

REVIEWS: UK

Merlin Carpenter
*The Opening*Simon Lee Gallery, London
1 – 25 April

Merlin Carpenter's wheeze of arriving at his own private view, mingling with the guests, then pulling out a thick brush and a pot of black paint and dashing off mardy text paintings on a series of installed blank canvases has been repeated too many times to be considered laudably seat-of-the-pants. Instead, with every incarnation, *The Opening* seems to be sucked further into its hollow core. This is a performance based on well-rehearsed clichés and truisms – about artworld duplicity, the fact that every big shot is really only a catamite to the Man. You go to one of Carpenter's *Opening* shows expecting bad language, and he doesn't disappoint, the word 'cunts' scrawled provocatively on the canvas nearest the gallery window. Next up is the obligatory dig at whichever dealer he happens to be showing with – in this instance 'Simon Lee utter swine' (which seems rather less barbed than 'Relax, it's only a crap Reena Spaulings show', produced for his New York gallery in 2007). Finally, there's bound to be some badinage about the worlds of art and high finance, served here by the teenager-level political insight 'Banks are bad'.

Of course what Carpenter's canvases, like every other painting in every other gallery, are really saying is 'Please buy me', and he highlights the issue by subtitled these works *Intrinsic Value*. His joke about bad banks, even in these straitened times, gains traction from the fact that antagonism is as much a come-on in the artworld as sycophancy – in fact the two are often hard to tell apart. This is a show, then, that grimaces at the whole sordid, hypocritical business of producing, selling and collecting art, the stereotype of the artist-genius and – since Carpenter seems forever branded an ex-assistant of Martin Kippenberger – the terrible burden of influence. And if you think such a position lets the viewer off the hook, just try pondering how these works fit into a painterly tradition, or the economy of Carpenter's brushwork, or that these are really rather nice stretchers covered with excellent linen. It's a blisteringly quick ride to pseud's corner.

What soon irks is the lack of panache, mischief or fun in evidence. That Carpenter feels ensnared by the system is one thing; that he is unable to find much of a direction for his bad-boy routine smacks of imaginative paucity on his part and increasing indulgence on that of his dealers. How safe it all seems, and condescending. Scrawled on the last painting you come to is the phrase 'Stop art'. Carpenter dropped his brush before finishing the final 't', but of course that's all part of the pose. Carpenter can't go on, he'll go on. Like the good boy he really is. *Martin Coomer*



The Opening, 2009
(installation view).
Courtesy Simon Lee
Gallery, London