

EUGENE PALMER "INDEX"

wolsey art gallery
christchurch mansion
ipswich

17-01-04 to 28-03-04

'INDEX' covers 10 years of Eugene Palmer's career and marks a new stage in his work. Showcased in the exhibition is Palmer's first film and most recent work which focuses on memories of his mother, his Jamiacan heritage and raises questions about cultural identity, influences and memories.

Palmer was born in Kingston, Jamaica and came to England as a child, with his parents in the 1966. Growing up, Palmer was influenced by two different cultures and it is the memories of these and influences from them which have shaped his artistic career.

Palmer paints portraits of friends and family, based on old black and white photographs. These works focus on memories and explore the main influences in his life. In his portraits, Palmer continually examines cultural history and cultural identity.

EXHIBITION TALK

Eugene Palmer

Thu 04-03 at 19.00hrs £2/£1 cons

Please book in advance

t 01473 433554 e wolseyartgallery@ipswich.gov.uk

Nearest Car Park Crown St

Please use the Bolton Lane entrance to Christchurch Park

HALF TERM FAMILY DAY

Sat 21-02 11.00 to 16.00hrs £2 Adults/£1 Children/under 5s free

Local artists will offer an assortment of activities around the theme of portraits, including drawing, painting and photography.

All welcome, most suitable for 3 yrs upwards

Children must be accompanied by an adult

No need to book

times

Tue-Sat 10.00 to 16.00hrs

Sun 14.30 to 16.00hrs

Summer Opening Times commence **08-02-2004**

Tue-Sat 10.00 to 17.00hrs

Sun 14.30 to 16.30hrs

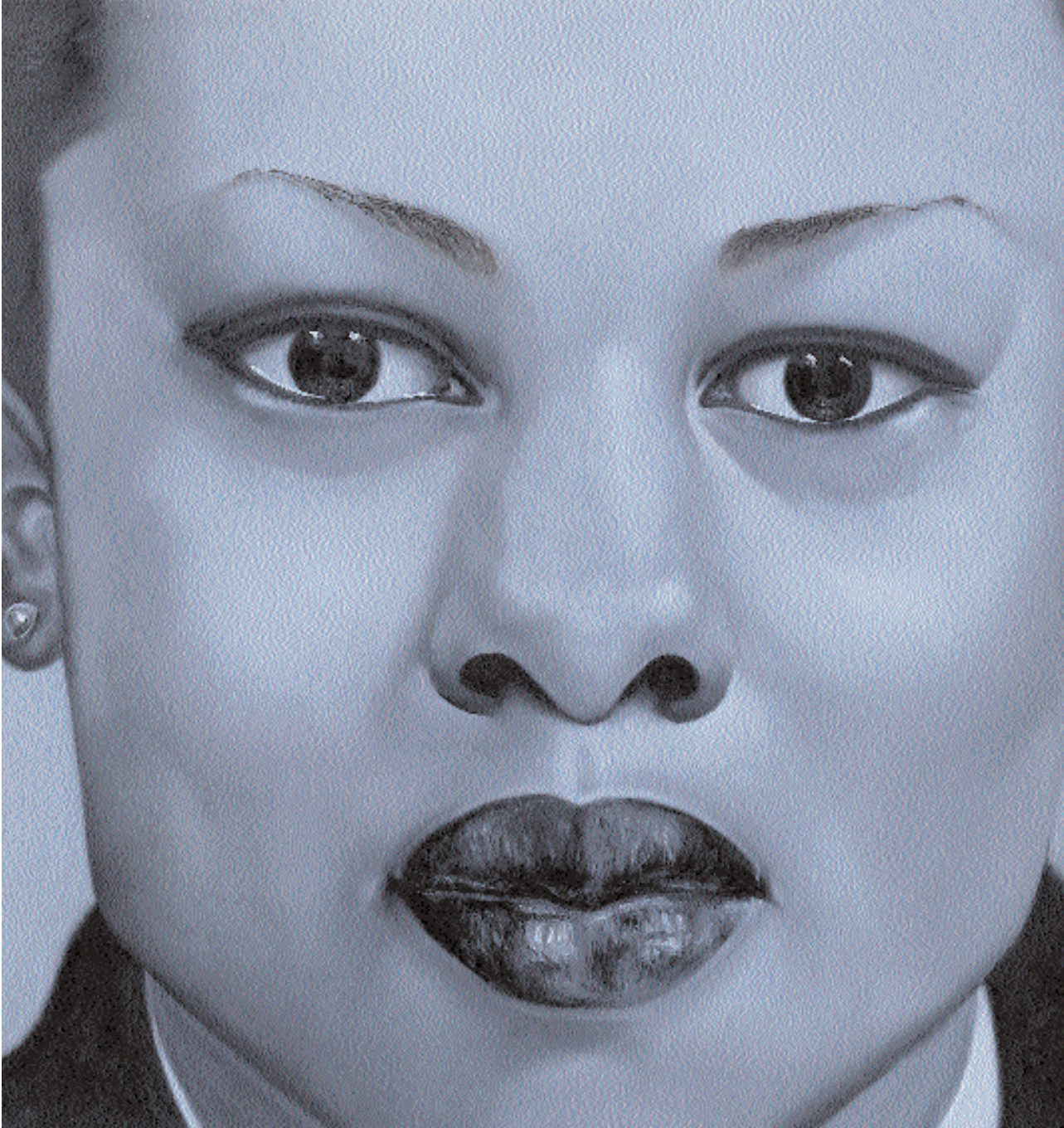
Christchurch Park closes at dusk

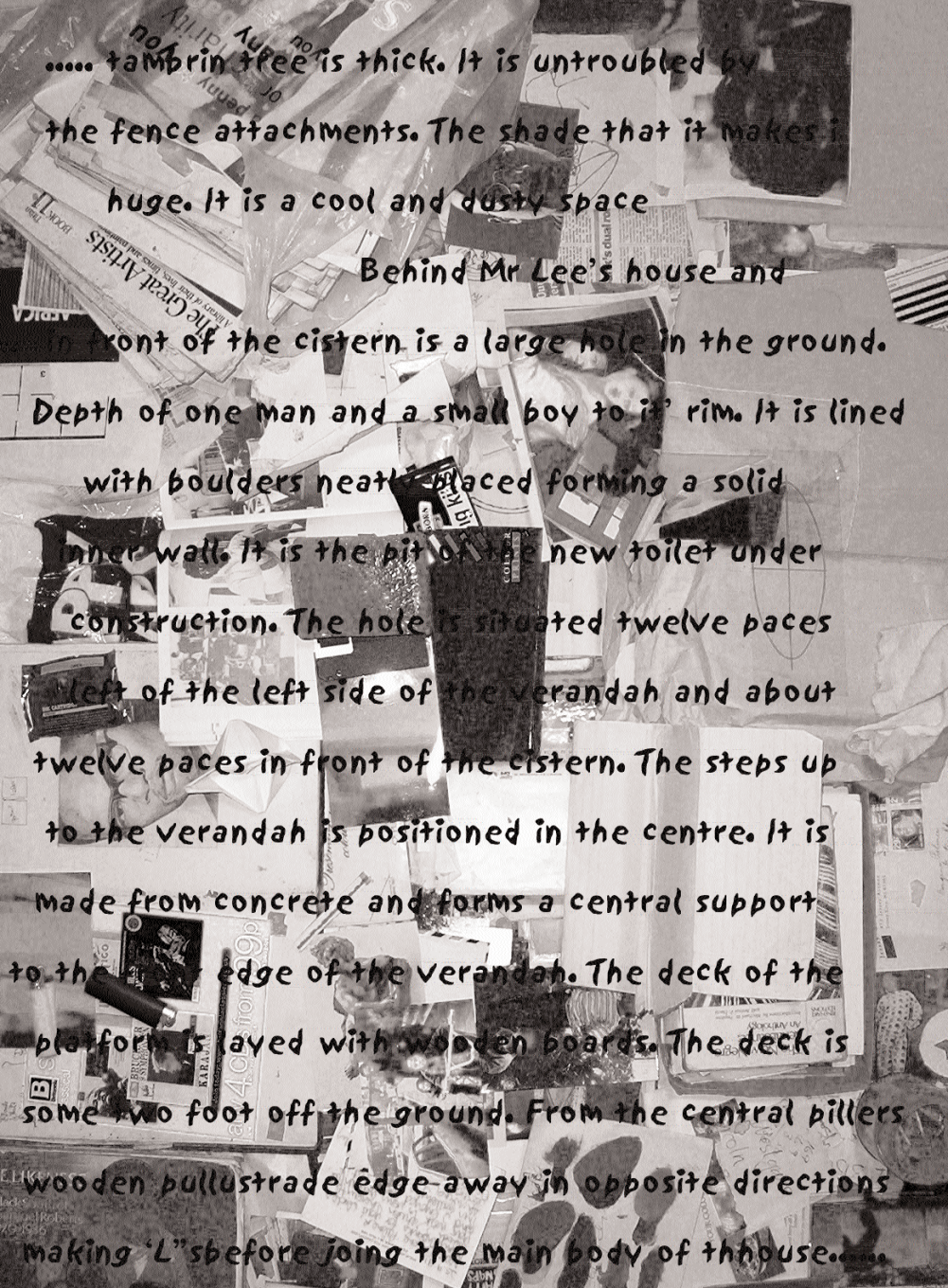
Admission is free

To ensure that your visit is as straightforward as possible please ring in advance.

Ramped access to the Wolsey Art Gallery via the gardens at the side of the building.







..... tambrin tree is thick. It is untroubled by
the fence attachments. The shade that it makes is
huge. It is a cool and dusty space

Behind Mr Lee's house and

in front of the cistern is a large hole in the ground.
Depth of one man and a small boy to it's rim. It is lined

with boulders neatly placed forming a solid

inner wall. It is the pit of the new toilet under
construction. The hole is situated twelve paces

left of the left side of the verandah and about
twelve paces in front of the cistern. The steps up

to the verandah is positioned in the centre. It is

made from concrete and forms a central support

to the outer edge of the verandah. The deck of the

platform is layed with wooden boards. The deck is

some two foot off the ground. From the central pillars

wooden pullustrade edge-away in opposite directions

making 'L's before joining the main body of thhouse.....

Eugene Palmer

For Eugene Palmer, painting has never simply been a means to an end. That is to say, a medium used to visualise his wide and varied concerns pertaining to history and identity. For, the nature of painting has and continues to be a key subject of his work. As Palmer declared ten years ago, “The way the image is brought into being, the play within the images, the empathy between what is said and how it is said... in short the making of the picture.” (1) It is unsurprising that such a sentiment should be as relevant today as it was ten years ago. For over the course of the past decade, Palmer has produced some of the most compelling and wide-ranging work of his generation.

The driving force for such a practice has been Palmer’s insatiable appetite for employing a veritable assortment of references, from classical painting and religious iconography, to media images and photographs from his personal archive. Creating complex visual assemblages, Palmer’s paintings have consistently sought to examine our relationship to history and identity with subtlety and humour. Equally, Palmer’s use of appropriation has considered the ways we read the visual in an age dominated by the daily consumption of images, from advertising and war, to famine and sport. Thus, although Palmer’s work has predominantly focused on the black figure, his wide ranging concerns have meant his work has never solely been about the ‘Black subject’ or so-called ‘Black issues’. Take for example, Palmer’s painting *The Brother* (1993). In this work Palmer painted a full-length portrait of his brother within a loose rendition of a landscape taken from Thomas Gainsborough’s painting *Pink Boy* (1782). Given that the original painting portrayed a young cherub-like boy dressed in an outlandish pink outfit, such a reference testifies to Palmer’s desire to play with visual narrative, albeit at times in the most understated ways

The Brother was one amongst a number of notable works produced by Palmer during the early 1990s, which presented life size portraits of family members within a variety of landscape settings taken from 18 and 19th century painting. Such a classical painting



Lulu Holding Stalks of wheat. 1993 oil on canvas 7" x 5'

tradition spoke of the aspiration, power and stature of the artists' subjects. Palmer's motivations for creating a seemingly incongruous pairing –of the Black subject and classical landscape- revolved around a desire to question the often peripheral consideration given to the Black subject/ artist within (art) history. As such, Palmer placed his family members within the centre of his visual narrative whilst also bestowing them with a certain if understated gravitas. Although times have changed these paintings still exude a visual potency and relevance today. For they offer, without condescension, a quite different image of the black subject to that often portrayed in the media. As Eddie Chambers has noted these paintings offer "...the dignity and status that seems largely absent from the everyday lives of many ordinary Black People". (2)

In recent times Black presence in Britain has largely been located within major cities and town, as such, Black identity has, for better or for worse, become synonymous with 'urban' environment and visa versa. By importing his Black subject from the urban environment, into an (art) historical landscape, Palmer contests this notion of Black identity, which is divorced from particular aspects of history offering as he does, images which unsettle traditional representations of Blackness. As someone who spent his early years growing up in Kingston, Jamaica, surrounded by a largely rural country, Palmer has always been attuned to a closer relationship between black people and rural space. Yet equally, Palmer understands this relationship beyond a notion of affinity, to one, which incorporates the spectre of slavery and more specifically the plantation. Thus, the juxtaposition of the Black subject and classical landscape in paintings like Lulu Holding Stalks of Wheat (1993) and The Letter (1992), resonate with a variety of other possible meanings, from memory and loss, survival and optimism to both a personal and collective notion of history.

Whilst the formal aspects of his work from the early 1990s drew heavily on a classical painting tradition and notions of the 'grand' narrative painting, Palmer also acknowledges the significant role which photography has had on his work. Palmer

Same



Small



Story

relates this influence to a trip he made to New York in the 1980s when he came across a book of photographs by William Roberts. The book *True Likeness*, documented black working class communities on the streets of North Carolina (?) during the 1920s. These images made an impression on Palmer because of the way Roberts' subjects portrayed a certain aspiration and composure. This work proved seminal in drawing Palmer towards using his own personal photographic archive within many of his important works during the early 1990s.

Writing some ten years ago on Eugene Palmer, Petrine Archer-Straw commented "[Eugene Palmer's] work has to be seen as a process of revelation and what makes Eugene's work of the past decade so exciting, is the possibility of watching this drama unravel." (3) During the mid 1990s this drama continued to unravel in the production of an astonishingly different body of work. The visual symbolism which had been such a trademark of his earlier work, was replaced by, an almost exclusive focus on the portrait. Where previously identity was explored through a juxtaposition of appropriated symbols and subjects, in his later work, the very act of representing identity was brought under closer scrutiny. Although Palmer continued to use photographs from his family albums, he did so in a quite different way. The once expedient use of the photograph, as a source material, now became quite literally, drawn to the surface. Palmer's new work referenced photography more directly, both in its use of repetition and in what has today become a "highly finished stylism" (4), alluding to photo-realism.

In the work *Six of One* (1999), the subject (Palmer's daughter), is painted in serial form. It is perhaps unavoidable when looking at such works that we inevitably seek out the subtle differences between them, to arrive at some form of hierarchy of originality. Yet, whilst we might revel in the accuracy of skin tone in one, the slightly darker tone of another casts doubt over our previous judgement. Being more drawn to one painting over another, or thinking one better over another, becomes as much of a game as it is



Kath 2003 oil on canvas 5' 10" x 4' 4"

an almost fruitless exercise. For the ‘qualities’ that might draw us to one painting are quickly undermined and contradicted by the presence of the other five. As one writer noted “each is both an ‘original’ while being at the same time a copy of all the others.” (5) The seemingly repetitious act of painting the images in Sun Sea and Sand (1999) or Kath (2003) is a paradoxical one. For with each copy (or is that each original), Palmer gets closer to or further from the essence of his subject. It is as if Palmer is asking, how much can any one representation tell us, about someone else, ourselves or the world in which we live? Thus, these marginal variations signify not evidence of a technical flaw but an allegory of identity itself, something, which is fluid rather than static, multiple rather than singular.

With typical understatement and subtlety Palmer’s serial paintings also provides a lucid critique of our times raising questions pertinent to an age preoccupied by (image) consumption, communication and the thorny debates about genetic engineering. It is also a testament to Palmer and his work that, during a time when photography and video art appear to be the mainstay of artistic, that by drawing our attention to the industry in his painting, Palmer can engage us in the act of looking afresh. That Palmer should find himself drawn ever closer to the photography suggests that, the “drama” within his practice promises yet more compelling revelations over the course of the next decade.

RICHARD HYLTON DECEMBER 2003

1. Jane Norrie, Paintings from 1983 to 1993, Eugene Palmer , exhibition catalogue, Norwich Institute of Art & Design and Institute of New International Visual Arts, 15 November –17 December 1993, p.6
2. ibid p.8
3. Eddie Chambers, exhibition brochure, Eugene Palmer, Recent Paintings, The Bonington Gallery, 1999
4. Petrine Archer-Straw, ...conversations with Eugene Palmer, exhibition catalogue, Norwich Institute of Art & Design and Institute of New International Visual Arts, 15 November –17 December 1993, p.6
5. Eddie Chambers, exhibition brochure, Eugene Palmer, Recent Paintings, 6 April –1May, The Bonington Gallery, 1999
6. Michael Philipson, Foil, Stanley Picker Gallery, 10 September-2 October ,1998, Kingston University, p.17



No. 37 Nursing Auxiliary.

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