WORKPLACE GALLERY

GALLERY PROFILE

Directors Paul Moss and Miles Thurlow got their big break by faking their first gallery, and later holed up beneath Gateshead’s infamous “Get Carter” car park. As they open a big new space in the Tyneside town, they discuss their journey from informal artists’ collective to one of the UK’s most internationally-oriented regional galleries

INTERVIEW: Louisa Buck PHOTOGRAPHY: Spencer Murphy

We describe ourselves as a commercial art gallery run by artists,” declare Paul Moss and Miles Thurlow, joint directors of Workplace in Gateshead. For the past six years, the gallery has been rewriting the art market rulebook by attracting international art world attention to its stable of local artists, while at the same time remaining doggedly faithful to its north-east England roots. In many respects Workplace follows the standard format of a rising young contemporary art gallery: it represents 23 artists, mounts a changing programme of solo and mixed shows and makes regular appearances at art fairs worldwide. But, more unusually, Workplace has eschewed the lure of the London art scene to remain in the north-east and to work exclusively with artists who are or have been based in the Tyneside area. “We like the idea that a gallery can exist in a place like Gateshead,” says Thurlow. “We felt that we wanted to add something rather than follow the usual course and head south.”

So far this strategy seems to have paid off. Workplace has recently taken out a four-year lease on an impressive three-storey former post office on Gateshead’s West Street, and the gallery artists continue to make waves both on the national and international scene. Among them is Matt Stokes, whose memorable film of Northern Soul dancers won him the Beck’s Futures award in 2006, and who next year has solo shows scheduled in Los Angeles, in Austin, and in London collector Anita Zabludowicz’s 176 space, as well as a major exhibition back in Gateshead at Baltic. Then there is the Newcastle-based painter Laura Lancaster, who is currently enjoying a run of museum shows across Europe and attracting collectors worldwide; Eric Bainbridge, a more senior member of the stable who has just had an acclaimed survey show at MIMA (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art), and artist-shaman Marcus Coates, whose films and performances have won him a place in next year’s Tate Triennial at Tate Britain. As for the co-directors themselves, they both continue to be practising artists, but although their work is featured on the Workplace website, they maintain a strict house rule not to exhibit in the gallery, or on Workplace art fair booths.

Despite their commitment to the north-east, neither Moss nor Thurlow are natives: Moss is from Liverpool and Thurlow from Colchester in Essex. They both came to Newcastle University in the 1990s to study fine art and, on graduating, decided to stay “for social and economic as well as cultural reasons”. Workplace began its life as an informal affiliation of artists, many of whom — including Matt Stokes, Jo Coupe, Catherine Bertola and Jennifer Douglas — studied together at Newcastle University, and all of whom wanted to challenge the conventional models of making and presenting work in the regions. “We started by asking ourselves, if you are an artist who wants to build a career but who also wants to live and work outside of London, what ingredients do you need?” explains Moss. “Unless artists are represented by a London gallery they generally support their practice by public sector commissions and residencies. That model can work well, but we also believed from early on that the commercial gallery can play a key role and that the market is not something to be shied away from.”

Breaking into the art market from the vantage point of Gateshead was never going to be easy. With the combination of strategic canniness and sheer chutzpah that has characterised so many of the gallery’s subsequent activities, Moss, Thurlow and artist Richard Forster decided that the most effective entry point would be to take part in an art fair. “It was our first project under the name of Workplace and we saw it as a statement of intent,” says Thurlow. At the time, back in 2002, Frieze was still on the drawing board and the best available showcase for a group of ambitious young artists from the north was the START section at the London Art Fair in Islington. They had no track record — not even a gallery — but they decide to take the plunge anyway: “We put together a portfolio of 12 artists, suited up, and went down to London.” Applications were made and all seemed to be going well until the selection committee announced that they were coming to Gateshead to view the gallery. A gallery therefore had to be found. “A friend’s father owned an empty property on the quayside and we managed to persuade him to lend us a room,” remembers Moss. “We went in, cleared it out, painted it white and built a big shallow plinth in the middle to
hide the fact there was a big hole in the floor. We hung the work, and the selectors came and stayed for half an hour. They thought it was interesting and we got the gig.”

The first Workplace gallery may only have existed for half an hour, but the impact of participating in an art fair was to be more enduring. Not only did Workplace’s north-eastern artists sell, but they also attracted attention in all the right places, with works sold to prestigious collections such as The Government Art Collection and the law firm Simmons & Simmons. “There was a very clear moment when we realised that all you have to do is to be in the right place at the right time and to show good work,” declares Thurlow. “All those regional insecurities were irrelevant.” This view has remained at the core of the gallery’s practice, and they continue to utilise carefully selected art fairs at home and abroad as an essential means of reaching and selling to a wider audience. In this year alone Workplace have taken part in 101 Tokyo, Open Space at Art Cologne, Zoo Art Fair in London and NADA in Miami. “Whether or not art fairs are the next great organising principle of the art world, they are a great leveller and a great showcase,” says Moss. “We are now very strategic about how we use them.”

Sometimes these strategies can carry a considerable risk. When Workplace was first invited to show at the NADA art fair in Miami in 2006, they mounted a solo show of the films of Matt Stokes, in which virtually nothing was for sale. Paul Moss still winces slightly at the memory. “We did a museum-style show in an art fair, which was quite a difficult thing to do and a huge financial commitment. We built this amazing video installation and shipped almost everything Matt had ever made out to Miami, even though it was all sold, or unavailable.” The gamble paid off. In great part due to his impressive Miami manifestation, Stokes now has a string of residencies and commissions and is currently represented by two galleries in America and one in Berlin.

However, building a presence at art fairs is only part of the Workplace story. Moss and Thurlow are adamant that the identity of the gallery lies back in England’s north east, and specifically in Gateshead. “It’s our spiritual home and – literally – our workplace. It’s an incredibly poor and neglected area, but there’s an edge to it that is exciting.” They also insist that the fact that there is virtually no local market in Gateshead is not the point. “We don’t have collectors turning up on the doorstep, but the shows that we put on are another way of building artist’s careers. We are always aware that the shows we are doing here are about adding critical value to the work and enabling artists production. In any case, you don’t get accepted for good art fairs without a strong programme.”

The gallery’s first permanent home was not down on Gateshead’s quayside amongst such lottery-funded landmarks as the Baltic and Sage centres but within the gritty underbelly of an earlier attempt at regeneration, namely the 12-storey Brutalist concrete Trinity Centre multi-storey car park, which dominates Gateshead’s skyline and gained cult status by its memorable appearance in the cult British gangster movie Get Carter (1971). Between March 2005 and August 2007 Workplace occupied an empty shop unit underneath Owen Luder’s decaying megastucture, which they lovingly converted into what they describe as “a New York-meets-Brighton-style white cube”.

“We were offered the space for a peppercorn rent and we realised that it was a really interesting context, socially, politically and regionally,” says Moss. “Newcastle already has a history of artist-run organisations, but what has Gateshead got? It’s got the Baltic and the Angel of the North, and it was great to be able to position ourselves physically right between the two,” adds Thurlow. “And in the coolest building in the UK!”

Being in the Get Carter car park certainly helped to put Workplace on the map and they mourn the fact that the building is due for demolition in the next year. “The real problem in Gateshead is poverty, not architecture. It’s crazy to knock it down,” says Thurlow. Nonetheless, they also admit that it was a challenging location for a contemporary art gallery, citing such instances as the time when they had to smuggle visiting curator Teresa Gleadowe under a police cordon that had been drawn around the building whilst a potential suicide teetered on the parapet overhead.

So, now that they are ensconced in a red brick Victorian building rather than a 60s Brutalist icon, what does the future hold for Workplace? The opening show for the new space seemed to emphasise both the local and the global, mixing artists represented by the gallery with a number of others drawn from throughout the UK as well as from Portugal, Chicago, Los Angeles and New Zealand. Also on show was a film made by Sophie Lisa Beresford, a recent BA Fine Art graduate from Sunderland University. Moss and Thurlow see this expanded view as part of the gallery’s natural evolution. “Workplace is very much a work in progress,” says Moss. “It is a completely different entity to what it was when we first started. There was a moment when it was important to tell the story of artists in this place, but we want to allow the gallery to grow and evolve, and that means continuing to engage in an international context. After all, why shouldn’t Workplace represent the most exciting artists from Los Angeles and from Berlin as well as from Tyneside? We will just go on looking for work that is really good.”

Workplace Gallery’s current show, Feedback: Peter J. Evans, runs to 20 Dec; www.workplacenewcastle.org.uk
WORKPLACE GALLERY: 6 KEY ARTISTS

Gallery directors Paul Moss and Miles Thurlow introduce some of the artists who, from their regional base in England’s north-east, have helped Workplace gain a reputation on the international contemporary art circuit.

Eric Bainbridge

“His work has great ‘fuck you’ northernness”

An internationally renowned sculptor, Eric Bainbridge is also professor of art and design at Sunderland University. Part of the so-called new British sculpture movement of the 1980s, he is best known for his giant sculptures composed from shapes taken from nature, modern design and everyday life, often camouflaged by a covering of fake fur. “Eric is a really important sculptor for us in many ways,” says the Workplace directors. “He’s been making fantastic work for over 30 years so he really understands the mechanisms of the art world and the role a gallery can play. His work has great ‘fuck you’ northernness without losing any clarity or intent.”

Marcus Coates

“He is such a dynamic artist and destined for stardom”

Perhaps best described as a performative artist-shaman, Marcus Coates uses traditional techniques of animal mimicry to resolve social issues within communities ranging from Liverpool city council to Ikukururu City in Japan. “We met Marcus during his residency in Berwick in 2002, at a time which coincided with our early Workplace plans and projects,” recalls Moss and Thurlow. “He is such a dynamic artist and destined for stardom. He’s already been in some great shows like Manifesta 7 and the British Art Show 6 – and we are taking his epic installation Dawn Chorus to NADA art fair in Miami this year, which will be his US debut.”

Jo Coupe

“Jo is one of a number of artists who have gone to do MAs in places like Goldsmiths and Glasgow and then returned back to live here”

Newcastle-based sculptor Jo Coupe uses a wide range of methods and media to tackle issues of growth and decay. “Jo is one of a number of artists who have recently come to do MAs in places like Goldsmiths and Glasgow and then returned back to live here – something which demonstrates how far things have come in breaking down outdated views of what is central and what is regional,” comments the Workplace directors. “Earlier this year she won best artist prize for her piece Enough Rope at 1:1 Tokyo Art Fair, and she has a solo show coming up at the new gallery space early in 2009.”

Matt Stokes

“2009 promises to be an amazing year for him”

Art meets anthropological enquiry in the films and performances of Matt Stokes, whose works investigate the informal movements or events that bind people together. “When Matt won Becks Futures in 2006 it marked a massive shift in the aspirations of artists working in the north-east,” says Moss and Thurlow. “His film Long After Tonight was the first video that we sold as a gallery, which marked a shift in our expectations too. 2009 promises to be an amazing year for him as he is making two major new film commissions that will open as solo shows: at 176 in London, Baltic here in Gateshead, and Art House in Austin, Texas.”

Laura Lancaster

“Her work is now in many collections worldwide and she is increasingly on the radar of museum curators”

Discarded photographs, slides and cine film are the subject and source material for Laura Lancaster’s work – which can encompass paintings, large scale drawing installations and found materials and film. “We opened the first gallery space with a solo show of Laura’s work back in 2005,” explains the gallery’s directors. “Her work is now in many collections worldwide and, like Marcus and Matt, she is increasingly on the radar of museum curators – especially in Europe. In 2007 we sold a major installation of 142 works on paper to a private collector; a sale that was a benchmark for the region and for the gallery – as it proved such things were possible!”

Rachel Lancaster

“She mines the world of cult TV and B-movies to find still images that she turns into paintings of fantastic and compelling luminosity”

Rachel Lancaster is the twin of Laura Lancaster, above. The source materials for her mysterious paintings are still photographs of her television screen, taken while she pauses them during TV programmes and films. “Rachel is the most recent addition to the gallery and we are very excited for her future,” says Moss and Thurlow. “Like with her twin Laura, we were drawn both to the way in which she handles material and to her subject matter. She mines the world of cult TV and B-movies to find still images that she turns into paintings of fantastic and compelling luminosity.”

Stills from Dawn Chorus (2006), 14-screen installation, duration 20’ (looped), detail

Enough Rope (2004), table, fruit, copper and zinc electrodes, electrical wires, solar motors, cutting tools

Long After Tonight (2005), super 16mm film and audio transferred to DVD, duration 6’ 45’’

Untitled (2007), drawing installation, graphite, charcoal, gouache, and felt tip on second hand book pages, 130 x 450cm, detail

Fairground (2008), oil on canvas, 45.5 x 61cm