



David Thorpe

The work of David Thorpe places a strong emphasis on the complexity of its process and the temporality of its production. The work of Thorpe is a love affair with labour and craft, distancing itself through an act of adoration from the alienating characteristics of modernity and the ways of being of the modern man. Inspired in part by the *English Arts and Crafts Movement*, John Ruskin and the late socialist writing of William Morris, Thorpe applies an aesthetic of organic ornaments and botanical motifs that act as a veil and as a protective skin to enclose and hide an increasingly vital yet marginalized philosophy. Through such a gesture, Thorpe advocates an opposition towards an economic and a social order closely connected with the modern and consequently the contemporary world we are immersed in today. The role of the machine in the work of Thorpe is rendered secondary and emphasis is placed on the careful and the time-consuming process of mixing, layering, cutting, extracting, filling, colouring, questioning thus the value and the nature of labor within the growingly immaterial realm of the present day.

David Thorpe (1972, London) lives and works in Berlin. His work has been exhibited at ICA (London), Hayward Gallery (London), Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven), Tate Britain (London), The Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), Saatchi Gallery (London), Santa Barbara Museum of Art (Santa Barbara), Camden Arts Centre (London) or Kunstverein Hannover (Hannover) among other.

Wild Body in Joy Growing, 2016

slaked lime, dried clay, hay, sand, pigment,
casein, oak, hazel branches
70,5 × 65 × 7,5 cm





Exhibition view *David Thorpe: Underground* at Maureen Paley, London, 2019



Underground Love, Chanting, Chanting, Chanting, 2019 (detail)

labour, time, mud, bone glue, earth, coal, sand, pigment, chalk, gum arabic, plant resin, casein, paper, metal
16 × 635 × 16 cm

Exhibition view *David Thorpe: Underground* at Maureen Paley, London, 2019



Exhibition view *David Thorpe: Underground* at Maureen Paley, London, 2019



Joyous Underground, 2018

shared labour, time, earth, coal, dried clay, hay, sand, pigment, chalk, gum arabic, plant resin, casein, paper and bone glue

254 x 15,6 x 15,6 cm



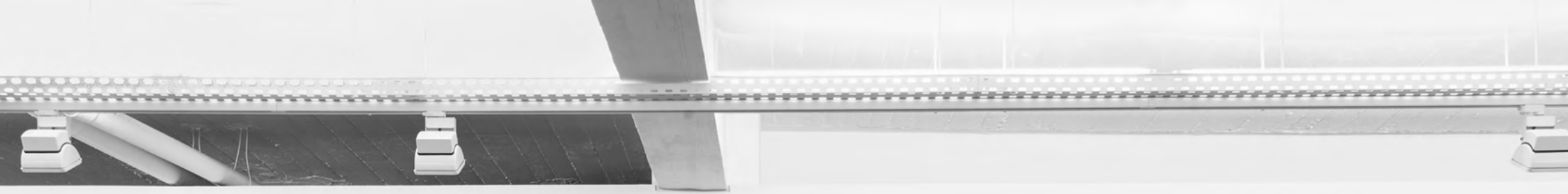
Hidden Bodies in Love Waiting, 2017

shared labour, time, earth, coal, dried clay, hay, sand, pigment, chalk, gum arabic, plant resin, casein, paper and bone glue

252 × 15,6 × 15,6 cm



Exhibition view *Lush Underground* at Galeria Pedro Cera, 2017



Exhibition view *Lush Underground* at Galeria Pedro Cera, 2017



A Wild Body, 2017

slaked lime, dried clay, hay, sand, pigment,
casein, oak and hazel branches

70,5 × 46 × 7 cm



Congeaed Bodies in Love Hiding, 2017

shared labour, time, earth, coal, dried clay, hay, sand, pigment, chalk, gum arabic, plant resin, casein, paper and bone glue

336 x 15,6 x 15,6 cm



Underground Bodies in Love Hiding, 2016

shared labour, time, earth, coal, dried clay, hay, sand, pigment, chalk, gum arabic, plant resin, casein, paper and bone glue

196 × 15,6 × 15,6 cm



Exhibition view *Loved Underground* at Meyer Riegger Gallery, Berlin, Germany, 2016



A Ripe Body Glowing, 2016

slaked lime, dried clay, hay, sand, pigment,
casein, oak, hazel branches

70,5 × 46 × 7 cm



David Thorpe
Berlin Art Link, July 25, 2016
Alice Bardos

“I feel the building and I are quite in sympathy with one another,” explains the lean and genial artist, David Thorpe, in his Moabit studio. “It feels soft as if thousands of shoulders and feet have rubbed and smoothed all the hard edges off the building. It feels very hand-made, odd proportions, dusty and peeling and a bit decrepit.” From the outside, the building bears a deceptively industrial appearance, the oversized entrance fitted with unvarnished wooded doors and weathered walls of umber and nude brick. The profile of the building gives much of itself away as the entire multi-storey structure’s depth is no more than four metres, making it no longer fit to be used as a production site for consumer goods. The cause of this is likely to have been wartime bombing.

The interior is fitted with a tight and steep set of stairs, while the air is heavy with moisture and the scent of Thorpe’s natural materials including oak, sand, clay, and rabbit skin. In one of the bottom rooms, the artist stores the yet-to-be-completed, box-shaped ‘Beasts,’

as he affectionately calls them. Their earthy vine-inlaid surfaces press viewers up against the cool walls as they stretch their necks trying to get the entire perspective in the claustrophobically-arranged space. That’s the way Thorpe wants it. “I’d call myself a shy fanatic, but I think I was raised too polite, so I’m more of a shy stubborn person than a fanatic.” His words hint at the humming ideological debates racing through his mind—lending themselves to his work with political potency. In fact, he wants his work to confront its audience in the same way American Jazz singer Sun Ra’s persona acted as supportive “bridge” to some and abrasive “wall” to others.

The artist aligns himself with some Marxist beliefs and actions. Three years ago he used to host a meeting group inside his atelier for readings and discussions on Marx’s *Capital*, though eventually the number dwindled until only the artists were left. For Thorpe, his work and relationship to the studio have helped him empathize with Marx’s critique of the commodification of the material world. The practice of artisanal creation has always been an escape and comfort to him, yet he’s felt at tension with his socio-political context within the industry. “I’m forty-four now, I do shows but I still have no money. I have no



A Proud Beast Surviving, 2016

slaked lime, dried clay, hay, sand, pigment, casein,
bone glue, oak, hazel branches
70 × 48 × 7 cm

shows but I still have no money. I have no savings, no pension plan, no security. You have to live two to three months at a time. I'm aware I'd give up anything in order to carry on making art."

Thorpe combats these feelings of restriction in ways both personal and social. He takes to heart his politics of anti-commodification and imbues his creations with an attention to detail and the flexibility to attain the best possible outcome, which he describes as "love." He hopes that the sheer power of his efforts gives his pieces an independence from the establishment he opposes—akin to how Sun Ra declared he was from Saturn, and beyond systems of oppression. For Thorpe, each work is even "an apology" to the last. The intention is that this dignifies and weaponizes his work enough to incite change. The sprouting motifs in his work have been reoccurring since the late 1990s, and yet the artist is still working on making them more rugged and imposing. Beyond his work, Thorpe supports his vision for the arts by sharing his and friend Björn Braun's space with emerging creatives, such as Erin Hughes and Emma Pepworth.

There seems to be a strange contradiction between the factory-style setting, which connotes the type of alienated labor the artist fights against, and the floral and natural content of his work. Having grown up in Southeast London, Thorpe explains: "all the nature I reference is not through lived experience, I have no experience of it." Like the individuals who defined the creative culture in the period preceding Karl Marx—the Romantic poets—Thorpe's work draws upon an idealized version of the natural world. Unlike them, his work does not feel like a lamentation. It's clear that there is some kind of strength in the artist's reclamation of this particular kind of space, where the fired clay building material of the enveloping brick and its integrity

are weathered and pacified by Thorpe's occupation.

Moabit is the part of Berlin that somehow manages to avoid the various ripples of zeitgeist that flow through the rest of the neighbourhoods in the city. To some, it may be considered listless, but perhaps its character is better described as timeless—much the same as David Thorpe's earthen works within his studio. The artist has metamorphosed a local industrial structure into a nursery, where he nurtures the lives of his botanical pieces as well as young members of the arts community. Through this presence his studio acts as something consistent, prodding at the facade of consumerism, beckoning for and setting the precedent of an increase in transparency and fairness in the processes of creation.



A Proud Beast Surviving, 2016

detail

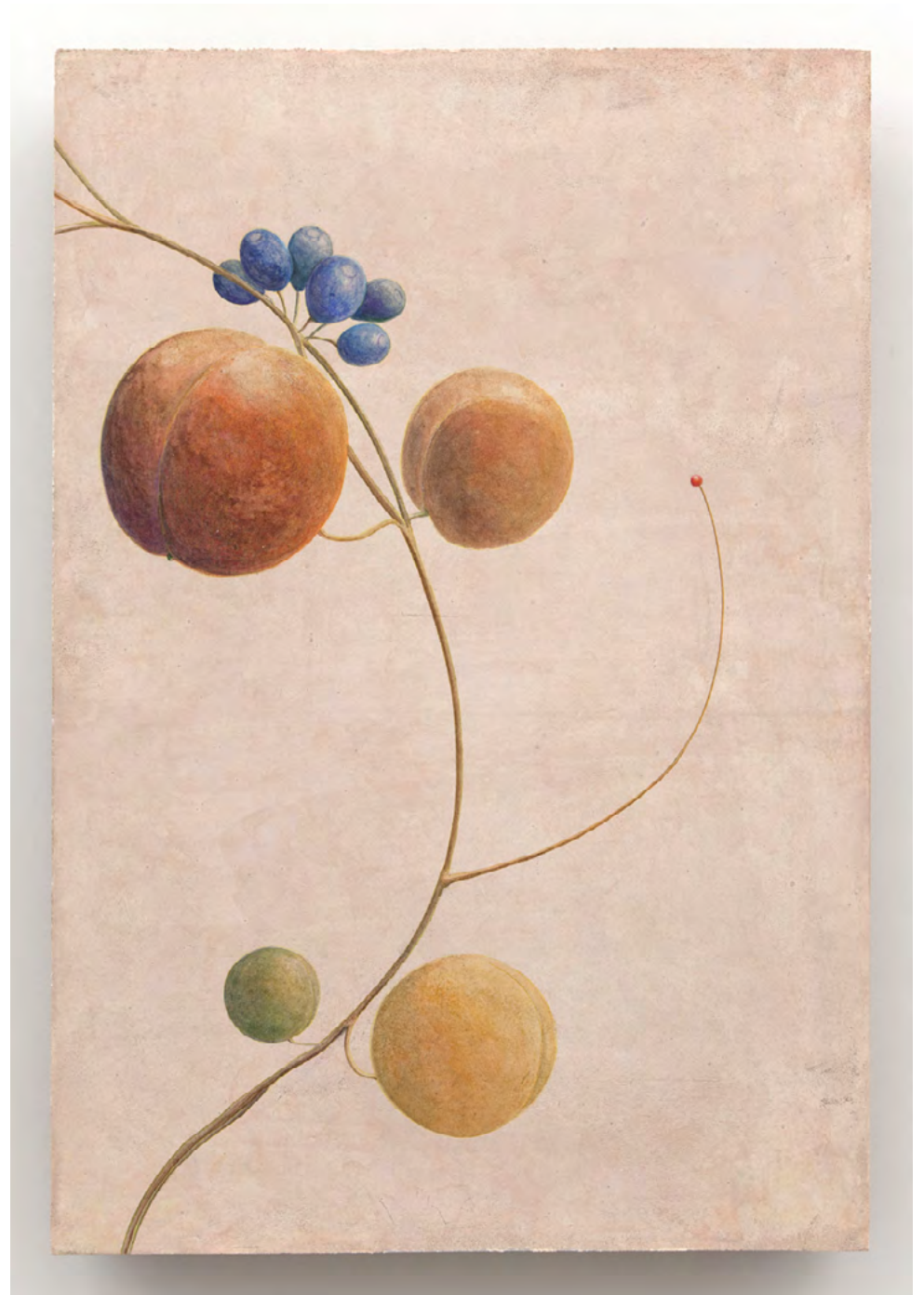


A Glimpse of a Gift to Another, 2014

oak, hazel branches, sand, clay, horsehair,
slaked lime, casein, pigment

48,4 × 66,5 × 7 cm

Joyous Bodies in Love Gleaming (Chest), 2013
oak, split hazel branches, sand, earth, clay, horse-
hair, dung, slake lime, pigment
67,5 × 45 × 7 cm





Joyous Bodies in Love Gleaming (Chest), 2013

detail



A Ripening, 2012

slaked lime, dried clay, hay, sand, pigment, casein,
bone glue, oak and hazel branches

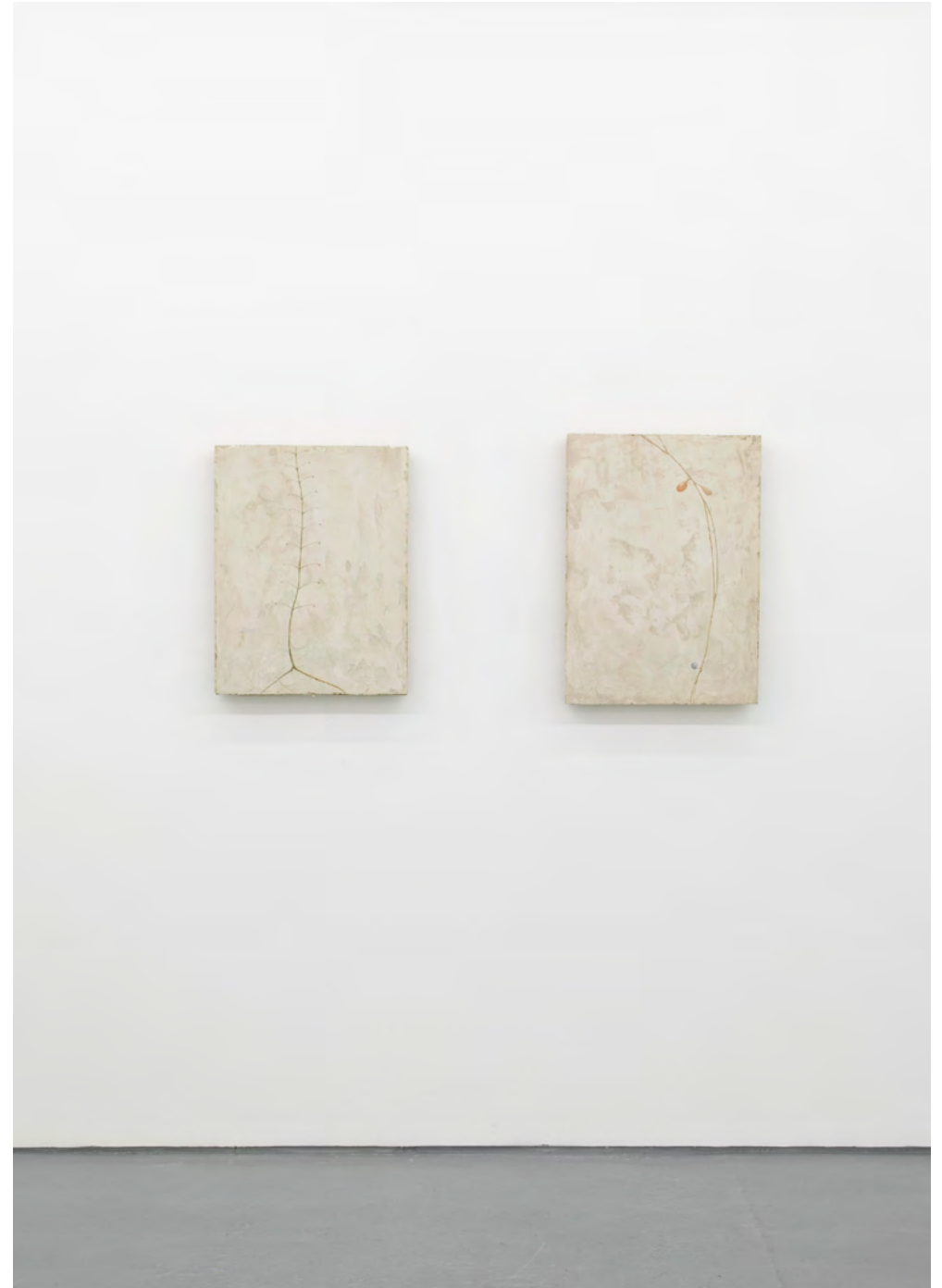
56,5 × 43 × 7 cm

David Thorpe: A Rare Beast
***this is tomorrow*, July 2012**
Henry Little

Libidinous, bulbous plants, groaning patterned monoliths, crafted vertebrae and a fleshy length of oak: David Thorpe's exhibition marries Victorian artisanal creed with the science-fiction, fantasy landscapes of previous years. Earlier works from the middle of the last decade depicted precarious architecture and emblematic civilisations in the wilderness, alone, but romantic and picturesque. Here, we see this peculiar world up close. A monument on eight wooden legs, just tall enough to make you feel small, occasionally asserts itself with a low groan. This seems strange, emanating from a rustic, ornate wall facsimile, devotedly inlaid with looping foliage patterns and constructed in antiquated wattle and daub. Its near neighbour, an upright screen with domestic dark brown tiles with a white foliage pattern, is comparably emphatic in its love of Victorian design.

Like the highly influential nineteenth-century writer and critic John Ruskin (1819 - 1900), Thorpe's current body of work foregrounds a fascination with the relationship between art and nature. And, more specifically, the tension and difference between imitating and recording nature. Ruskin was a keen advocate of botanical illustration, in fact championing these humble craftsmen as artists, not merely 'illustrators', and was an avid water-colourist himself. In Thorpe's botanical watercolours, we see this same impetus to record accurately, but instead of known plants we are presented with fantastical specimens derived, as we may suppose, from the artist's own universe. These works, if you are so inclined, are truly exceptional. 'Ecstatic Hangings' (2012) bears the erotic fruit of the work's title.

Exhibition view *A Rare and Gentle Beast* at
Maureen Paley, London, 2012





A long, fibrous plant, it's as alien to my eyes as most exotic plants, but clearly imagined by Thorpe. At its tip, a delicate blue flower atop a spiked central limb, with small blue berries distributed in pairs along its length. Finally, a circle of white orbs about its base, followed by a cluster of suggestive vegetal sacks - the 'ecstatic hangings' of the work's title.

Upstairs the biological and anatomical associations are drawn out in greater detail. In the middle of the gallery 'Gangraena' (2012) is a complicated proposition, although of simple appearance. A lengthy section of ancient oak has the warm colouring of flesh, painted using a medieval technique with countless layers worked up from a dark purple, to give the convincing illusion of human warmth under the surface. Here then we have a means of imitating nature applied to a found natural object: nature and its image conflated to produce an uncanny artefact. The title of the work is also steeped in historical meaning. Gangraena is the name of a heresiographic tome (i.e. a chronicle of heresy and blasphemy incidents) written by the zealous puritan Thomas Edwards (c. 1599 - 1648). Crucially, this account has a distinct reputation for adversarial tone and hard line puritanical doctrine - as you might imagine from a title which equates heresy with the deathly sores of gangrene. If, as the press release states, this body of work was conceived in opposition to Thomas Edwards, then Thorpe's lively oak celebrates Ruskin's vigorous identification of humanity with nature, and rejects Edwards' denial of our natural urges towards a freedom of emotive and religious conscience.

Ecstatic Hangings, 2012

framed watercolour on paper

109.5 × 50 cm



Exhibition view *A Rare and Gentle Beast* at Maureen Paley, London, 2012



These are Our Bones, Grown then Dressed then Cloaked (hip), 2012

twigs, sand, clay, hair, dung, chalk, pigment, oil, pencil, rabbit skin glue

14 × 19 × 14 cm



A Rare Beast, 2012

oak, sand, clay, hair, dung, slake lime, pigment, rabbit skin glue, split
hazel branches, with sound component

244 × 282 × 88 cm



Sanderson Emerged, 2012

oak, metal, ceramic

290 × 250 × 120 cm



Exhibition view David Thorpe at The Hepworth Wakefield, Wakefileld, UK, 2012



The Collaborator, 2010
wood, oil paint, sound system
231,4 × 237 × 109 cm

**David Thorpe at Casey Kaplan
Art in America, February 2011
Matthew Israel**

Defying categorization, the large-scale objects in “Peace Not Pacifism,” an exhibition by British-born, Berlin-based artist David Thorpe, embrace the antithetical esthetics of Minimalism and the Arts and Crafts movement (all works 2010). The first piece one saw upon entering the gallery was *The Collaborator*, a rectangular box—a “specific object” of sorts—raised off the floor on splayed wooden legs. Narrowly braced in wood, the panels that constitute its sides are painted in oil with interlacing floral patterns that could have been sourced from William Morris. Though visually intriguing enough, *The Collaborator* also emits a startling hum that is activated as spectators approach and fades as they pass: hence its witty title. This odd mixture of craft and technology was recapitulated in several smaller raised boxes. Their side panels are made of plaster decorated with leather vines and flowers, but rather than sound, a shockingly bright light could be viewed through a small square aperture in one side of each. You could not help but think of a film projector, though it’s difficult to imagine work less inclined to the photographic.

Likewise laboriously handcrafted, two monumental pieces consist of expanses of ceramic tiles glazed with lush, dark brown ornamentation: an imposing 10-foot-tall screen, *Endeavors*, and *The Plague*, stretching along the floor for 23 feet and looking like a cross between a Carl Andre sculpture and a palace pavement.

Thorpe initially gained recognition for two-dimensional cut-paper landscapes. Here, his work on paper consisted of a delicately painted five-part watercolor depicting bamboolike plants with elegant foliage. It could almost be a mock-up for scenic wallpaper, and, indeed, one wonders where the artist is heading. The recent, characteristically collaborative work at Kaplan represents a shift to more monumental formats and complex effects if not outright architectural ambitions. Based on the works in this fine show, I wouldn’t be surprised if Thorpe were to go on to fashion a highly developed, all-enveloping Gesamtkunstwerk.



Privet Lives, 2010

plaster, leather, light system, wood stand

107,3 × 106 × 106 cm | wood stand: 70,5 × 93,3 × 93,3 cm

Exhibition view *Peace not Pacifism* at Casey Kaplan, New York, 2010





Exhibition view *Peace not Pacifism* at Casey Kaplan, New York, 2010



Exhibition view *Veils and Shelters* at Kunstverein Hannover, Hannover, Germany, 2009



As yet untitled missile, 2010

leather, plaster, wood

60 × 15 × 15 cm



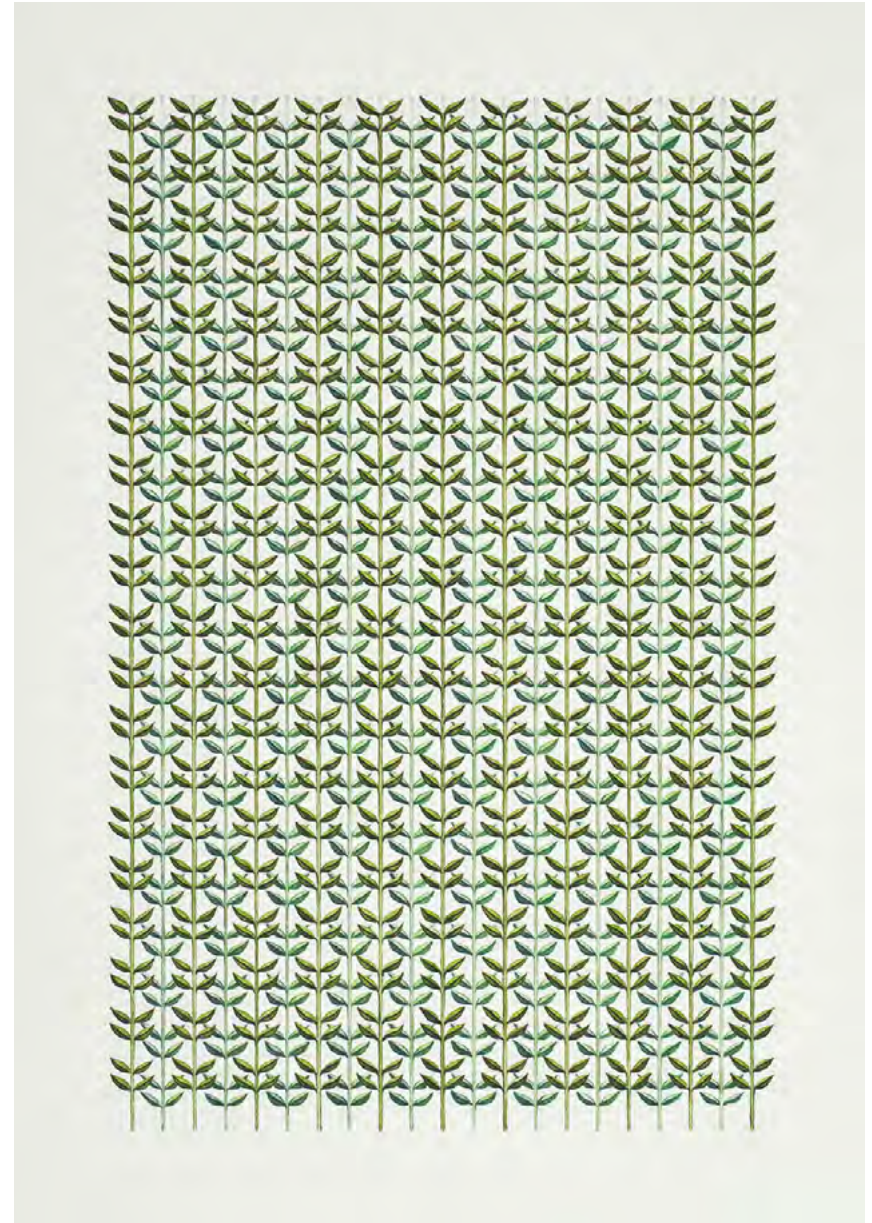
A and C missile, 2008

leather, plaster, wood

60 × 15 × 15 cm



Shadows (3), 2009
watercolor on paper
112,4 × 104 cm



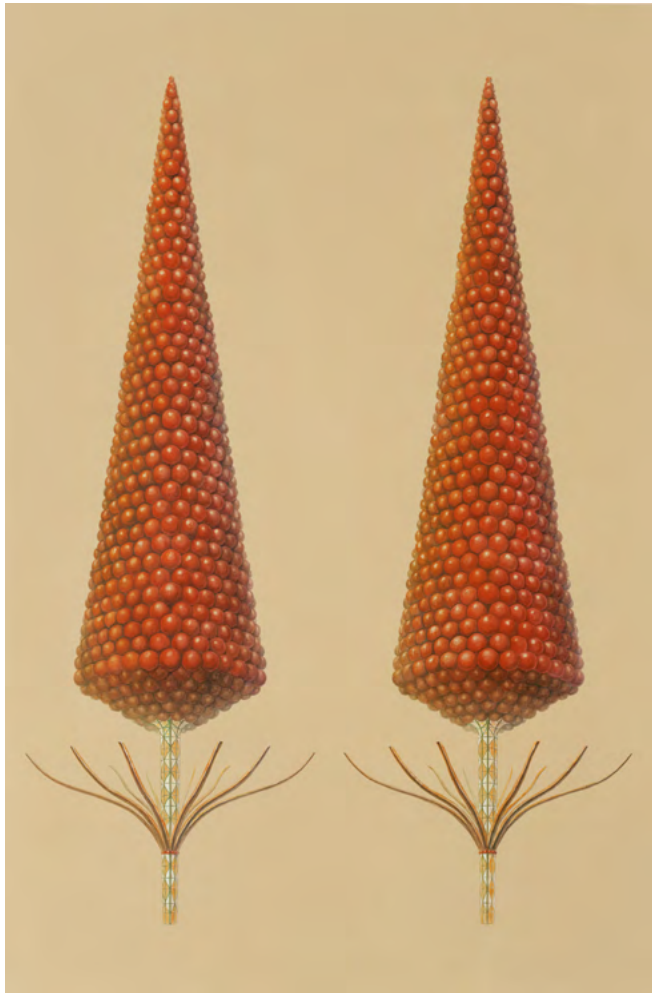
Shadows (2), 2009
watercolor on paper
109 × 94,4 cm



The Defeated Life Restored, 2006 – 2007

mixed media installation

dimensions variable



The Defeated Life Restored, 2006 – 2007
details



Exhibition view *The Colonist* at Tate Britain, London, 2004



The Protecting Army V, 2004

plaster, wood, leather

60 × 15 × 15 cm



The Colonist, 2004

mixed media, collage

83 cm



The Axe laid on the Root, 2004

mixed media collage

63 × 90 cm



Life is Splendid, 2000

paper collage

82 × 54 cm

David Thorpe
Born in London, 1972
Lives and works in Berlin

Education

1991–1994 Humberside University, BA (Hons) Fine Art, Lincoln, UK
1996–1998 Goldsmiths University, MA Fine Art, London

Solo Exhibitions (selection)

2022 *We came to display but may come back to destroy*, Casey Kaplan,
New York, USA
2019 *Underground*, Maureen Paley Interim Art, London
2017 *Lush Underground*, Galeria Pedro Cera, Lisbon
2016 *LOVED UNDERGROUND*, Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe, Germany
2012 Maureen Paley, London
The Hepworth Wakefield, Wakefield, UK
2010 *Perfume Against the Sulphurous Stinke of the Snuffe of the Light for
Smoak*, Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe, Germany
Peace not Pacifism, Casey Kaplan, New York
2009 *Veils and Shelters*, Kunstverein Hannover, Hannover, Germany
A Weak Light Flickering, Meyer Riegger, Berlin
2008 Museum Kurhaus Kleve, Kleve, Germany
2007 *The defeated life restored*, Kunsthau Glarus, Glarus, Switzerland
Camden Arts Center, London
Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe, Germany
2006 *A meeting of Friends*, Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts, USA
2005 *The defeated jolly fellow March in True Majesty*, Maureen Paley
Interim, London

303 Gallery, New York
2004 *The Colonists*, Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe, Germany
The Colonists, Art now space David Thorpe, Tate Britain, London
2003 Taro Nasu Gallery, Tokyo
2002 Maureen Paley Interim Art, London
1999 Maureen Paley Interim Art, London

Group Exhibition (selection)

2026 *Nearly 31*, Casey Kaplan, New York
2025 *Works on Paper*, Casey Kaplan, New York
2023 *This Isn't Who It Would Be, If It Wasn't Who It Is*, Casey Kaplan, New York
2022 *There is no sea but the sea*, Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe, Germany
2020 *A Means To An End*, Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe, Germany
2019 *Come Together*, Meyer Riegger, Berlin, Germany
Modern Nature, Drawing Room, London
2018 *Malevolent Eldritch Shrieking*, AttercliffeTM, Sheffield, UK
2017 *And Then There Were None*, Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe, Germany
2016 *Sitting on branch*, Von Bartha, Basel, Switzerland
The Science of Imaginary Solutions, Breese Little, London
2014 *Never Look Back When Leaving*, Casey Kaplan, New York
Half past noon, CAN–Centre d art Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland
2013 *Labour and Wait*, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, USA
Drawing a Universe, Arthena Foundation, Dusseldorf, Germany
2012 *Courtship of the People*, Simon Oldfield Gallery, London
Heather & Ivan Morison, Ben Rivers, and David Thorpe, The Hepworth
Wakefield, Wakefield, UK
No. 17, Casey Kaplan, New York
The Power of Paper, Saatchi Gallery, London
2011 *From the Recent Past: New Acquisitions*, The Museum of Contemporary
Art, Los Angeles, USA

- 2010 *Shape of Things to Come: New Sculpture*, Saatchi Gallery, London
- 2010 *The Library of Babel / In and Out of Place, 176 / Zabłudowicz Collection*, London
- 2009 *The Dark Monarch: Magic and Modernity in British Art*, Tate St Ives, St. Ives, UK
- Delusional Virtuosity*, Stedelijk Museum, Schiedam, Netherlands
- 2008 *Haus und Himmel*, Museum Kurhaus Kleve, Kleve, Germany
- 2007 *Three for Society*, 303 Gallery, New York
- Imagination Becomes Reality*, Eine Ausstellung zum erweiterten Malereibegriff, Werke aus der Sammlung Goetz, Zentrum für Kunst- und Medientechnologie-Museum für Neue Kunst, Karlsruhe, Germany
- 2006 *Toutes Compositiones Florales, with David Thorpe*, Counter Gallery, London
- Imagination becomes Reality. Part III: Talking Pictures*, Sammlung Goetz, Munich, Germany
- China Art Objects Galleries*, Los Angeles, USA
- Sleep of Urlo*, A Foundation, Liverpool, UK
- 2005 *Déja-vu*, Österreichische Galerie, Vienna, Austria
- The Triumph of painting*, Saatchi Gallery, London
- British Art Show 6*, Hayward Gallery Touring Exhibition, UK
- William Blake and Sons*, Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork, UK
- Wunschwelten. Neue Romantik in der Kunst der Gegenwart*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany
- Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany
- Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe, Germany
- 2004 *Into My World*, Recent British Sculpture, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut, USA
- Not Afraid*, Rubell Family Collection, Wynwood Art District, Miami, USA
- Edge of Real- A Painting show*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London
- 2003 *Bootleg*, Spitalfields Market, London
- 2002 *We all love...*, The Mission, London
- A Collection*, ABN Amro Bank, Netherlands
- Beyond Barbizon*, Elias Fine Art, Allston, USA
- Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, MoMA QNS, New York
- Per Saldo*, Noordbrabants Museum's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands
- Tailsliding*, Bergen Centre for Contemporary Art; Vilnius Centre of Contemporary Art, Vilnius, Lithuania
- Rotermann Salt Storage*, Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn, Estonia
- CASA*, Salamanca, Spain; *Turku Art Museum*, Finland (Tailsliding), Brno House of Arts, Czech Republic
- The Necessary Enemy*, Bart Wells Institute, London
- Beyond Barbizon*, Elias Fine Art, Allston, Massachusetts, USA
- Painted, Printed and Produced* in UK, Grant Selwyn, Fine Art, New York
- 2001 *Futureland 2001*, Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, Germany
- Sages, Scientists and Madmen*, One in the Other, London
- Extended Painting*, Monica de Cardenas, Milan
- Salon*, Delfina Project Space, London
- 2000 *Future Perfect: art on how architecture imagined the future*, Cornerhouse, Manchester, UK
- Twisted. Urban and Visionary Landscapes in Contemporary Painting*, Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, Netherlands
- Future Perfect: art on how architecture imagined the future*, Centre for Visual Arts, Cardiff, UK
- The Wreck of Hope*, The Nunnery Gallery, London
- Wooden Heart*, AVCO, London
- Salon*, Delfina Project Space, London
- 1999 *Idlewild*, The approach, London
- Heart & Soul*, 60 Long Lane, London

- 1998 *The Sea, The Sea*, Murray Guy, New York
Die Young Stay Pretty, ICA, London
Cluster Bomb, Morrison Judd Gallery, London
Ruislip, De Pracktijk, Amsterdam
Post Neo-Amatuerism, Chisenhale Gallery, London
Futures for the Young, Axel Morner Gallery, Stockholm
Printemps, Deutsch Britische Freundschaft, UK and Germany
Sunshine Breakfast, Michael Janssen Gallery, Cologne, Germany
Sociable Realism, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London
The new neurotic realism, The Saatchi Gallery, London
- 1997 *David Thorpe and Simon Periton*, Habitat, Kings Road, London
Need for Speed, Grazer Kunstverein Steirischer herbst 97, Graz, Austria
B.o.n.go, Bricks and Kicks Gallery, Vienna, Austria
David Thorpe and Simon Hollington, City Racing, London
- 1996 *Angels*, Standpoint Gallery, London

Public Collections (selection)

- Albright-Knox Museum, Buffalo, New York
Landesmuseum fur Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Munster, Germany
Museum Kurhaus, Kleve, Germany
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, USA
Saatchi Collection, London
Tate Britain, London
Zabludowicz Collection, London

Catalogues and Publications (selection)

- 2009 *David Thorpe: Veils and Shelters or Sparkles of Glory or Perfume Against the Sulphurous Stinke of the Snuffe or the Light for Smoak*, Kunstverein Hannover, Hannover, Germany, 2009
- 2008 *David Thorpe*, Museum Kurhaus, Kleve, Germany, 2008
- 2007 *David Thorpe-The Defeated Life Restored*, Camden Arts Centre, London, 2007
- 2004 *A Rendezvous with my Friends of Liberty*, Revolver, Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany, 2004