

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Susan Hiller *Rough Seas*

March 14 – April 15, 2023
504 West 24th Street, New York

Lisson Gallery is pleased to present a survey of Susan Hiller's *Rough Seas* works. The exhibition tracks Hiller's investigation into a particular cultural artifact, the 'rough sea' tourist postcard, which she began in the early 1970s and continued until her death in 2019. *Rough Seas* represents the influential artist's third exhibition with the gallery and first in New York since 2017.

Having moved to the UK in the late '60s, the US-born Susan Hiller was in the seaside town of Weston-super-Mare when she came across an old Edwardian postcard bearing the image of waves crashing against the shore and the legend 'rough sea'. Soon she began collecting similar postcards from junk stores in other coastal towns, recognizing them both as a form of collective portrait, a representation of Britain as an island nation, obsessed with the weather; and also as a domesticated, miniaturized version of the Romantic tradition of the sublime. Her first work to make use of this collection was the multi-panel installation, *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* (1972-76), one of the best-known British conceptual works of the period (Tate collection). Positioning herself as curator, Hiller treated the postcards as miniature artworks, products of a previously unacknowledged artistic tradition in which anonymous workers, typically women, were employed to add hand-tinted effects and painted details to photographic images. Subsequent 'rough sea' postcards that Hiller continued to acquire, between 1976 and 1982, were made into various *Addenda to Dedicated to the Unknown Artists*: small, single works that focused on specific themes.

Hiller further explored the core relationship between painting and photography, first identified in *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists*, in her *Rough Seas* works. While some of the original postcards were printed versions of photographs that had been altered by hand and then rephotographed, others were photographic reproductions of paintings. The *Rough Seas* play out various permutations of these possibilities, enlarging the images and arranging them into gridded groups. In early works, such as *Another Sea View* (1982-88) and *Storm Scenes* (1987), Hiller adopted the role of hand-colorizer, modifying the images in a variety of different ways; later, she experimented with digital processes to produce ostensibly painterly effects and fantastic tonal shifts, in works such as *Night Waves* (2009) and *Rough Dawns II* (2015). In each case, the resulting scenes of storm-wracked coasts and churning waters seem to thrill us, and speak to our deepest cultural fears and desires, our complicated longing for wildness and otherness.

Installed in the gallery's final room, *On the Edge* (2015) was intended by Hiller as a companion piece to *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists*. A similarly extensive, multi-paneled display, it eschews the earlier work's detailed linguistic and pictorial analysis in favor of a kind of stately litany, the arrangement of 482 postcards proceeding geographically through locations around the UK's coastline – a circumnavigation that describes the limits of terra firma, that ironically attempts to map the interface between known and unknown. The title also suggests the precariousness, the inherent lack of definition, of island boundaries, a concern more prevalent than ever in the age of climate change.

For over five decades, Hiller explored the fluid interrelation between the rational and the irrational, using her art to inquire into what she called 'unstable zones', where the liminal, the invisible, and the unconscious hold sway. The *Rough Seas* works exemplify this space. Positioning the heaving, crashing waves within the formal restraint of the grid, Hiller's images throw into question the logic and order that the format has come to represent. "[T]hese images represent the uncontainable", writes the novelist and critic Lynne Tillman in her 2019 essay, which has been reprinted to accompany the exhibition. "Through their infinite stasis, absolute stillness, the images speak to the permanence of the irrational and of Nature's uncontrollable forces."

About the artist

With a multimedia practice extending over 50 years, Susan Hiller was one of the most influential artists of her generation. Since first making innovative use of audio and visual technology in the early 1980s, her groundbreaking installations, multi-screen videos and audio works have achieved international recognition. Each of Hiller's works is based on specific cultural artefacts from our society, which are used as basic materials. Many pieces explore the liminality of certain phenomena including the practice of automatic writing (*Sisters of Menon*, 1972/79), near-death experiences (*Channels*, 2013) and collective experiences of unconscious, subconscious and paranormal activity (*Belshazzar's Feast*, 1983-4; *Psi Girls*, 1999; *Witness*, 2000). Hiller's powerful and resonant films range from the *J Street Project* (2002-05), a chillingly extensive search for every street sign in Germany bearing the word *Juden* (Jew), to *The Last Silent Movie* (2007), which also documents disappearance and absence, although this time through speech recordings of dying or extinct languages. Her psychologically charged and thematically varied practice amounts to an impassioned plea for the joys and mysteries associated with irrationality.

Susan Hiller (1940-2019) was born in Tallahassee, Florida. After graduating from Smith College in 1961, she went on to do doctoral studies in anthropology at Tulane University in New Orleans with a National Science Foundation fellowship. However she abandoned anthropology to become an artist, and from the mid '60s was based mainly in London. Her career has been recognised by major solo and survey exhibitions at institutions including Bloomberg SPACE, London, UK (2020); The Polygon, Vancouver, Canada (2018); Officine Grande Riparazioni, Turin, Italy (2018); Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL, USA (2017); The Model, Sligo, Ireland (2014); Samstag Foundation, Copenhagen, Denmark (2014); Summerhall, Edinburgh, UK (2014); Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Toulouse, France (2014); Tate Britain, London, UK (2011); Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Germany (2011); Centro Cultural Montehermoso, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain (2010); BAWAG Foundation, Vienna, Austria (2008); The Jewish Museum, New York, NY, USA (2008); Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy (2006); Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland (2005); Museu Serralves, Porto, Portugal (2004); Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK (2004); Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde, Denmark (2002); Henie-Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, Norway (1999); ICA, Philadelphia, PA, USA (1998); Tate Gallery, Liverpool, UK (1996); Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK (1989); and ICA, London, UK (1986). She participated in Documenta 13 and 14, Kassel, Germany (2012, 2017); Manifesta 11, Zurich, Switzerland (2016); and in British Art Shows 2, 5 and 8, touring, UK (1984, 2000, 2015). Hiller's work features in numerous international private and public collections including the Centre Pompidou, Paris, France; Ludwig Museum, Cologne, Germany; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA; the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, USA; Tate Collection, London, UK; Serralves Foundation, Porto, Portugal; and Centro de Arte Contemporanea Inhotim, Brumadinho, Brazil.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, two in New York, one in Shanghai and Beijing, as well as a forthcoming gallery in Los Angeles, opening 15 April. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estate of Leon Polk Smith. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Van Hanos, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky and Cheyney Thompson.

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