

# LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

## ‘Rodney Graham: Paintings and Lightboxes’

2 February – 23 March 2024  
1037 N. Sycamore Avenue, Los Angeles

Opening reception: 1 February, 6 – 8pm

For his first solo exhibition in Los Angeles in two decades, Lisson Gallery presents a selection from two major bodies of work by Canadian pop conceptualist, Rodney Graham. It is also the gallery’s first show with him since the artist passed away in late 2022, looking specifically at some of the paintings and lightboxes he was working on in the last years of his life. While these two-dimensional works flip between monumental, back-lit photographs and textured, abstract paintings, they also reference a plethora of Graham’s wider interests including filmmaking, literature, music, comedy and art history. The seemingly oppositional media of painting and lightbox photography are also united by the careful processes of staging and collaging together so many diverse elements and influences into singularly memorable and surreal images. Graham employed these twinned techniques of narrative- and world-building throughout his long and varied practice, whether devising one of his many fictional persona – through vast productions involving multiple props and elaborate sets – or while constructing new cubistic paintings from older examples, collaging these fragments and then committing them to canvas.

Graham’s painting career began in the early 2000s and the multiple layers of his recent compositions closely mirror the complex construction of the lightboxes, which originated in 2000. Starting from existing ‘source’ paintings – by Aleksandr Rodchenko, Jean Arp, Morris Louis, Pablo Picasso and many others – each painted surface is built up by manipulating, scaling and shifting these components into satisfying arrangements: “I want to find a balance between spontaneity and meticulous planning,” he said in a 2020 *Financial Times* interview. The painstakingly painted surfaces are not static or smooth, however, with faux woodgrain taken from hardware catalogues and sand-encrusted passages suggesting illusory shadows and depth beyond the flat picture plane.

The five lightboxes by Graham included in this show (from some 40 produced during his career) all share the shallow space of a painting: from a worker taking a break during a drywalling job, to another protagonist captured between takes on a Hollywood soundstage while filming a scene set in an 18<sup>th</sup> century French garden. These works form two of his *Four Seasons*, capturing a quartet of characters – always starring the artist himself – who are lost in thought, in moments of repose and at rest after work, here representing Winter and Spring respectively. Also inhabiting a narrow space between viewer and subject is the *Tattooed Man on Balcony* (2018), hovering on a typical mid-century veranda, staring wistfully into the distance. The textured backdrops, abstractly painted walls and colorful sprays of tree blossom provide other links back to the paintings, while Graham again complicates his role as author through the roleplaying and code-switching of his chameleon-like lightboxes.

Another connection between these scenes is Graham’s love of classic cinema. The French dandy in *Actor/Director 1954* (2013) was inspired by the 1946 comedic version of an earlier silent film, *Monsieur Beaucaire*, featuring Bob Hope as Louis XIV’s heavily-coiffured barber. Graham’s final lightbox, titled *Refraction Study after Jerry Lewis (Artists and Models, 1955)* (2020) was made during COVID-19 and so necessitated a more low-fi approach to the habitual sets, lighting and image compilation employed in previous outings (many of them are constructed from thousands of photos, stitched together). This depicts Graham reenacting the slapstick antics of Jerry Lewis behind a water fountain in a waiting room, his nose stretched to Pinocchio-style dimensions through the glass. The original film, *Artist and Models* of 1955, is another Graham touchstone, being a fictional depiction of a struggling but debonair painter, played by Dean Martin, making his haphazard way through the world.

## About the artist

For fifty years, Rodney Graham pulled at the threads of cultural and intellectual history through photography, film, music, performance and painting. He presented cyclical narratives that pop with puns and references to literature and philosophy, from Lewis Carroll to Sigmund Freud to Kurt Cobain, with a sense of humour that betrayed Graham's footing in the post-punk scene of late 1970s Vancouver. The nine-minute loop *Vexation Island* (1997) presents the artist as a 17th-century sailor, lying unconscious under a coconut tree with a bruise on his head; after eight and a half minutes he gets up and shakes the tree inducing a coconut to fall and knock him out, and for the sequence to start again. Graham returned as a cowboy in *How I Became a Ramblin' Man* (1999) and as both city dandy and country bumpkin in *City Self/Country Self* (2001) – fictional characters all engaged in an endless loop of activity. Such dream states and the ramblings of the unconscious are rooted in Graham's earlier upside-down photographs of oak trees. Inversion, Graham explained, has a logic: 'You don't have to delve very deeply into modern physics to realise that the scientific view holds that the world is really not as it appears. Before the brain rights it, the eye sees a tree upside down in the same way it appears on the glass back of the large format field camera I use.' (2005)

Rodney Graham was born in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada in 1949 and died in Vancouver, Canada in 2022. He had solo exhibitions at the Serlachius Museum Gösta, Mänttä, Finland (2020); Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, Germany (2017); Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, Netherlands (2017); BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK (2017); Le Consortium, Dijon, France (2016); Sammlung Goetz, Munich, Germany (2015); Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, Canada (2014); Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada (2012); Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria (2011); Museu D'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Spain (2010); Jeu de Paume, Paris, France (2009); Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, CA, USA (2004); Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, UK (2002); Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany (2001); and Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria (1999). He participated in group exhibitions such as the Carnegie International (2013), the 13th, 14th and 17th Sydney Biennales, Australia (2002, 2006, 2010), the Whitney Biennial, New York, USA (2006) and the Biennale d'Art contemporain de Lyon, France (2003). He represented Canada at the 47th Venice Biennale, Italy (1997) and among awards he received the Gershon Iskowitz Prize, Toronto, Canada (2004), the Kurt Schwitters-Preis, Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung, Germany (2006), and the Audain Prize for lifetime achievement in visual arts, British Columbia, Canada (2011). Rodney Graham was appointed as an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2016 for his contributions to Canadian contemporary art.

## 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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