

## Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness

29 April – 21 June 2015, Galleries 1, 8 & Victor Petitgas Gallery (Gallery 9)

Media view: Tuesday 28 April, 10am – 12pm

The Whitechapel Gallery presents the first UK retrospective of American artist **Christopher Williams**, one of the most influential artists working with photography and the production and display of images.

Christopher Williams' recent photographs reveal the unexpected beauty and cultural resonance of commercial, industrial and instructional photography, and also adopts their production methods. Often working in collaboration with set designers, models and technicians, the resulting technically precise photographs recall imagery from 1960s advertising, the Cold War era, as well as the histories of art, photography and cinema. However, closer inspection reveals that flaws and aberrations which would usually be removed in production or postproduction, such as a model's dirty feet or a bruise on a ripe apple, remain in the final images. Williams also sees the photographs themselves as part of a larger system of display which includes exhibition design, walls, books, posters, videos, vitrines, and signage, and uses these elements playfully within the exhibition.

*The Production Line of Happiness* brings together over 50 photographs from Williams' 35-year career, and is on show from 29 April 2015. Five new works never seen before in the UK go on display including a pristine image of a broken Citroen car headlight, an image influenced by British and European Pop art. The photographs are displayed in an architectural installation specially conceived by the artist and inspired by histories of display. Temporary walls come from art institutions in the Rheinland region of Germany, where Williams currently lives and works and are both a reference to and a partial reprisal of a 2009 exhibition at the Bonner Kunstverein made in collaboration with Austrian artist Mathias Poledna.

Following presentations at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition is arranged across three galleries starting with his most recent works and ending with his earliest.

The earliest work in the exhibition is *SOURCE...* (1981). For this the artist visited the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum where he chose and re-photographed 4 images all taken on a particular day in 1963, the year Kennedy was assassinated, which all capture the iconic politician with his back to the camera.

In *Angola to Vietnam\**, Williams photographed glass flowers made by the Dresden-based Blaschka family, housed in the Botanical Museum in Harvard University. He selected only the national flowers of countries from A – V cited on an Amnesty International list of nations engaging in political disappearances for this installation of 27 black and white photographs.

A single work consisting of a photograph and a wall, *Bouquet for Bas Jan Ader and Christopher D'Arcangelo* (1991), is presented in Gallery 9, and pays tribute to two artists who died at a young age in the 1970s. A still life photograph of a bouquet of flowers, referencing a work by Bas Jan Ader, is installed on a wall made to the artists specifications, which is based on a work by Christopher D'Arcangelo that involved the construction of a wall for the purpose of displaying others artworks.

### Press Release

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This work highlights Williams' long-standing engagement with architecture and the history of display.

*Young Hee Kim and Gyung-Hwa Han* (1992) is a portrait of two Korean women wearing blue contact lenses. Closer viewing reveals that that one of the sitters has removed a lens to reveal a natural brown eye.

*For Example: Die Welt ist schön (The World Is Beautiful)* (1993 -2001), is an eight-year project inspired by Albert Renger-Patzsch's 1928 book containing 100 pictures of natural and man made creations. Williams' subjects include a tropical beach in Cuba, carefully maintained for tourists; an overturned Renault recalling the student unrest in Paris of May 1968; and two beetles on their backs.

*For Example: Dix-huit leçons sur la société industrielle (Eighteen Lessons on Industrial Society)* (2003– ongoing) takes its title from the 1962 book by French sociologist Raymond Aron. These detailed images of photographic equipment – cross-sections of cameras, lenses and photographic colour charts - allow the camera to take centre stage at the very beginning of the exhibition. The series also includes highly produced, glossy images of everyday objects such as apples and tyres, as well as models and products next to colour charts used by photographers to assist in the printing process, or a Playboy model amidst the lighting equipment and props of a professional photo shoot, stretching and laughing during a pause from the labour involved in the construction of images of fantasy and desire.

Each of the exhibition spaces of *The Production Line of Happiness* are visually and architecturally linked through bright green signage, which references both the colour of the Whitechapel Gallery edition of the exhibition catalogue, and a photograph by Williams of a tile by artist Daniel Buren, which is also included in the exhibition.

#### Notes to editors

- Christopher Williams (b. 1956, Los Angeles, USA) studied at the California Institute of the Arts under the first wave of West Coast conceptual artists in the 1970s, including John Baldessari and Douglas Huebler. Exhibitions include: Carnegie International (1991), Kunsthalle Basel (1997), Secession, Vienna, Austria, and Kunstverein Braunschweig, Germany (both 2005); Kunsthalle Zürich (2007); Museu Serralves, Porto, Portugal (2006); Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Germany and Bergen Kunsthall, Norway (both 2010); Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen, Germany and Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, Belgium (both 2011). His works are held in collections including: The Art Institute of Chicago; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Ludwig Museum, Cologne; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. In 2014, Williams was the first artist to receive the Photography Catalogue of the Year, presented by the Paris Photo–Aperture Foundation PhotoBook Awards, for the two volumes specially designed and published on the occasion of his touring survey, *The Production Line of Happiness* (exhibition catalogue) and Printed in Germany (artist book). He has been Professor at the Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf, since 2008. He lives and works in Cologne and Los Angeles.
- *Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness* is the first major survey of the artist, which spans thirty-five years of his work. The exhibition was at The Art Institute of Chicago (January–May 2014) and The Museum of Modern Art, New York (July–November 2014). The Whitechapel Gallery exhibition (29 April – 21 June 2015) is guest curated by Mark Godfrey, Curator, Tate Modern, with Lydia Yee, Chief Curator, Whitechapel Gallery; Seamus McCormack, Assistant Curator, Whitechapel Gallery; Omar Kholeif, Curator, Whitechapel Gallery; and Emily Butler, Assistant Curator, Whitechapel Gallery.
- The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with essays by Mark Godfrey, Guest Curator; Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art;

and Matthew S. Witkovsky, Richard and Ellen Sandor Chair and Curator, Department of Photography, The Art Institute of Chicago. The book explores Williams's engagement with his artistic peers and predecessors, with his relationship to cinema, and with the methods and modes of display and publicity within the context and history of art. £24.99.

- This exhibition has been generously supported by: The Artworkers Retirement Society; Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne; Ringier Collection, Switzerland; Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso Para El Arte and David Zwirner, New York/London. Funded by the Kunststiftung NRW.

### **Visitor Information**

Opening times: Tuesday – Sunday, 11am – 6pm, Thursdays, 11am – 9pm. Free entry. Whitechapel Gallery, 77 – 82 Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX. Nearest London Underground Station: Aldgate East, Liverpool Street, Tower Gateway DLR. T + 44 (0) 20 7522 7888 [info@whitechapelgallery.org](mailto:info@whitechapelgallery.org) [whitechapelgallery.org](http://whitechapelgallery.org)

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