

Simon Patterson

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN REVIEWS | 06 SEP 96

When Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, he transformed language into what Robert Smithson called linguistic objects. Bell also built kites, using them as tools to extend his explorations into aerodynamics, aeronautics, ship building and surveying. He anticipated the possibilities of what communication might become with the development of technology. His inventions embody the idea that conventional systems of perception need to be either modified or destroyed if new languages are to emerge. This connection between objects (material or immaterial) and their literal and metaphorical potential is the area explored by Simon Patterson in this show.

In the first room, ...words fly up... (1996) comprises six box kites hanging near the ceiling in a state of suspended flight. The names of six men are inscribed on the walls Alexander Graham Bell, Samuel Franklin Cody, Colonel W.F. 'Buffalo Bill' Cody, Benjamin Franklin, Marconi and Kakinoki Kinsuke. In the same way that a kite is an expression of an invisible element (wind), words are a manifestation of an invisible human connection with the world language. Words transcend the space in which they are uttered, impossible (as the saying goes) to take back. Where do they go? The kite, at once an object of science and of pleasure, is juxtaposed with both real and mythical names associated with invention and boundary riding.

Patterson creates a neat metaphor for a cultural oxymoron logic at play.

In the main gallery three racing yacht sails, Untitled (1996), are inscribed with the names of three writers: Raymond Chandler 1886-1959, Currer Bell 1816-1855 and Laurence Sterne 1713-1768. Raised like flags or banners, each sail represents a different author and interpretation becomes a sport. Lacking a boat, a skipper and the elements to fuel movement, the lifeless sails, and by association the authors themselves, go nowhere.

In Untitled (1996), a map of a tilting or sinking ship is painted directly onto the wall. But precisely what constitutes the mechanics of the sinking remains mysterious. The map reflects the mind of the mapper it seems pretty obvious, but orientation is subject to knowledge.



'How to measure a myth' might be the subtitle of the piece Gunmen (1996). Four large slide rules made from marine plywood, formica and perspex are lined up on the floor, each inscribed with the name of a Wild West hero: Billy the Kid, Bat Masterton, Wild Bill Hickock and Jesse James. On the wall, the piece is continued in a more transparent vein the names of Pat Garrett, Belle Star, Frank (Windy) Cahill, Six-Toed Pete, John Wesley Harding, Bob Ford, Cold Chuck Johnny and Three-Fingered Dave are almost invisibly inscribed into the perspex. Frontier men, myths and maths but if measuring is precise, what precisely is being measured? Measurements are meaningless without an absolute, and here none is given. As a critique of reductivism, it's a little heavy-handed but as a dig at the over-simplified measuring of personality vital to any myth-making, it's quite funny.

It's easy to reinvent systems by replacing their frame of reference, except of course that you then lose the actual system itself. In a series of 24 silkscreens on linen, Twenty Four Hours (1995), the periodic table of elements is redrawn. The 103 boxes are filled with mysterious words like 'Hydri', 'Librae', 'Betelgeuse', 'Procyon' and 'Nath'; words that sound like stars, real or imagined, but you can't be really sure. The stars have been navigational tools for sailors for thousands of years, and the table of elements has been transformed into a poetic tabling of elements, where the sky might indicate a passage over the sea. Art and science, survival and star-gazing.

Like the mathematics department of a giants' school, in Sister Ships (1995), the names of three real ships, SS Britannic, SS Titanic and the SS Olympic, and one fictitious ship, the SS Gigantic, are inscribed on four giant abacuses that fill the last room of the show. The disaster of the Titanic arose from the foolish assumption that the natural world could be mastered by technology. If the relationship between order and disorder is contingent upon either accident or design, then the SS Titanic is the perfect model for a fusion of both. The iceberg precipitated the design faults, and so the ship sank.

There is a linking of elements here the elements of wind and water, of the Periodic Table, or more generally of elements as the fundamental parts of which anything is composed. Extracting meaning from the various components of the show is difficult only if you try to literally decipher the idiosyncratic language that Patterson has developed. Rather, he seems more interested in the possibilities of rearranging meaning through the displacement and contradiction of both source material and absolutes, using the gallery as a site to extend and explore the limits of language, history and object relationships. This, to put it mildly, is an ambitious project. Raymond Chandler did it with the novel he reinvented the pulp fiction of the detective story into perfectly formed modernist allegories and Currer Bell (Charlotte Brontë) also did it, using the restrictions of isolation, illness and gender as a catalyst for, rather than deterrent to, creativity. Although he hasn't got there yet, travelling hopefully, Patterson attempts to do it too.



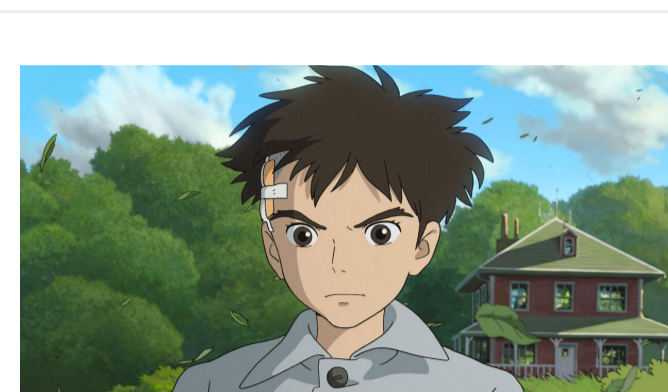
JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.

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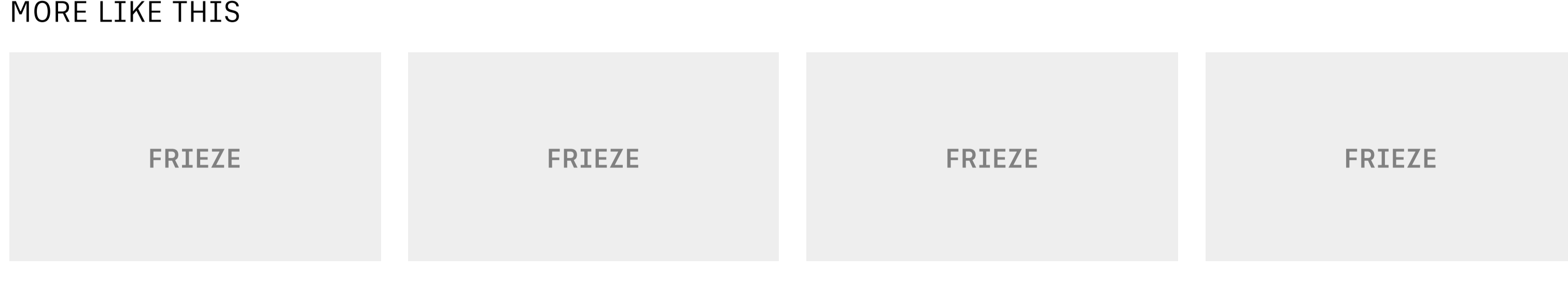


'The Boy and The Heron': Hayao Miyazaki's Swan Song



Michael Dean's F-Bombs and Eight Balls

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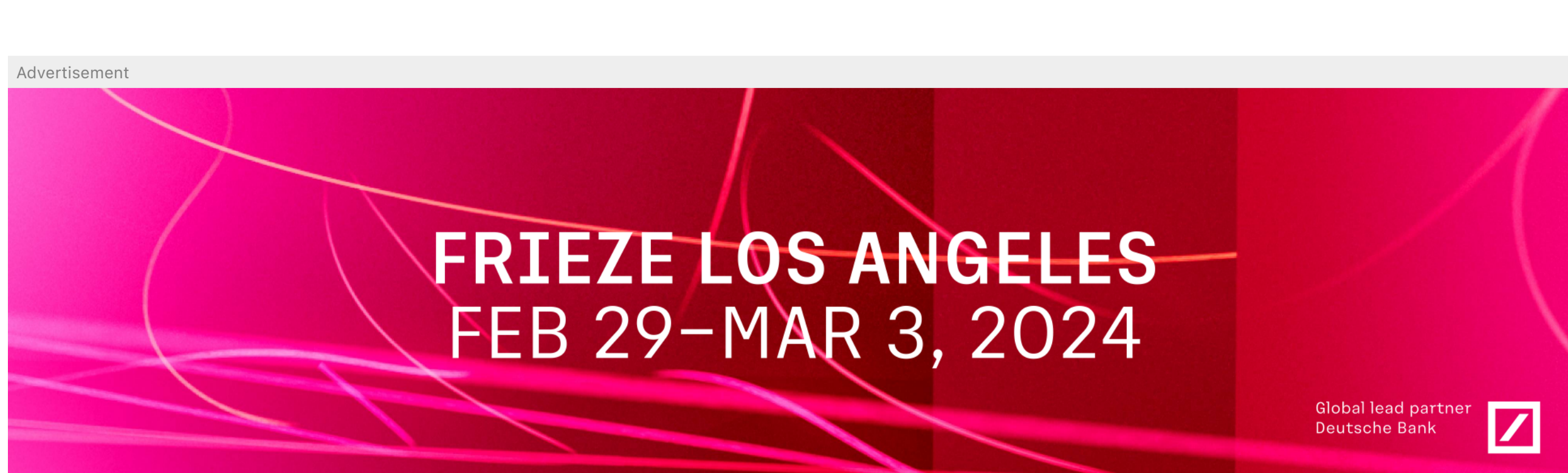


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