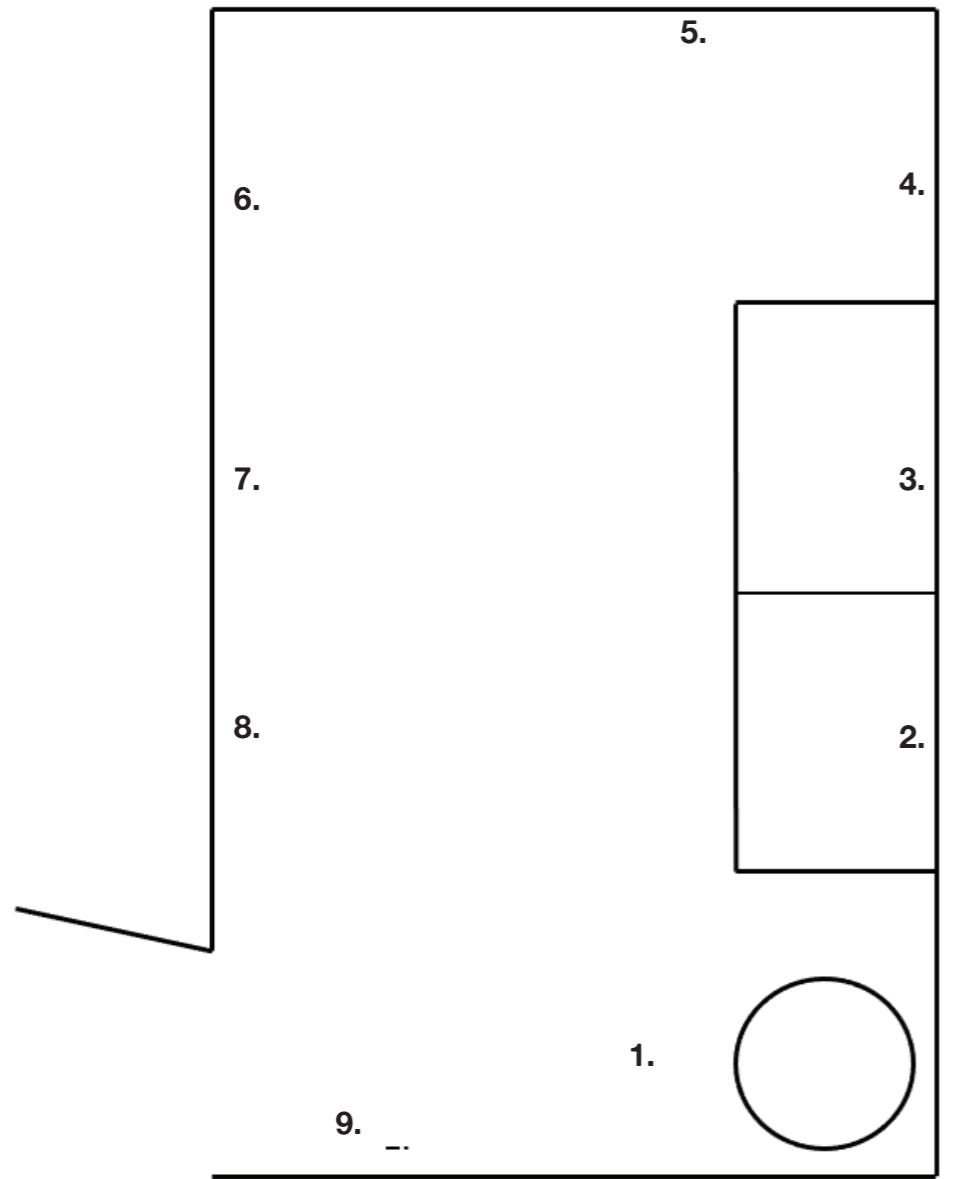




Helium

Tim Hardy



1. **Deliverence**, 2021. Digital c-print, timber framing, 46 x 36 cm.
2. **America in Love!**, 2021. Digital c-print, timber framing, 46 x 36 cm.
3. **Fumbling towards ecstasy**, 2021. Digital c-print, timber framing, 46 x 36 cm.
4. **528 Hz**, 2021. Digital c-print, timber framing, 46 x 36 cm.
5. **School's in/out**, 2021. Digital c-print, timber framing, 46 x 36 cm.
6. **Fall 2004. Sky, Nature, Grass**, 2021. Digital c-print, timber framing, 46 x 36 cm.
7. **Teacher's pet**, 2021. Digital c-print, timber framing, 46 x 36 cm.
8. **432 Hz**, 2021. Digital c-print, timber framing, 46 x 36 cm.
9. **Spring training**, 2021. Digital c-print, timber framing, 46 x 36 cm.

Too much sex, not enough sex, normal sex, hardcore sex, bell hooks sex, Trad sex, Red Scare sex, Dis Magazine sex, Dean Kissick sex, North Melbourne instagram sex, insecure sex, wholesome sex, sexologist sex, necrophilic Heathcliff sex, good sex, car sex, queer sex, straight sex, app sex, the porn debate, conversations where the way you look has some bearing on how seriously you'll be taken, all of the Bruces (Hainley, Weber, LaBruce), Zizek in Abercrombie & Fitch Quarterly, Mallarmé in *La Dernière Mode...*

Pine needles, distressed elastic, sun bleached ecstasy, cable knit, the texture of coarse body hairs on the tongue and in the teeth, the taste of salty sweat, the smell of laundry products, of cotton, the way the subtle smell of elastic hits your nose like the sun, the bread crust feel of bark on a tree, the peripheral union of skin and clean white sheets...

Tim Hardy has made the small backyard gallery **Asbestos** into an orgone accumulator and a campaign for something unfulfilled. It's an invitation (much more than a dare) to sit with the complicated nature of desire. By entering, one is complicit in an experiment in embodiment. Inside the gallery / orgone accumulator is a series of photographs, loosely based on Abercrombie & Fitch catalogues from the early 2000s, that Tim has staged and shot.

Susan Sontag made it her life's work to undo her cerebral expertise and rally against interpretation, in favour of sensual embodiment. It's a paradox exemplified by her open-ended non-definition of "camp," a word which has since been galvanized into something un-camp by cultures' weird machinery. In her quest to allow the term to have its own complexity and will to desire, she made notes toward it without ever settling on one meaning, conceding that to define it would be to betray it. Recalling this bygone liminality, Tim's series of images represent a campaign for desire constructed by visual signifiers that we can all understand, because as icons of American sexuality (via cultures' weird machinery), they are like the Tarot cards of our subconscious.

Attraction to power is not a very popular theme these days. The reappropriation of a style of photography that celebrates the kind of beauty perceived as structurally dominant makes for self-conscious viewing. As much as you look at these works, they look at you. By lighting up the grey areas and ambiguities, Tim is leading us into a space between sincerity and irony where we can be rehabilitated by confusion. Can these representations of uncomplicated desire keep interpretation at bay? Might they stimulate something akin to Wilhelm Reich's orgone accumulator if we submit to the confusion of sitting with desire, suggestion, coyness, and everything else in the realm of unfulfilled, directing us to "...the capacity to surrender to the flow of biological energy, free of any inhibitions; the capacity to discharge completely the dammed-up sexual excitation through involuntary, pleasurable convulsions of the body."

I keep forgetting to fantasize instead of focussing on reality because of mindfulness. Campaigns help me fantasize, they set out a clear path to oblivion. Earlier I walked past the fountain while touching my flat screen, where the abs would be on Tim's model. That Tim made these images is enough affirmation for me to know that I am supposed to be looking at them. So I am curious.

A girl's belly button is echoed by a large button clasping the top of her skirt which is bunched at the sides. A body on the couch behind her seems asleep. Her body language is somewhere along the continuum of frustrated, satisfied, defiant, or triumphant... sensations that denote a relationship contingent on an event or individual. Synthetic, heavy embossed carpet is laid underfoot the models sheer tights. Cream, flesh, brown, black, beige. Knits, pleats, cushions, and heavy carpet. Worn. It's a home from the early 2000s maybe... I can almost hear the air conditioning unit. Through the window, small topiary trees are perched above a knee high ornamental stone border wall.

Four hairy legs emerge from the interior of a glinting, red, vintage car (urgent bed). Cargo pants and jean shorts bunch up around tube socks, Abercrombie & Fitch jocks, and high-top cotton converse shoes.

Two girls are at the point of touching one another's face but their lips are not fully engaged. It's a classic, almost postcard image, but I can't remember ever seeing one quite like it. It alludes to some kind of eroticism that feels prefabricated and original at the same time.

A man at a pottery wheel crafts a phallic mound. He is wearing an astonishingly well-fitted singlet and ripped jeans. His companion braces him from behind, holding his arm and supporting one of his hands, leaving fingerprints on his skin. He is topless, wearing slacks and at least tube socks, and looks like how I imagine Dorian Gray looked. They are feeling each other but looking intently at the wet clay column spin.

A freckled girl with long brown hair and glasses covers her breasts with a baseball mitt—like some kind of varsity pudica.

Dirt, pine needles, and grass clings to a model's legs.

A blurry, colour-heavy, magenta, yellow, and blue (I'm lousy at naming colours) composition speaks to a kind of listless pleasure.

Hirsute back.

These photos have the kindness of friends snapping one another and the vague enticing swappiness of porn. That big cock swaggers into the sequence like a comedian. Another model's gaze makes me take a deep breath... I concentrate on his armpit hairs while averting his eyes for a second.

I imagine shame and practices of hiding and privacy are important to sex because we learn of it when we are young and trying to hide it from our parents, teachers and religious figures; protecting ourselves in the process of self-actualisation. Masturbation is an escape from the panopticon of adult supervision. Fun is derived from doing something private with one person. Sex is rarely something you are taught. Like many practices that we adopt when we are young, practices of hiding, privacy and shame are hard to shake and awkward to publicly change. Tim making this work represents a significant amount of bravery and I respect that. There is bravery present in the appropriation of structurally dominant "protect me from what I want" kind of desire. If it were a meal I'd be full by the first image. But all it does is build a huge cavity of symbolic appetite. Nothing tastes as good as desire unfulfilled.

Restraint is a primary material in these works, it's easier to imagine the sex if it's not explicitly depicted. There's been a lot of imagining in the past few years. I'm flicking through Tim's works and then looking at others... Corinne Day, Collier Schor, Bruce Weber, Bruce LaBruce, Richard Kern, Larry Clark. In this spectrum of suggestive to direct and explicit, sex is often just out of focus—almost like the route to the sale of something else. Tim has made a campaign that uses soft-core evocations of sex to sell the idea of selling sex via the appropriation of Abercrombie & Fitch catalogues. I'm trying to wrap my head around this: Desire in capitalist cosplay; faking as reality; deferral via glossification of desire.

Abercrombie & Fitch copped some flack for being white and exclusionary and a bit weird and awful. It reminds me of my first understanding of the concept of fashion. Typical of my late-to-the-game life experience, it came from my Dad, who told me that the Australian soldiers were always jealous of the nazis in WW2 because their uniforms fit so well and looked so sexy. It hadn't previously occurred to me that looking good had no bearing on goodness.

As per the title, "**Helium**," Tim's work is about ascension into ecstasy. But we read down a page... if ascension is an orgasm then reading and writing are the least sensual things you could do. As understanding accrues, innocence and ignorance departs. Confusion is a way to maintain the downward momentum while preserving innocence or sensual/embodiment; keeping rationalism at bay. Enough of oneself. Bouquets of shame. A garment made of cum. Imagine if all the gossip and bullshit was actually eclipsed by pleasure, Tim's solution. Everyone can generally talk the talk, but can they walk the walk? Are you experienced? The ragpickers of language listen in to everything everyone says and make it into great anti-sexual formulations; like Sontag's big paradoxical project to become embodied which culminated in her spectacular reaction to the cumshot of 9/11. Her frustration was palpable.

Now that we have organised sex into administrative procedures things can be very clear. Clarity swings its scythe through sex. Desire is counter-intuitive when sex is administered. Desire is a ghost here. However we are under the influence of sex. "A clinic of phantasms" to use a phrase Avital Ronnell attributed to something else entirely. These images show the stages of intoxication. That the models are experiencing them theatrically and internally makes us try and trespass to understand.

Tim invites us to bear witness to a kind of desire that feels nostalgic but also underpins our subconscious understanding of desire. If desire is a ghost then is sex necrophilic? If a brand, concept, or idea, is dead and we continue to fuck with it, is it necrophyllic or is it grieving? Reich's ascension was dismissed by many as pseudoscience, and Tim is dragging it back out because the apps are boring and everyone's lost touch with their bodies and the only people having a lot of sex are sex workers, because desire has to be administered like a drug, in moderation.

There is only comfort in accepting the paradox of thinking about sex implies that we are not having it, and these long recesses of not having it are codependent with the helium momentum... Tim's works pop, the lights he sets up behind his models conquering legibility. Limitation opens up the possibility for ascension. Style constructs curiosity about the sexual revolution in lieu of the sexual revolution (curiosity is close to desire). When I look at these photos I can vaguely recall the smell of the elastic waistband on underpants... does the skin heat it up and make it stronger?