

# Remember,



**VISUAL ARTS:** Where were you when we were getting high, asks the Camden Arts Centre's new show. Richard Cork considers his response

Once we have mounted the steps leading to the gallery entrance, a strident floor pattern traps our feet and drives them inside. Jim Lambie's jagged, relentlessly coloured stripes, bouncing off the walls and careering in to a crowded centre, dominate every move we make. The onslaught of glossy vinyl tape smothers the Camden Arts Centre's wide foyer, trapping us in a psychedelic whirlpool.

Nothing could be more apt as a scene-setter for *Dream Machines*, Susan Hiller's entertaining and provocative selection of hallucinatory art. Altered states of consciousness is the theme running through this continually surprising show, where the exhibits ambush us at every turn. As one who has grappled impressively with such haunting themes in her own work, Hiller proves an ideal curator. Setting no limits on the media employed and allowing the wildest obsessions to flourish, she only stops short of violent nightmares.

But if a work in *Dream Machines* looks alarming at first, the impression turns out to be deceptive. When I saw Adam Chodzko's video projection *Night Vision* from a distance, the spectacle of blurred and grainy figures stumbling through a gloomy, rain-sodden wood reminded me of a scene from *The Blair Witch Project*. But in reality, they are all rock-concert designers and technicians, bent on carefully lighting a heavenly scene among the trees.

Maybe they would have profited from the mushrooms which Carsten Holler unpacks, fries and eats in his hotel room. He lapses into a visionary stupor, and we watch him slump, doze, clutch his head and sing with eyes shut. A revolving mushroom appears in a wood, changing colour as it spins. But most of the time we are aware that Holler's hallucinogenic experiences stay within his head, and cannot be conveyed by his laid-back videos.

In this respect, Rodney Graham's *Halcion Sleep* is more effective. He took a sleeping pill in a motel on the outskirts of Vancouver. Then he was placed on the back seat of a car and driven to his flat. En route, he makes no attempt to show us his dreams. But somehow, the sight of this horizontal figure lying so still, with one hand propped neatly under his head, conveys a sense of his trance-like state. His body bumps up and down with the

car's motion, but he remains imperturbable, his expression serene.

By adopting such a straightforward approach, Graham avoids the frustration experienced by Henri Michaux. Celebrated for his experiments with mescaline and the agitated drawings he drew under its influence in the late 1950s, he later collaborated with Eric Duvivier to make a film about the visions induced by this potent drug. A video copy of this is being shown at the gallery, and its black-and-white images return time and again to the close-up of a man reeling as he registers the effects of his own mescaline intake. At one point, he claps his hands to his eyes, as if attempting to stop the visionary bombardment. But it continues, showing upraised hands in strange clusters, the sun shimmering on an immense, empty sea, candles wavering in woodland and galaxies glittering like a thousand precious stones set in blackness.

One critic damned the film as "a documentary on colours filmed by the colour blind". Michaux admitted the film's failings, especially its slowness compared with the incredible speed of the visions he had experienced — he insisted that they "should be more dazzling, more unstable, more subtle, more ungraspable, more oscillating, more trembling, more torturing".

In view of Michaux's complaints, artists may be well advised to avoid simulating the effects of drugs in their work. Jane and Louise Wilson's video, *Routes 1 and 9 North*, benefits from the directness they adopt. Shot in a dingy American motel, it looks at first like a porn film or a crime scene. But we soon realise that the Wilsons are being hypnotised, and much of the film's interest lies in the fact that they are twins.

The two women react to the hypnotist's quiet commands in near-identical ways. Their deadpan faces allow us to project our own thoughts on to the proceedings, and identify with the calming effect of the session. At the same time, the shadows flung on the walls behind their heads promote a feeling of eeriness as the Wilsons slump forwards, in thrall to the hypnotist's instructions.

The spoken word plays a conspicuous role throughout the show. Near the entrance, a speaker attached to the wall relays a 1926 recording of Kurt Schwitters's voice performing *The Primordial Sonata (Ursonate)*. Photographs of the artist performing it show his expression altering from a vehement, downturned frown to defiant, head-thrown-back glee. "Uu zee tee wee bee," he cries, brazenly challenging us to understand his enigmatic score. Schwitters's ability to sustain this torrent of sound for 40 minutes helps to explain why au-

diences at his live performances found him so arresting.

Mark Harris adopts a far more sober approach in his two-screen video *Marijuana in the UK*. Studious and bespectacled, a young man reads aloud to marijuana plants from texts by Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. Both authors deal with the narcotic properties of hashish, and Harris hopes that the plants' potency will be enhanced by their words. The plants seem to grow ever more lush as the reading proceeds, but perhaps my response to these tropical images was influenced by the persuasive sound of Baudelaire.

Dan Graham's voice-over on his *Rock My Religion* video is even more matter-of-fact. But his subject is electrifying. Reliant on contemporary footage and texts, he ranges freely over the bizarre connections between the Shakers' trance-like dances when possessed by demons, and the equally ecstatic state of rock bands in full frenzy.

Several of the artists riskily invite us to adopt a more participatory role. Job Koelewijn trusts that we will do one of his grey body-warmers and listen to the "disembodied voices of poets, living and dead, as a source of psychic energy for artist and viewer". But the speakers attached to the body-warmers emitted only indecipherable noises, and no one bothered to take them off their coat-hangers while I was in the gallery.

Marina Abramovic's exhibits encountered a similar resistance. She invites us to take off our shoes and socks, walk over to a couple of large amethyst blocks and place our bare feet inside them. According to Abramovic, the wearers will find themselves launched on a voyage into the unconscious. But my feet were too large for the cavities hollowed out of the blocks, and I had to content myself with contemplating the soft explosion of graphite marks in Shirazeh Houshiary's soothing *Last Gasp* canvas near by.

Susan Hiller's own contribution, *Magic Lantern*, proved far more engaging. Continually shifting circles of pure colour are projected on to an otherwise dark wall. They are infinitely beguiling, and yet we hear the sound of persistent rhythmic chanting from "voices of the dead" recorded by the Latvian scientist Konstantin Raudive. Hiller adds to the ghostly mood with her improvised vocal contributions. At once seductive and unsettling, the entire work lasts only 12 minutes.

But it is far more hypnotic than Minerva Cuevas's *Drunker*, a 70-minute video which records, with self-indulgent slowness, the artist's road to inebriation as she boozes from a bottle of tequila. It is almost a relief to turn to Lygia Clark's mercifully short *Cannibalistic Slobber*, a 1973 video documenting the macabre performance she developed with her students in Paris. We see them kneeling around a figure stretched out on the floor. They pull thread from their mouths, as if disgorging an unidentifiable substance, and then start wrapping the inert body with saliva-smothered strands.

The whole ritual looks as eerie as an embalming, but the students finally begin pulling at the skeins as though determined to free the body from this ominous web. Brief it may be, but *Cannibalistic Slobber* nagged at my mind long after the most long-winded exhibits had begun to fade from memory.

● *Dream Machines* is at Camden Arts Centre (020 7435 2643) until October 29

A young man reads aloud to marijuana plants from texts by Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin