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Bradley Davies | Hochstapler

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After walking up the steps into Bradley Davies' *Hochstapler* you start quite literally at the top. Your feet crunch on the asphalt of a house roof, out of which two broad chimneys are sticking out. That Davies is concerned with the conceits of language is immediately clear in how, despite it being utterly convincing, the illusion established by this environment is rapidly dispersed by the seemingly unrelated images on the wall. These *trompe l'oeil* framed jockey's silks bring to mind a gentlemen's club or a sports bar. This isn't a hopeful view of the big sky or the whole of the moon, where we could pretend things were normal just for a brief moment in time. These fake trophies in their fake frames project another truism at you: in order to have them on your wall you must have won the race.

Visiting this exhibition not two weeks into lockdown (lite) in the middle of this of all years, you would be right in supposing that Davies' doubling down on these ingratiating forms of affirmation is harbouring a subtler, more insinuating intent. As you continue to move through the unfolding rooms of *Hochstapler* you can literally smell it in the bitumen, looking down at the roof beneath your feet it is clear that this little world has been turned upside down. And it is a little world now. Even for the most well travelled of us, getting about has become an exhausting luxury, involving levels of caution so epic that they are already immortalised as memes.

And after walking up the steps into Bradley Davies' *Hochstapler* you enter a mimetic (or even memetic) space, where image, language and a shared cultural experience are sublimated into an uncanny symbolic compact. *Hochstapler's* successes are framed on the wall but have been painstakingly faked. *Hochstapler's* bright vistas are the plain white walls beyond the rickety functional structures of a cheaply finished rooftop. Even the chimneys are adulterated, precisely sculpted by Davies out of papier-mâché and wood. The macabre spectre of imagined victories and toppling certainties soon ends in utter paranoia; a dead end. Here a final *trompe l'oeil* work, a beady eye or two stares back at you - *the impostor* - from beneath the once familiar floorboards.

A dead end stretched out on dead wood then sends you up the stairs to the basement, since a proper nightmare (or as the present British government would have you believe, the inevitable life of an artist after art) must have a second act. Here Davies' focus on playfully manipulating the English language within images shifts to teasing out the literal meaning of the German word *Hochstapler* (someone who stacks things high), and sending you up into a typical subterranean labyrinth of a German apartment building. This is where you put all your unwanted junk, leaving it mouldering away before you take it to the flea market or flog it on ebay.

Welcoming you to this labyrinth is the curiously avuncular figure of a skeleton (flayed not flogged) tottering in the dour confines of a dungeon, and when you wind around the next turn this figure confronts you anew, this time sitting in the identifiable pose of Rodin's *The Thinker*. To pursue a pun in pursuit of the artist: Davies has thought this through. At a time when art's commercial value as a good is settled, but its place physically is subject to chaos (for basement slats read unfinished art fair booths or boarded up museums) this act of thinking through space goes beyond a gesture and stakes instead a claim for art's validity as a space of reflection and contemplation, especially in a crisis. Much like his antecedents in *Art & Language* or Marcel Broodthaers, Davies playfully engages the art gallery's perhaps all too often repressed potential as an independent site of critical examination, and (impostor syndrome be damned) the last bastion in this topsy turvy time for the intrinsic systemic relevance of composed reflection and critique, and of the work of art.

Krzysztof Honowski, November 2020