

**Neil Mulholland**

**Review: 'The Visible and the Expressible'  
Modern Painters, February 2006, 117.**



Glasgow

## **John Russell: The Visible and the Expressible**

Transmission Gallery

18 OCTOBER – 5 NOVEMBER

Errantly over-determined, high-definition, digitally manipulated images, bearing their Photoshop scars as fangs, parade the Transmission like Tretchikoff dinosaurs. Tales of the expected, they look like paintings but aren't. In the main gallery, these huge laserjet prints ape the scale of history paintings and New York School prairie canvases. Backstage, smaller versions of the same images mounted in light boxes, all hung salon-style, wait in the wings.

On the face of it, these works aren't encumbered with any strategic pretexts, their pun-poetic titles deferring meaning. At the same time, all the images simulate art-historical genres, splicing them with more contemporary images. *Prophecy: Devil's Dictionary* (2005) constructs a crucifix from fresh cuts of finger flesh and flips the bird to make a blasphemous middle-finger 'fuck you' gesture. The identical digits are digitally distorted in ways that are palpable, cut and pasted to create a profusion of proximal interphalangeal joints.

Comparably, *Hand Idea: Fantasies of Realism* (2005) represents three bloody, carved-off hands as an idolatrous corpus, each with a big nail hammered through it. A fourth hand is substituted for a big Mr Whippy.

These images recall Russell's contributions to the artists' group BANK (1990-2000) with whom he organized *Zombie Golf* (1994) and *Cocaine Orgasm* (1995). Their garish, saturated aesthetic is still prominent in his work, an aesthetic rooted in a mix of religion, sex and gore culled from commercially exploitable horror movies made in the early 1970s by Tigon British Film Productions. This period gothic genre has been recently revived in comic parodies such as Steve Coogan's and Graham Duff's *Dr Terrible's House of Horrible* (2001) and Garth Marengi's spoof pulp horror, *Darkplace* (2004). As an artist, Russell has made it his own, publishing *Frozen Tears* (2003) and *Frozen Tears II: The Sequel* (2004), 800-page 'bestseller novels' containing pulpy narratives from an array of contributors.

*Idea: Ornate/Circular [Low budget mysticism]* (2005) more readily recalls the violent surfaces of the performative paintings that Russell produced in collaboration with Fabienne Audéoud in 2000. Echoing the commercialism of tie-dye and chaos patterns, this work's heart has slipped from its sleeve, replaced by the mysticism of a new age website. Constructed from bits of Cronenbergian 'new flesh' the image looks alchemical, but, being digital, lacks any factual chemistry. It jostles for attention with a larger work, *Ornate Idea: Meat Doesn't Travel Well These Days* (2005), that is rooted in allegedly more reputable forms of mysticism, namely Abstract Expressionism (via the Viennese Actionists). Perhaps the depth of these images lies in the fact that they literally allow us to look inside?

To continue to read Russell's new work as an exercise in mischievous quotation may miss the obvious. Orgasms of entrails, blood and organs are what Russell terms 'ecstatic uses of flesh', which are performed rather than simply represented. They are explicitly sensuous images brimming with colour, emotion, rhythm and speed. In this, they are a welcome break from the good decorum that *Transmission* has tended to exhibit of late, although they don't perhaps quite match the true blood, digital terror of erstwhile *Transmission* exhibitor Albert Oehlen.