

**BEN HORNS**

***FLAT EARTH***

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In the early 1990s, the French theorist Marc Augé introduced, with the title of his book, the idea of a “non-place.” His work directed attention to the proliferation within late capitalism of anonymous spaces, divested of their sociality and devoted to transient and ephemeral activities. At first glance, Ben Horns’s paintings might seem to be an exploration of these depleted milieus, and this response is not completely unwarranted. Such spaces, epitomized by airport waiting areas and of shopping malls, have certainly not disappeared since the ’90s. But in those pre-internet days, non-places were markers of planetary homogeneity (for example, the identical lobbies of hotel chains regardless of what city or country one was in). Horns, however, is remarkably attuned to what has shifted since then. His unsettling images are the product of a very different moment in which our perpetual absorption in the algorithmic worlds of our screens has estranged us from physical environments of any kind. No matter where we are now, we also are always elsewhere. At the same time, the accumulated impact of earth system collapse, pandemic lockdowns, horrific conflicts in Ukraine and Middle East have shattered the complacent fantasies of a seamless and hyperreal global village.

It’s tempting to label the content of some of his work as “generic” spaces, anonymous and bereft of singularity. But Horns reveals to us something else. However minimally, his paintings are of specific places, unoccupied but retaining faint traces of sociality, of the passage of time. He engages these locations to recover both their strangeness and obdurate actuality. The critic Fredric Jameson wrote that realism, as a cultural form, is inseparable from the possibility of narrative or storytelling, but he also insisted that realist art or literature is always marked by affect or mood. Horns’s images do not entirely foreclose narrative (as in his painting of a solitary reader on a train or the nocturnal view of Christmas lights in someone’s backyard), but they portray a contemporary world in which the conditions for storytelling have been gravely damaged. That incapacitation, however, produces its own affects, in which a given space is the locus of indistinct memories, intimations of inertia, isolation, disconnection. This is what distinguishes Horns’s work from the calculated blankness and refusal of affect in Luc Tuymans, Dike Blair and numerous other contemporary painters. Key to Horns’s painting is his sensitivity both to the vacuousness of place and to the ghostly persistence of what was once thought of as everyday life. But he refuses a melancholic vantage point. He depicts sites without access to a past or to what has been lost and with an unflinching vision, he offers us enigmatic encounters with nameless regions of our fragile and shallow present.

— Jonathan Crary, author of *Tricks of the Light: Essays on Art and Spectacle* (Zone, 2023) and *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso, 2013)