

MODERN PAINTERS

INTERNATIONAL ARTS AND CULTURE OCTOBER 2005

JASON ODDY

new romantic

Daniel Buren sails into Grasmere, home of the Lake Poets



GRASMERE HAS NEVER SEEN anything like it. Nine striped sails gliding across its slate-grey waters. Behind them the garden green hills of this spot made famous by the lakeland poets. A stone's throw inland lies Dove Cottage, William Wordsworth's haven from the distractions of the fast-industrializing England of his age. But today, two centuries on, the shore-bound knot of onlookers is more interested in the approaching micro-Armada and its sundry colours gradually coming into view across the lake.

Among the spectators, the French artist Daniel Buren is watching the one-man dinghies vie with one another to carry off first prize in what is in fact a race around the poet's cherished mere. If the confusion of yellow and white, red and white, green and white, blue and white and brown and white sails make it hard to see that this is a competition, then nor is it exactly evident that what Buren has really done is launch a ninefold Trojan seahorse of hard-nosed postwar theory into the sanctum of English romanticism.

Strangely, for an artist considered sufficiently important to have had a solo show in both Paris's Centre Pompidou and New York's Guggenheim Museum over the last three years, Buren has only ever had a few low-key exhibitions in Britain. That his Lake District outing took place at all was thanks to the efforts of the young English painter Daniel Sturgis, whose residency at the Wordsworth Trust in the winter of 2004-5 inspired him to ask the Frenchman to stage *Voile Toile/Toile Voile* on Grasmere this July.

Sturgis's own work was on display at the Trust's 3rdW Gallery and like Buren it seems resolutely disconnected from the Romantic tradition. His decidedly contemporary canvases fall between hard-edged abstraction and a style that could perhaps be characterized as pre-figurative. Host to a world of shapes picked out in ungraduated hues, they seem to describe an embryonic vision of reality where simple forms

have not yet differentiated into more complex ones.

These supremely knowing paintings may sit self-consciously at this late juncture in the history of the medium, yet there is nothing backward-looking about them. Sturgis's largely upbeat, synthetic palette deters you from thinking of his work as a melancholic remembrance of forms. If in some pictures hundreds of small three-quarter ellipses crowd the edges like so many anonymous people, and in others soft-edged rhomboids crested with dots suggest the wooded hills around Grasmere, then they still depict an emergent, hopeful reality rather than one suffering the depredations of entropy.

Like many Goldsmiths-trained painters of his generation, Sturgis uses the canvas as an arena for aesthetic and intellectual enquiry. Emotion and the outer world are kept safely at several removes. Instead of daffodils, the concentric patterns found in some of his pictures prompt us to think of floral motifs. It is a cerebral approach that recalls Buren's own investigations into the position of the work of art.

The last two centuries have witnessed a dramatic drop in the temperature of the creative endeavor. Impassioned verse and rhapsodic communion with nature have been replaced by cooler, more analytic ways. Yet to a greater or lesser extent both Buren's spectacular regatta and the results of Sturgis's residency draw on the natural world. In a place like Grasmere the mercury will never dip too close to zero.



Top Left:
Voile Toile/Toile Voile
regatta on Lake Grasmere
2 July 2005
PHOTO COPYRIGHT JASON ODDY

Top Right:
Installation shot of Daniel Buren
Voile Toile/Toile Voile at the Old
Library Gallery, Wordsworth
Trust, Grasmere
July to September, 2005
COURTESY THE WORDSWORTH TRUST

Left:
Daniel Sturgis
Share and Divide, 2005
acrylic on canvas, 38 x 51 cm
COURTESY THE ARTIST