

# Art

MONTHLY

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Unspeakably Beautiful

The fantasy world of Matthew Barney

Northern Exposure

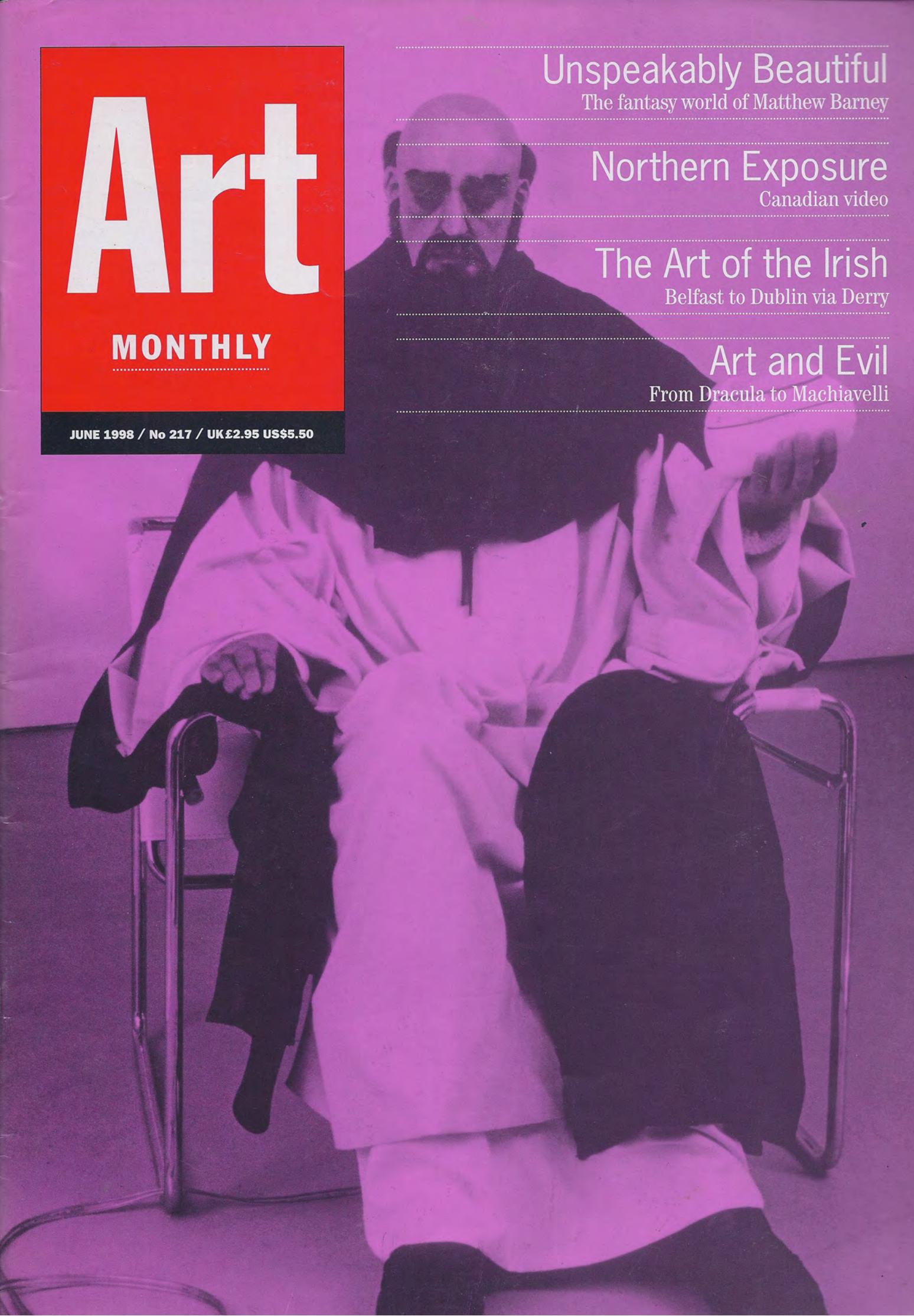
Canadian video

The Art of the Irish

Belfast to Dublin via Derry

Art and Evil

From Dracula to Machiavelli



Despite being basically a lot of nonsense 'Current Research' does however occupy a legitimate position within the ongoing dialogues that make up contemporary art practices, as artists react to, and are examples of, the current status quo and as such they all constitute to a greater or lesser extent the components that go to make what we know as art history. Though both Jeremy Deller's suggested links between acid house and brass band music, and Hamad Butt's attempts to plot the entropy of iodine appear to be outside the terms of reference of art, they are nevertheless framed by art discourses and as such may exist as legitimate parts of this ongoing process.

'Current Research', jointly organised by the Millais Gallery and the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, is as much an exhibition about documentation as it is documentation itself, and maybe sooner or later someone will organise an exhibition addressing the way in which exhibitions are organised using 'Current Research' as part of their archaeological material. 'Current Research' is an enjoyable show, though one does get the feeling that, to a certain degree, the curators' taxonomies are as overdetermined as those suggested by the artists. ■

**Current Research** tours to the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland in January 1999.

**John Tozer** is an artist and writer.

## ■ Keith Edmier

**Sadie Coles HQ** London May 14 to June 17

Memories of a Midwestern childhood are the subject of Keith Edmier's work. Held skilfully on the brink of tacky sentimentalism they are turned into poignant recollections of an ordinary life. Amongst earlier pieces are a crayola-blue pie crust made using casts of his dead grandmother's hands, yellow replicas of toy piano legs gnawed at with impressions of Edmier's milk teeth and six-foot high copies of instamatic photos taken when he was so young that his fingers strayed in front of the lens. His aesthetic is sometimes close to the school art room: the style of the cereal packet freebie gone heroic, incorporating the berserk chroma of *PeeWee's Playhouse*.

This gallery's trademark monochrome invitations, issued every month with a new colour, hit the spot this time with a baby pink card. Pink saturates the two principal works in this show as an emanation of filial tenderness. *A Dozen Roses* is just that, exquisite in translucent carmine dental resin, tied with a ribbon, with profuse leaves jutting out from the stems. This is a vision of the perfect Mother's Day present, exuding an eagerness to bestow thanks.

*Beverly Edmier, 1967*, a full-sized representation of the artist's mother, the beneficiary of this symbolised gratitude, rests on a low platform positioned towards the back of the gallery. She is also entirely pink, and her isolation emphasises the reverential mood. Most surprisingly one satin-gloved hand lifts her blouse to reveal a transparent stomach in which we can clearly see the child inside her – Edmier's self-portrait as a foetus. She supports her belly with her left hand and gazes down abstractly towards the womb. The tender realisation of the piece makes its intimacy uncomfortable. Here is a son whose affection entails such close identification that he will render his mother's prenatal feelings as a gaze onto himself in the exposed uterus. There is a relation to early anatomical representations showing figures peeling back tissue to display their own organs, and here the contrast between interior and exterior is equally disturbing since Edmier's mother wears a silver-braided pink twin-set made of real wool. Knowing that the clothing and hairstyle replicate Jackie Kennedy's appearance on the day JFK was shot, we might remember that there were also roses in the victim's car. In this work actual memories are fused with remote historical incidents in an attempt to find a suitably complex mnemonic model, one that will show the limitations of memory in recovering the past as well as lament its failure to forestall mortality.

Some of his work is the more intriguing for leaving us unsure whether Edmier's faithful reconstructions are to exorcise or celebrate his cornball demons. *Jill Peters*, an earlier piece, was modelled on a high school classmate for whom he once yearned. A life-sized figure, wearing an ill-fitting period outfit and posing awkwardly, she epitomised the white-bread homogeneity of a broad swathe of Middle America. That Edmier should reveal such stereotypical object choices without irony or embarrassment is characteristic. Based on unremarkable events, his pieces have a look of the unremarkable about them. Turning around the self-justifying methods of identity-based art and scrutinising instead the white

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suburban milieu that had grown too ashamed to take itself seriously as a subject, Edmier gives us identity at its most excessively prosaic.

Such literalness appropriately reflects a child's talismanic fascination with the lookalike. These are juvenile subjects rendered with a knowing adolescent sincerity, sometimes including the teen artefact itself. *Ethiopian Baby*, *Young Woman*, for example, completed in 1994, incorporated Edmier's own childhood version of a starving infant made when he was watching television coverage of the African famine a decade earlier.

As with Jennifer Pastor's enlargements of rural motifs and, in a different manner, Ann Hamilton's labour-intensive installations, Edmier's demanding technique reflects a peculiarity of American art production as indebted to the pioneering history of the Midwest. Settlers forced by circumstance to make their own tools in order to build homes, bequeathed to sculptors an exacting artisanal ethic that still persists. In Edmier's case, fine craftsmanship is necessary to show the imperfections of memory, where the effort of recall is enacted in the production of the work. Its fastidious rendering stands for our desperate attempts to fix a vanishing memory where so much may be missing that we treasure those few details remaining distinct. ■

Mark Harris is an artist.

## ■ Chris Ofili

Southampton City Art Gallery April 9 to May 31

Being a black artist is not simply a matter of happening to be black and choosing to be an artist. It is an exacting task which calls for inventiveness and guile. In art you have to struggle to be black. In fact, in art you have to struggle to be anything. Critical postmodernists subverted and resisted racism in art by establishing alternative forms of attention, often through the use of unconventional forms such as performance, video and installation. Chris Ofili makes beautiful paintings. Far from being a failure to live up to the works and arguments of the likes of Rasheed Araeen, however, Ofili's paintings continue the struggle to be a black artist from the perspective of a younger generation. Ofili's first extensive solo exhibition (which, incidentally, may well get him a Turner Prize nomination) is an excellent opportunity to see what this struggle looks like.

Ofili's paintings have acquired a number of persistent features – cynics would mistake them for trademarks – the most well-known and perplexing being his use of elephant dung, which he both sticks to the surface of the canvases and utilises as squat supports for the paintings to rest on. Shit is an incongruous presence in painting. Elephant shit, more so, because not only does it not belong in painting, it does not belong in the West; horse



manure, cow pats and human turds can at least be obtained without taking trips to the zoo.

In another sense, however, Ofili makes a happy marriage of the corruption of painting with balls of dung. This is done by incorporating them into the play of elements and structures which constitute the paintings' logic. Ofili has often mentioned that his work is unrepentantly decorative. Their patterns are typically combinations of symmetrically arranged motifs and flowing strings of dots, or images masquerading as dots. Areas of colour are predominantly made up of dots, too. Ultimately, the elephant shits look like massive dots ranging across the pattern, or lined up over it. Often on the balls of dung tiny circular map pins (prefabricated dots this time) string together to draw patterns or spell words. More dots, more references.

The dots, the dung, the map pins and the patterns featured in the earlier abstract works, as did the use of resin to allow surfaces to be laid on top of one another.

Keith Edmier  
Beverly Edmier, 1967  
1998

# Alan Smith FILTER



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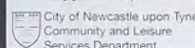
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## COVER

**Siobhán Hapaska**

*The Inquisitor*

1997

## {01} FEATURES

**Unspeakably Beautiful**

Mark Sladen revisits the fantasy world of Matthew Barney

## {07} Northern Exposure

Catherine Elwes experiences Canadian video

## {14} COMMENT

**Editorial Letters**

## {16} ARTNOTES

## {20} PROFILE

**Out of the Woods**

Elisabeth Mahoney on Claire Barclay

## {22} REPORT

**North and South Belfast to Dublin via Derry**

David Musgrave on the road

## {24} EXHIBITIONS

**Reviews**

**Critical Interventions: Evil**

David Burrows

## {26} Host

Neil Mulholland

## {28} Current Research

John Tozer

## {30} Keith Edmier

Mark Harris

## {31} Chris Ofili

Dave Beech

## {33} Henry Bond

David Barrett

## {34} Gordon Matta-Clark

Michael Ellis

## {35} Judith Cowan

Valerie Reardon

## {38} EDITIONS

**Artists' Books**

**Boxing Annette**

Cathy Courtney

## {39} Negative and Positive

Stephen Bury

## {40} BOOKS

**Iterability's Irritations**

Jonathan Harris

## {42} ARTLAW

**Is Your Copying Right?**

Henry Lydiate

## {44} SALEROOMS

**God Not Warhol**

Andrew Wilson

## {46} LISTINGS

Exhibitions



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