

## Strange but true

**NED DENNY** on a graduate show in which the uncanny too often becomes ordinary

There's a short film in "Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2002" that is so odd and yet so peculiarly right that it's impossible to forget. Like all good art, it takes up residence in your head without any real justification or bidding. Hiraki Sawa's *Dwelling* (2002) starts with a few shots of a small apartment, bare and featureless

except for the toy planes that are lying on every surface. Next thing, and without any warning, one of them slides along the carpet and lifts steeply into the air, as sudden and improbable as when you see it happening through the plate-glass windows of a departure lounge. And then another and then another, until soon the whole flat is criss-crossed by these miniature Boeings on their solemn flight paths, their engines roaring. They soar sedately through kitchen and bedroom, bisecting the air at different levels. They drone past light switches and slip in and out of half-open doors. At one point, there are about 20 of them traversing the narrow hallway. This sounds absurd, but it doesn't come across that way when you watch it. The effect is as humbling as it is comical, making this poky little flat feel as vast as the stratosphere. Above all else, though, *Dwelling* compels because of its seemingly effortless strangeness.

The idea of the "strange" has been singled out by one of the co-curators as a binding theme in the Barbican show, which comprises work drawn from graduate art students up and down the country. In his catalogue note, Graham Gussin

speaks of strangeness as "the unfamiliar in the familiar... the state where something is present but cannot entirely belong". It is distinct from the merely weird, which is a commonplace of television and advertising. The strange is something subtler, something with its own elusive logic. All this clearly applies to *Dwelling* and its haunting conjunction of inner and outer space, the domestic and the celestial. Eva Stenram's photographic series *EU Palaces* (2001), in which the royal residences of Europe have had doors and windows sealed with stone, is also beguilingly strange. Our own Buckingham Palace looks better than ever, transformed via digital manipulation from lordly monstrosity into glowering mausoleum. What, exactly, is she saying here? That monarchy is dead and buried? Or, somewhat less politically, that fatality towers in our midst, that the tomb is the one true palace? But it doesn't really matter, because the work, like Hiraki Sawa's, has a presence that transcends pious moralising. And that, I suppose, is the essence of the strange.

So far, so good, but a lot of the work on display falls short of this standard. And

I wonder whether Gussin isn't overpraising as he ascribes to these students some unique quality of uncanniness. I mean, surely that has been the intention of all serious art since we were painting in caves. What does he think the surrealists were doing? Compared with that genuinely dangerous movement, there is much here that feels small in both scale and ambition, the usual degree-show mix of whimsy, geekiness and private obsession. The tiny, felt-pen drawing of Kraftwerk that Babak Ghazi has propped on two rolls of masking tape (*Kraftwerk*, 2001) may be a touchingly lo-fi homage to German synth-pop, but it's hardly revelatory. Likewise, Rob Grose's shoe made from a plastic bag and electrical tape (*Self-Endorsed Gola*, 2001) is the kind of clumsy approximation of a brand-name trainer that you'd see in the slums of Mombasa or Johannesburg. Among the paintings, I quite liked Charlotte Briland's toxic landscapes and Andrew Palmer's nerdy little oils of computer screens complete with icons. Lucinda Metcalfe's pictures done with marker pen on whiteboards, on the other hand, can only bring back toxic memories for



Rooms without a view: *Buckingham Palace* by Eva Stenram, from the series *EU Palaces* (2001)

anyone who was at school in the Eighties. The obligatory video works are, on the whole, more engaging – if only because it is easier to capture a semblance of life with a camcorder than it is with plaster or paint. Take Helen McCrorie's *Waterway* (2000), where a camera pans slowly along the bank of a festering, rained-on canal. The title suggest something elemental and unsoftened, and yet all we see on our glum perambulation are black slicks, sewage outlets and the half-submerged skeleton of a car. When it finally ends with a freeze-frame, the reflection of white sky and blackened trees makes the water look like marble. Equally good is *Tom Basement* (2001) by Tom Hanbury and Meiro Koizumi, a savage masquerade in which the artist's put-on voice and scrunched-up face make such a convincingly lonely monster that your heart aches. It's a world away from Helen Barron's mask of transparent fabric and crude, stuck-on eyes, which hangs limply on the wall nearby. But it is this piece that seems to encapsulate the mood of the show. It so very much wants to be scary, to be powerfully strange, but somehow the spirit is weak.

"Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2002" is at the Barbican Curve Gallery, London (020 7638 5403), until 12 January

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