

John Wood and Paul Harrison, Carroll/Fletcher

The Laurel and Hardy of the art world venture from comedy to failed utopian dreams

by Sarah Kent | Saturday, 25 April 2015



Still from 'Semi Automatic Painting Machine', 2014, by John Wood and Paul Harrison

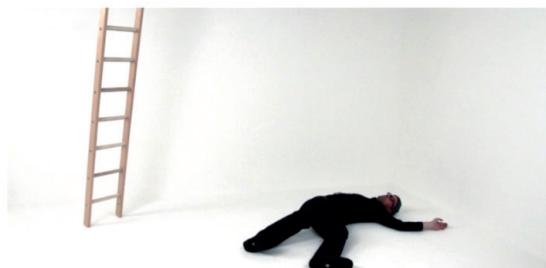
© John Wood and Paul Harrison, courtesy Carroll / Fletcher Gallery

Described by the Tate as the Laurel and Hardy of the art world, John Wood and Paul Harrison are best known for appearing in superbly timed, comic videos using their own bodies to explore spatial relations. Projected over the concrete stairwell of the Carroll/Fletcher gallery 100

Falls (pictured below right) is excruciating to watch. A black-clad figure in a white room disappears from view up a wooden ladder. Seconds later he plummets down to crash land in a crumpled heap on the floor. Sometimes he smashes into the wall, sometimes his legs are bent awkwardly beneath him. Surely he must be injured? Each time, though, he gets up and repeats the painful operation. Its all an illusion, of course. The climber may be a real man, but the falling body is a dummy; but so seamless is the edit that each "accident" is completely believable.

Semi Automatic Painting Machine (main picture) is a comic take on colour co-ordination, stylish living and camouflage. White lampshades are spray-painted red, yellow and green, so are balloons and a strip of white bunting. A rubber plant is sprayed white to match the wall, then green to match a coloured backdrop; a white door leaning against a white wall is sprayed red, but when it falls forward, it reveals a blue rectangle hidden behind. The jokes are all visual, so they don't translate well into words, but the experience is utterly beguiling.

For comedy to work it has to appear effortless, so a great deal of preparation goes into the making of each video. This often involves building simple but precise sets and some of the skills



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needed to construct the perfect scene are

celebrated in a tongue-in-cheek installation about tools, drawing equipment and other useful items. Two propelling pencils share a singled lead; another pencil has been sharpened right down to the rubber; a length of string is measured against a ruler; blue tape is crumpled into a sticky ball and, mounted on a turntable, a globe revolves at 33 rpm. A garden bench lies on its back; attached to it, a bronze plaque reads: "Bench for Looking Up". The humour is dry and the jokes visual; vision is refreshed and the familiar made strange by altering perceptions.

Immaculately crafted from plywood, *A Film About a City* (pictured below) is like an architect's model for a new town. One building has an arcade made from protractors, but most are rectangular blocks differentiated by unexpected details. One block has mirrored walls that reflect the buildings around it; the church, on the other hand, is completely surrounded by mirrors. One building is jacked up at an angle, while a whole neighbourhood cluster is completely covered in grass.



The cars in the multi-storey car park are arranged according to colour – black, blue, green, red and white on respective floors. Peopling the place are identical white figures; one stands alone in a large square; two explore a [Richard Serra-like](#) sculpture; two others stand precariously on a high ledge and several stroll along a tree-lined avenue while, elsewhere in town, a crowd gazes out from a flat roof.

This installation may represent someone's idea of utopia, but housed downstairs is a series of models depicting [failed dreams and abandoned projects](#). A patch of scruffy grass bears the marks of a dismantled funfair; an unfinished monorail goes nowhere and a rejected building project slowly rots and crumbles. Meanwhile, on video, a car rolls inexorably down to a watery grave at the bottom of a lake, while those left in the car park are blown up one by one.

The videos which made the artists famous were filmed in an all-white studio environment in which they appear dressed in black. Like *100 Falls*, each absurdist event is a dynamic exploration of cause and effect in which the artists are simply generic figures – bodies in space acted on by gravity. Colour and all references to the outside world are excluded from the equation.

The work in this delightful exhibition opens the flood gates to the world outside. Narrative comes seeping in; colour, style, taste, politics, aspiration, planning, individual and collective dreaming and ambition all put in an appearance, whether literally or metaphorically. Time has lengthened from seconds into decades and the focus has widened from a momentary encounter in a studio to a discarded project in a landscape, or a vision of things to come.

These are exciting times in the world of John Wood and Paul Harrison. Long may their absurdist explorations and precisely honed humour continue to develop and flower.

- [John Wood and Paul Harrison: An Almost Identical Copy at Carroll/Fletcher until 30 May](#)