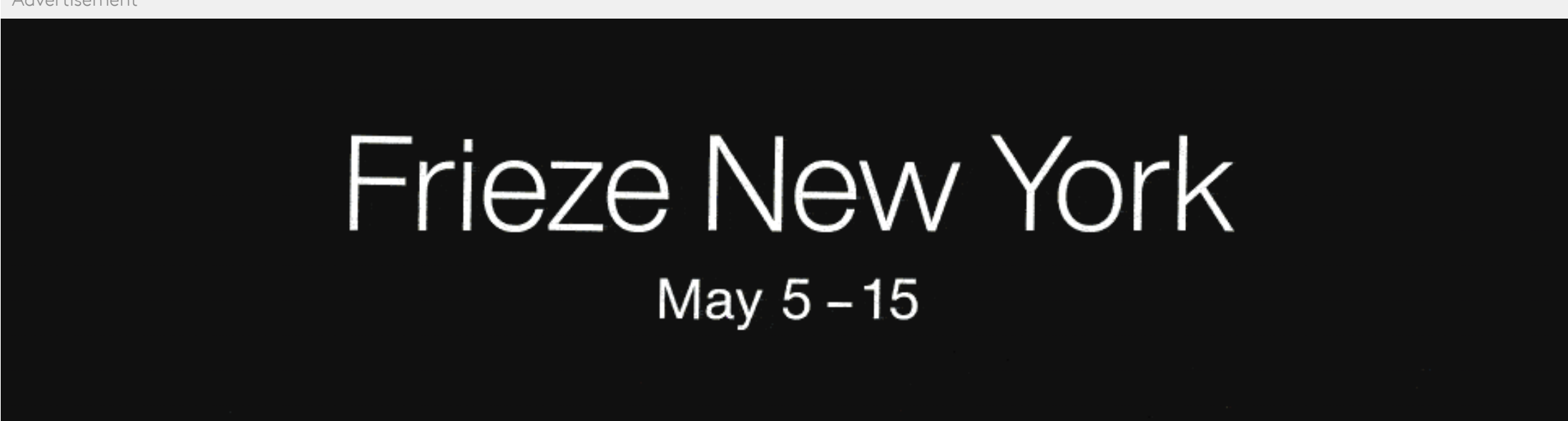


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BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
10 SEP 2003

Get it while you can

Janice Kerbel



A few years ago Janice Kerbel was broke, so she devised a plan - Bank Job (1999). Posing as an architecture student, for a year and a half she staked out a London bank: the Lombard Street branch of Coutts & Co.

Her research completed, she published an astonishingly detailed instruction manual on how to rob it, entitled *15 Lombard St* (2000). This master plan includes exhaustive information: accomplices, location, security set-up, ventilation, transmission, diversion, plan of action, getaway to a Spanish hideout and so forth. Accompanied by diagrams and blurred photographs, the dense text doesn't let up for 100 pages and is as thorough - and as demanding - as a tax form: 'The team is composed of ten individuals, seven of whom comprise a core group and three who are contracted and paid a fixed fee, half in advance, half upon completion ...' etc. It is only when you realize that the artist is obsessed with a plan she will never follow through that it becomes clear that the idea of deception is being posited as a Sisyphian act of liberation - if you can imagine something, she seems to be implying, that makes it, on some level, exist.

Kerbel's approach to crime - which is only one element of her work, and one that has (so far) remained in the realm of proposal - is about the possibility of using art more as a tool for escape than as a conduit for ill-gotten gains. Money has always shaped what could be called the economic determinism, or limits, of the imagination - who hasn't had a conversation about what they could make, see or do, if only they had more cash? - but the deception Kerbel employs contains not a shred of light-fingered malice. Tempered with a gentle, inventive melancholy, her work is shot through with delicate strains of longing - not only for money but also for gardens, invisibility or a desert island. In their extreme attention to detail Kerbel's various projects - which are essentially concerned with making daydreams concrete - are like mad cakes baked from the driest of ingredients. (You could imagine them spilling from the pockets of an unhinged clerk.)

Kerbel's is an approach that both embodies and acknowledges the fact that most art, by its very nature, depends on large doses of secrets, lies, repetitions, codes that need unravelling, and leaps in faith and trust. (Kerbel is well qualified for what she does - she trained in cultural anthropology, once had a job proofreading crime fiction and is the daughter of a criminal lawyer.) For example, dreaming of a holiday she could never afford, Kerbel designed an elaborate and convincing website advertising real estate on a perfect, fictitious, uninhabited island (*The Bird Island Project*, 2000-ongoing). Around the same time, she realized she was losing too much money playing poker, so she made packs of cards for cheats (*Three Marked Decks*, 1999). More recently she has been designing gardens, including one for agoraphobics (*Home Climate Gardens*, 2002-3), and home furniture to assist 'quick and easy escapes' and 'spontaneous appearances' (*Home Conjuring Units*, 2001). *Home Fittings* (2002-ongoing) comprises the insertion of slender brass markers into wooden floors, and various maps which indicate how to walk across selected rooms without them creaking (useful for both thieves and those desiring invisibility for personal reasons), and where to stand in certain rooms if you do not wish to cast a shadow (ditto).

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If the language Kerbel employed for Bank Job was dry, for *The Bird Island Project* it is as lush as its subject. 'Teeming with pink flamingos, long-tailed tropical birds and the remarkable Exuma Emerald, the island is an untouched tropical haven; night-blooming cereus and tiny straw lilies grow wildly amidst the dense coconut palm ... From above Bird Island looks like a boomerang lost in the Tongue of the Ocean. Eleven miles from nowhere, it is a stray gem off the glorious Exuma Cays, a glittering necklace of 365 islands.' And if for Bank Job Kerbel examined, in minute detail, the workings of an actual place, for *The Bird Island Project* she created a fictitious island in such a specific location - geographic co-ordinates 24.36°N 76.40°W - that she could, after much research, conclude how an island might look and what might grow on it at this precise point in the Caribbean. The project, which includes a website, texts and drawings, is broken down into the property section ('Bird Island Villas'), a section that explores the bio-geography of the island ('Welcome to Bird Island'), a watercolour of an indigenous bird that Kerbel invented in collaboration with bird illustrator Brin Edward (the 'Exuma Emerald') and a CD (*Exuma Emerald Calls*). 'Bird Island Plant Life' is a series of delicate, large-scale architect's drawings of the possible plant life on the island.

There is an inbuilt obsolescence lurking at the heart all of Kerbel's projects. If her plans were followed through, the object of desire would be destroyed - the police could read the plan to rob the bank before it took place; buying property on a desert island, even if it existed, would mean that the island was no longer deserted, and anyone arriving on it would destroy its fragile eco-system; and there is no point buying cheat cards which their creator has made no sly attempt to sell under the counter. Even the bird that Kerbel designed, the 'Exuma Emerald', has no natural predators and large thighs, which means it can't fly well - it would die if it left its fictitious paradise. It's an obsolescence, however, leavened by an element of the absurd. Kerbel's working method embraces a kind of conceptual *trompe l'oeil*, and, as with any *trompe l'oeil*, what you see in her work, despite its appearance of scientific rigour, is tinged more with expectation than with actuality. In this sense she would appear to be arguing the case for the power of the imagination to transcend a perhaps more easily disposable, and possibly crueller, version of 'reality' - no one in her world is ever injured in a heist, no island is ever destroyed by tourism and birds can rejoice in their frailty as they have nothing to fear. She once said to me, 'nothing lives up to what you want, does it?' Unless, that is, you create it yourself.

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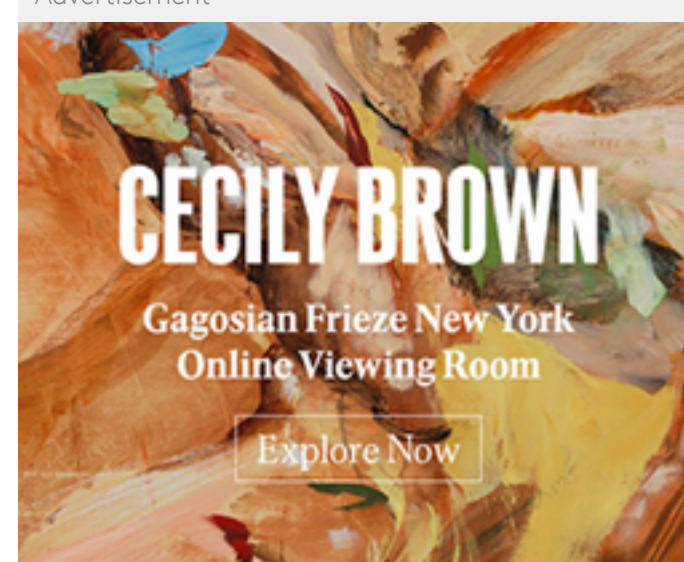
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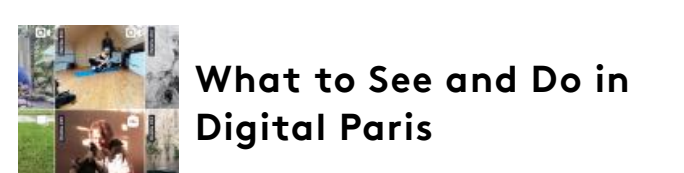
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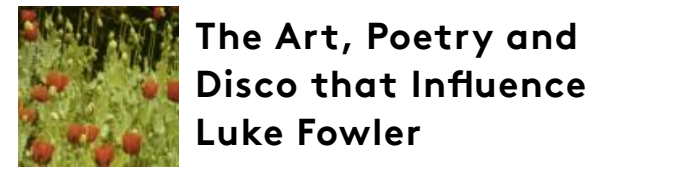
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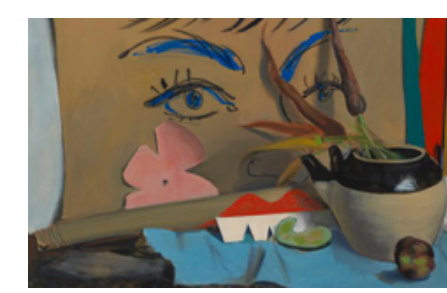
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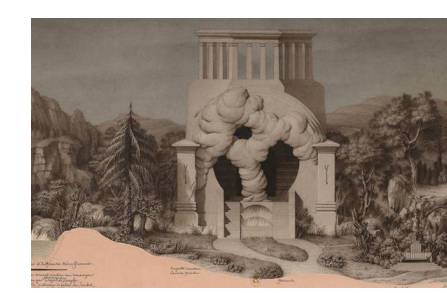
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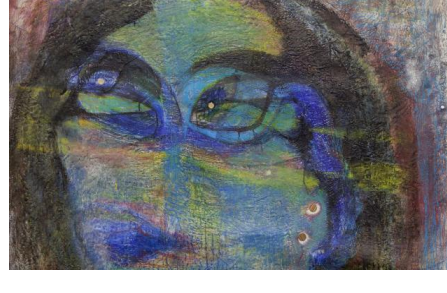
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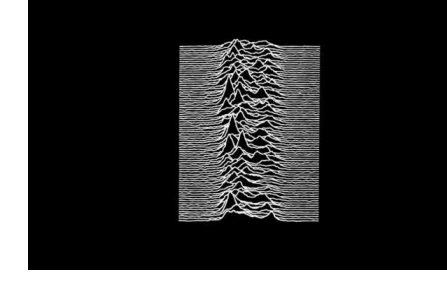
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