

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:****MERLIN CARPENTER: DECADES****12 OCTOBER – 15 NOVEMBER 2014****PRIVATE VIEW: SATURDAY, 11 OCTOBER 2014, 6–8PM**

For a first-time viewer a possible problem is not the realization that there are many layers, but not knowing how to use them. Someone with a vague knowledge of his work, based on gossip and internet material, would likely be puzzled and rather discouraged by a Merlin Carpenter exhibition when faced with all too obvious references that leap out but that seem to conceal others. The viewer would also be intrigued by the pure aesthetic of Carpenter's paintings, often visually pleasant. Think of the current show *DECADES*: a series of paintings of degraded popularised versions of Warhol. Carpenter's press releases, which are informative and quite candidly literal, would only cause further disquiet, because the viewer can feel the obliqueness of the explanation. But it is necessary to work with this discouragement as a prerequisite. This is what Carpenter sets out to achieve. In fact we need to find another level of observation, taking in his numerous interventions, which often reference painting and sometimes operate in stealth mode away from the art world. At first influenced by debates on institutional critique in 80s New York/90s Cologne and a conceptual approach to painting, Carpenter broke away via a process of opposition, adjustment and exchange with other protagonists in this scene including artists, critics, gallerists, and curators, at the risk of a kind of disenchantment. But one which turned out to be productive in a wider frame. (Premise 1: engaging in a dialectic and knowing where we're speaking from). Over the past two decades, Carpenter has made personal archaeological excavations of cultural situations linked to a recent history of art. For example, the staging in Paris of a corporate event faking a London 90s rave to talk about Tate Modern's gentrified *rive gauche* (*Merlin and Isabelle BANKSIDE Launch*, 2014). Or in Nice, a series of art school versions of Degas paintings shown in a café and an office, placing French art of the late 19th Century in relational aesthetics (*Au Café*, 2012). His interventions create a bipolar tension between contexts in order to play them against each other. (Premise 2: displacing contexts). Ultimately, these types of deployment and avoidance involve an analysis of institutions and the way the art system dictates its rules, establishing the value of artworks and attributing positions, roles, fictions, and meanings. If Carpenter chose not to resist an explanatory approach, the audience would be subjected to a set of responses explaining the work, undermining the viewers' own abilities to experience and interpret it for themselves; this way they are more likely to identify the subtle mechanisms of art reception and to find their own path. (Premise 3: working on independence). Alternately, we might find Carpenter playing a character without ever making this explicit, and casting his friends and the public as art world extras (*The Opening*, 2007-2009). Making the viewer feel awkward by creating exasperating, boring, embarrassing, but also hilarious situations, as well as having fun. These are ways of reconnecting with a freer atmosphere, other relationships, other codes eventually to be transgressed in turn. Some of his shows feel like a rock tour: they happen very quickly, but they're designed to undermine their own style (*Burberry Propaganda Tour* 2013). The question is not how to put together good or bad exhibitions, but to generate instances of social intensity and transient art events. (Premise 4: creating a scene that has a use value).

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