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Merlin Carpenter Can't Let You See His New Paintings (They Might Be Against the Law)

They're on display at Simon Lee Gallery in London—but they can't actually be seen until 2081.

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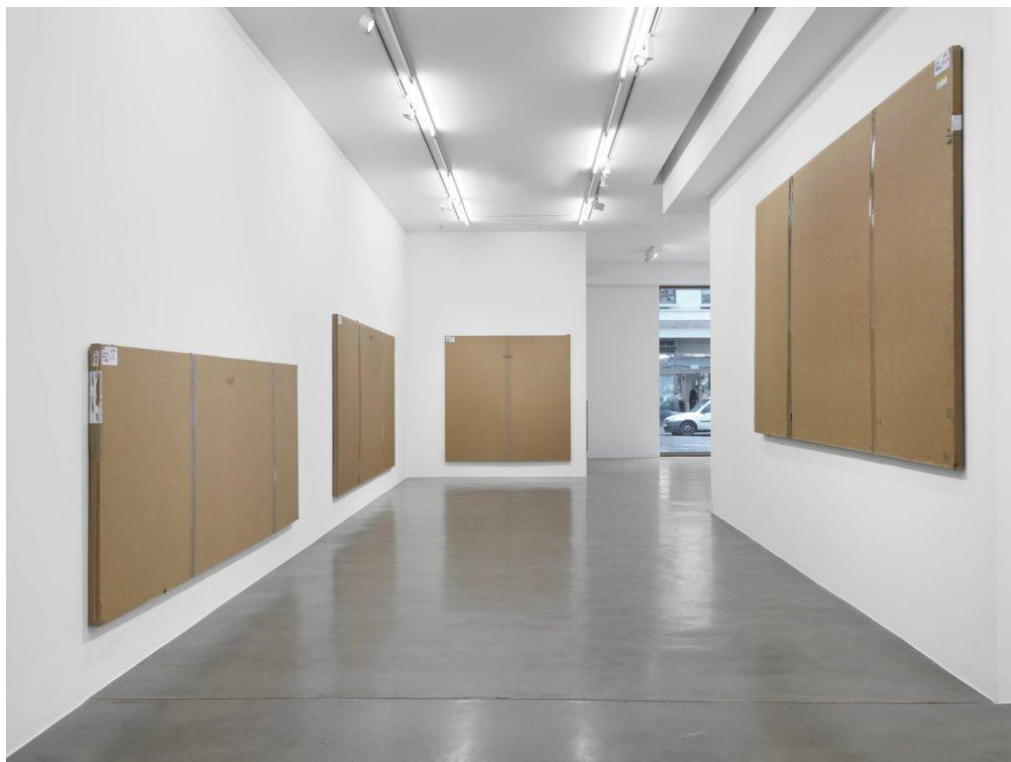
In 2009, the conceptual painter Merlin Carpenter decided to reinterpret a series of large-scale, abstract paintings done in the 1960s by pioneering British artist John Hoyland. The resulting works are hung on the walls of Carpenter's new show, "Do Not Open Until 2081," which can be seen now at Simon Lee gallery in London. However, you can't actually see the paintings themselves. That's because they're wrapped in cardboard and plastic.

The show, in fact, is both an homage and a protest of sorts. In 2011, Carpenter sought formal permission to exhibit the reimagined paintings, but Hoyland refused to grant it. The elder artist died later that year, at the age of 76. Carpenter decided his reinterpretations should still be displayed, so he wrapped them in shipping supplies to shield them from view—circumventing Hoyland by following the letter of UK copyright law. The show's title is also a set of instructions: the paintings can't be unwrapped until December 31, 2081—70 years after the end of the calendar year in which Hoyland passed away (and long after the lifespan of any original buyer).



Merlin Carpenter, "After John Hoyland 19.12.66, 2010," 2017. Cardboard, plastic and acrylic on canvas. 84 5/8 x 141 3/4 x 2 1/8 in. Courtesy Simon Lee.

The purchase of any one of Merlin's works in the show comes with a sale agreement—which is also included as an addendum to the show's press release—that specifies the conditions under which the work must be kept for it to contractually "remain authentic as an artwork." Removing the cardboard, even partially or accidentally, before 2081 is "akin to permanently damaging or destroying the Work," according to the agreement. If that does happen, the painting underneath the cardboard must be destroyed immediately. (The box can, however, be re-taped or otherwise repaired if need be.) Upon being unwrapped in 2081, the "underlying painting becomes the Work, and the wrapping is no longer part of the Work."



Installation view of "Do Not Open Until 2081." Courtesy Simon Lee.

This isn't the first time Carpenter has made work with an antagonistic relationship to art history and intuitional conventions. In a series of exhibitions held from 2007 to 2009, for instance, Carpenter flippantly painted all the works during the course of the shows' respective openings. In 2012, he turned the gallery space at Reena Spaulings Fine Art—his longtime New York gallery—into a Tate Modern café. Later that year, he displayed poorly recreated versions of Degas paintings in cafes and office buildings in Nice—a playful take on relational aesthetics.

So, what is Carpenter doing with this new series of cloaked paintings? It's impossible to know, exactly—the artist has refused to discuss the subject. Perhaps it's a critique of art as luxury commodity, a visual joke rooted in Duchampian tactics. Maybe the boxes are completely empty. In the end, we may never know—it's not likely we'll live to 2081, to learn the truth.

"Do Not Open Until 2081" is on view at Simon Lee Gallery in London through November 25, 2018