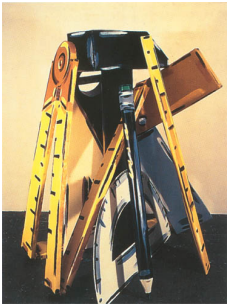
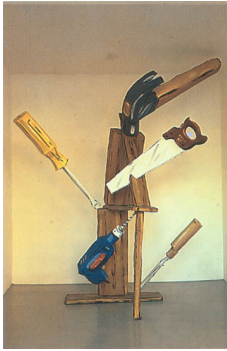




Julian Opie, Imagine that it`s Raining • RICHARD SHONE

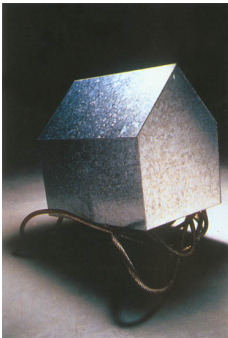
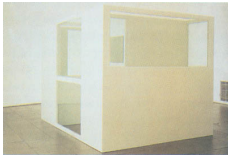
## JULIAN OPIE, IMAGINE THAT IT'S RAINING



Julian Opie came to prominence at a particularly diverse and buoyant moment in recent British art. He was a student in London at Goldsmiths College between 1979 and 1982, a period in which recognition was accorded to a group of British sculptors that included Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Bill Woodrow, Richard Wentworth and Antony Gormley. The years of his first exhibitions (1983-85) saw the brief success of much figurative painting with which his works had little connexion save its 'figuration'. And in the later 1980s when he was extending and consolidating his early achievement, there emerged another closely associated but highly individual group of artists, a little younger than Opie, among whom were Rachel Whiteread, Gary Hume, Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and Matt Collishaw. Although sometimes bracketed with the earlier sculptors (mainly because he shared with them the same London dealer), Opie cannot be placed comfortably within any group. In one sense this has been to his disadvantage: a label can be a help as well as a hindrance in the public's perception of an artist's work. From another viewpoint, Opie can be seen as resolutely his own man, unlikely to be deflected by extraneous concerns from the pursuit of his remarkably personal vision. At the same time, his investigation of artifice and reality and the representation of experience gives his work an up-to-the-moment immediacy of focus that prevents isolation.

At Goldsmiths College, Opie was recognised as a conspicuously intelligent and prolific student. His mind raced ahead of his flow of ideas, making him an impatient spectator of the physical outcome of his own thought. This desire to see the thing itself encouraged a technical adroitness and efficiency that he has since refined and amplified. It has allowed him to fabricate a wide range of often highly contrasting works, his practical resourcefulness inseparable from the fertility of his concepts. At Goldsmiths, Opie was taught by, among others, Michael Craig-Martin for whom he later worked as a studio assistant. Craig-Martin's conceptual rigour, object-based work and cosmopolitan background were exemplary in the younger artist's formative years.

Right from the start, Opie took familiar domestic existence as the subject of his work with an acute appreciation of the unique qualities of everyday objects and the way they also triggered a shared and general experience. At the same time, he was literate, not in the least bowed down by his knowledge of the history of art. This last simply became a further resource, deepening the content of his work. In several early sculptures - objects carried out in dashing painted sheet metal - witty allusions to the work of artists from Manet and Monet to Barnett Newman and Richard Long were filtered through the commonplaces of everyday reality. Art was the invention of a language, a mode of representation in which artifice and reality fed off each other. Nothing was quite what it seemed in these works, yet each object was instantly recognisable. A matchbox or a flower, a Monet or a saw were evoked in paint put on through the same focus - sparse, casual, colourful - that identified each object without particularising it in any mimetic sense. (Fig. 1 and 2.) Space was present as both real space in which the viewer confronts the object, and as depicted space, a wonderfully quirky juggling act between solid fabrication and the painted fictions applied to it. It became obvious from such solo shows in London as those at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1985 and at the Lisson Gallery in 1983 and 1985 that an articulate, humorous and accessible artist had arrived.



As suggested above, Opie was by no means alone in his investigation of commonplace experience but he had arrived at his own solution. A range of artists in the 1980s eschewed the presentation of first-hand experience and an individual apprehension of form, finding texts, diagrams, brought-in objects and photography as the ideal vehicles for this desire for neutrality. It was in some ways a continuation of the Conceptual Art of the previous decade but inflected by issues of originality, mass media, personal authorship and representation. Opie grounded his apprehension of these issues of language and context in work that was personally fabricated, giving it a sense of being part of our daily world - though not quite. This tension between reality and representation was seen at its most taut and succinct in a series of works from 1987-89 which, by a hair's breadth, defied categorisation as 'refrigerators', 'air vents' and 'storage cabinets'. (Fig. 3 and 4.) At one moment it seemed as though you were looking at refined, minimalist sculpture in the tradition of Judd and LeWitt; at another you were trying to disentangle features that pertained to a readymade refrigerator from those that might signal 'abstract' sculpture as expected in the white-walled space of a gallery. Sensations of extreme familiarity and anxious disorientation combined in works that were ascetic and unnerving. Here was a celebration of banality, an art where the questions raised were inextricable from the objects themselves. They may not have been as immediately seductive as the painted sculpture of the preceding period but they came nearer to the pulse of Opie's overall concerns.

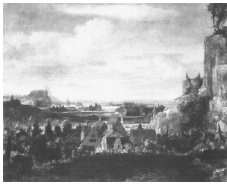
The sculptures of 1987-89 were autonomous, free-standing or, where appropriate, wall-mounted objects closely derived from semi-industrial prototypes, pristine and somewhat forbidding in their self-contained silence. Opie's next work included an exploration of space and location, again confined to commonplace experience, such as the office environment. Modular shelving, moveable partitions and colour-coded areas suggested an idealised space perfect for the modern worker constructed from representations of such spaces (architectural drawings and models and retail catalogue images). But the resulting work (such as HA. 45-11, Fig. 5) was physically unenterable, functionally useless and spatially ambivalent - characteristics frequently found in sculpture but unusual in architecture. On every level, Opie thwarted expectations.

Such works were a preparation for the prolific period of the early 1990s when Opie's work became more inclusive with the addition not only of an increasingly complex exploration of the experience of space and distance but of the representation in physical form of certain kinds of feeling or response common to late twentieth-century living. It is to this period that *Imagine that it's Raining* belongs.

In Opie's earliest sculptures, wit was an essential component. It was the wit of the English Metaphysical poets in which seemingly alien concepts are brought together to form an amusing conceit. A fanciful metaphor used to vivify an immediate experience - a pair of lovers likened to a pair of compasses, for example - produces a third element of paradoxical and witty illumination. Opie's wit was also the result of youthful high spirits, an exuberant manifestation of lightly-worn learning: each sculpture went off like a firework. He was not alone in this humorous appraisal of serious issues. It was present in works by several of the Lisson Gallery sculptors, particularly Woodrow, Cragg and Wentworth (Fig. 6) in their metamorphosis of the commonplace; in Craig-Martin's wall drawings of unlikely assemblages of differently scaled household goods and furniture; in Lisa Milroy's paintings of ubiquitous objects that questioned all aspects of verisimilitude with wonderful insouciance. As Opie progressed, the spirit in which his work was conceived necessarily lost some of the lightness of touch and became more wryly

meditative. Certainly the 1988- 89 sculptures contained a humorous element but it was less overt. Thereafter an inescapable melancholy became evident in the viewer's response to the work as much as in its content.

In 1991-92 Opie had a large number of shows in Europe and often drove long distances across the Continent, particularly through Germany; there were also personal reasons for several visits to Italy. The experience of motorways led to a series of works related to driving, of moving fast through a landscape with all its concomitant changes of scale and focus. This coincided with his familiarity with computer games and their graphic representation of reality which struck him as both 'incredibly sophisticated' and 'very primitive'. Motorway-driving can be both exhilarating and alienating. It generates feelings of release and liberation; at the same time, the road becomes a place where a sense of personal individuality is shed in order to conform to the rules. Reality becomes subsumed in the artificiality of the situation yet is simultaneously heightened. In computer games, with their flat, idealised representation of the world and their ability to draw in the player to the point of an obsessive exclusion of all else, Opie found a fruitful extension to his search for an image of contemporary reality. Although his subsequent works continue earlier preoccupations, they also take on board feelings of transience and loss, frustration and longing. They are not necessarily a critical down-grading of aspects of contemporary life but more a presentation of them mediated through an acute sensibility working under no illusions.

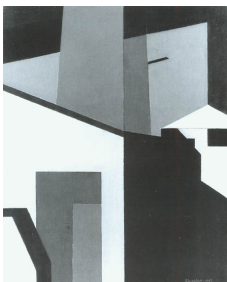


In the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam there is a landscape painting by the early seventeenth-century Dutch artist Hercules Seghers. (Fig. 7). It depicts the passage of a river through a cultivated valley seen from a high vantage point among cliffs. In the distance, the land recedes to a very far horizon. Three distinct groups of buildings occupy the central section of the composition: the first, a clump of roofs and house-sides in the foreground; the second, some houses and church towers in the middleground; the third, a far-off group of what seems to be a farm and its adjacent buildings. The painting combines detailed verisimilitude, characteristic of Dutch art at the time (the 1620s), with a sense of otherworldliness, a dreamt landscape based on observation but re-cast to maximise its beauty and strangeness.



Opie's *Imagine that it's Raining* (Fig. 8) consists of three distinct groups of houses, each group of nine separate pieces, all made from plywood painted in off-white and grey gloss paint. They are reduced in scale by two-thirds, each group standing close together on the floor in the same configuration, at some distance from each other. The houses are reminiscent of children's toys - from capacious dolls' houses to movable farm-buildings - as well as of architectural models, although they lack any particularising features such as doors, windows and chimneys. The immediate look may be modern but they are obviously based on the gabled and pitched-roof style of domestic architecture that, with variations, has been the staple diet of Northern European building over several centuries. The hundreds of photographs Opie has taken on his travels contain many instances of this generic type of building - from humble village roofs to grand Rhine-land castles. However, he has suggested that the houses in *Imagine...* were formed from an amalgamation of visual memories rather than from any specific house - from looking down on the rooftops of Cornish villages in England in his early years, to buildings seen later in Holland, Switzerland and Germany. Other works made in the same period as *Imagine that it's Raining* include models of churches, fortified castles and farmhouses, (Fig. 9) all articulated in con-





siderable detail. Definitely more redolent of Northern Europe than elsewhere, they evoke the schloss rather than the château, the bauernhaus rather than the maison de ferme. Simplified through the focus of computer-generated images, as seen in Opie's paintings of roads and streets (the *Imagine you are Driving*, (Fig. 10) and *Imagine you are Walking* series of 1993), the works nevertheless embody complex references and feelings.

The dimension of space-and-time haunts the landscapes of Seghers and his compatriot Jacob van Ruisdael. A sense of dealing with several levels of reality - optical, geographical, social, spiritual - combined with the free-flow of a transforming imagination occurs throughout the landscape art of Northern Europe. Opie's work contains elements of this tradition without his being in any way a naturalist. His 'style' is nearer the architectural modernism of earlier twentieth century American artists such as Charles Demuth, Rawlston Crawford and Charles Sheeler, especially the latter's clean-cut, idealised views of an unpopulated urban scene (Fig.11 and 12). Opie is very much an urban, contemporary commentator dealing with language, whether the language of modernism, of the motorway, of computer games, modular assembly or maps. Even the titles of his works, important keys to their content, contain wordplay and paradox. For example, the *Imagine...* of several titles is both a playful invitation (in the manner of 'Once upon a time...') and an incitement to follow the artist into another dimension of reality. We are asked to imagine that it's raining and we see the drenched landscape swiftly passing, imagine windscreen wipers, roadspray, an elusive melancholy taking over our spirits in sympathy with the prospect outside. Yet Opie's sculpture seems to deny the possibility of rain and discomfort: the neatly ranged houses glow in the simulated sunlight of the gallery. They have a sanitised, pared down appearance and assume the look of the ersatz historicising of genteel housing, out-of-town supermarkets and service stops. The old vernacular language has become homogenised for present consumption, blandly undetailed and characterless.

Opie's most recent exhibition in London, *Imagine you are Driving* (June-July 1996, Lisson Gallery), a dense installation of objects, painting and video, continued to examine life as a 'forest of signs' from the 'no-place' security of a car. We were bidden to pass office buildings, a castle, to drive through a wood, see hills in the distance, the car itself, central to each section of the exhibition, becoming the lens through which we viewed such 'reality'. Any specific narrative, however, was disrupted by the interchangeability of the show's constituent parts. Were we in city or in country, on business or on pleasure? The old romance of travel was reduced to a bland consumerism, each feature of the journey simulated like those exclamatory symbols on tourist maps - 'historic house', 'place of special interest', 'panoramic view', each having its own reductive, symbolic picture. The clean, unmodulated colours and shapes of road, car, building and sky formed a toytown *gesamtkunstwerk* with its approximation of our desires. Just as the landscape, as we moved through it, lost its focus, so our sense of transience became indefinable, our desires approximate. What place, what time were we mourning,?

*Imagine that it's Raining* occupies an important role in Opie's work to date. It is an elegant encapsulation of many of the concerns which fuel his art and which led to the tour de force of *Imagine you are Driving*. It has a specific physical presence and wide metaphorical implications; it is a painted, three-dimensional structure yet based on a flat, linear style (drawing has been crucial for Opie since his earliest works); it feeds off memories of Modernism yet is too idiosyncratic to be pastiche; it is strongly rooted in contemporary experience yet is neither an endorsement nor a criticism of that experience; it is about

art yet is not partisan, compellingly occupying, instead, a no-man's-land between representation and abstraction. This conflation of issues, central to much good art of today, invests Opie's imagery with wit, paradox, ambivalence and authority.

My thanks for help and information go to Julian Opie, Henry Meyric Hughes, Michael Craig-Martin and Susan Waxman of the Lisson Gallery. A full bibliography appears in publication, no 4 listed here, but the following texts have been particularly useful: Michael Craig-Martin's introduction to Opie's Lisson Gallery exhibition catalogue (1985); Michael Newman's essay in Opie's Lisson Gallery exhibition catalogue (1988); the texts and illustrations in Opie's Hayward Gallery exhibition catalogue (1993); Liam Gillick's review of the Hayward Gallery show in *Art Monthly* (Dec/Jan 93-94), p.26; and James Roberts's essay on Opie, 'Tunnel Vision' in *Frieze* (May 1993), pp. 28-35.

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1 Julian Opie. Texts by Michael Craig-Martin and Art & Language. Exhibition catalogue, Lisson Gallery, London (1985).

2 Julian Opie. "Undecidable Objects" by Michael Newman. Exhibition catalogue, Lisson Gallery, London (1988).

3 James Roberts: "Tunnel Vision" (on new work by Julian Opie), *Frieze* (May 1993), pp. 28-35.

4 Julian Opie. Various texts in catalogue to exhibition at Hayward Gallery, London, and Kunstverein Hannover (1993); cf. Lyone Cooke, "Rehearsing Realities".

## ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Making It. 1983. Oil on steel, 260 x 260 x 260 cm. (Tate Gallery, London).
2. Broken Rules. 1985. Oil on steel, 213 x 152 x 183 cm. (Private collection).
3. Installation of works by Julian Opie at the Lisson Gallery, London, February-March 1988.
4. Installation of works by Julian Opie at the Lisson Gallery, London, February-March 1988.
5. HA. 45-11. 1990. Wood and glass, 198 x 289.5 x 208 cm. (as installed at the Bern Kunsthalle, October-December 1991).
6. House and Home, 1986, by Richard Wentworth. Steel cable, wood, galvanised steel, 48.26 x 38.1 x 30.48 cm. (Private collection, Switzerland).
7. Rivervalley with a group of Houses, ca. 1625, by Hercules Seghers. Canvas, 70 x 86,6 cm. (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam).
8. Imagine that it's Raining. 1992. Gloss paint on plywood, 27 units. 9 units: 54,8 x 48,3 x 13,5 cm.; 9 units: 161.2 x 144 x 40.4 cm.; 9 units: 502.5 x 430 x 122.4 cm. (ForArt, Oslo).
9. Fortified Farm. 1993. Painted plywood. (3 parts: 130 x 130 x 150 cm.; 140 x 130 x 100 cm.; 140 x 130 x 100 cm.) (Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London).
10. Imagine you are Driving (8). 1993. Acrylic on wood, glass and aluminium, 93 x 123 x 3 cm. (Private collection).
11. Imagine that you can order these (2). 1992. Acrylic on wood, glass and aluminium, 160 x 160 x 7 cm. (Coll.: First Austrian International Bank, London).
12. Architectural Planes, 1947, by Charles Sheeler. Canvas, 38,1 x 30,48 cm. (Worcester Art Museum, MASS. Gift of Sandra B. Lane in memory of her husband, William H. Lane, and purchase through the Standard Acquisition Fund.