



Günther Herbst  
The Man Who Wasn't There

Tottenham Court Road 2/Black Yellow Blue 2009 Acrylic and oil on board 270X285mm

## The Man Who Wasn't There

Yesterday, upon the stair,  
I met a man who wasn't there  
He wasn't there again today  
I wish, I wish he'd go away...

Antigonish (1889) Hughes Mearns

In the film *The Man Who Wasn't There* (Coen Brothers, 2001), the main protagonist Ed Crane, a small town barber, appears on trial for murder. In order to defend himself Crane hires the services of Freddy Riedenschneider, a highly charismatic and expensive attorney from Sacramento.

Freddy Riedenschneider - who is a cross between a showman, a philosopher and a preacher - begins Crane's defense by painting an emotive picture of the man on trial. He describes how Ed Crane has lost his place in the universe, how he is too 'ordinary' to be a criminal mastermind, and how, maybe there is a greater scheme at work that the state has yet to discover. Riedenschneider's opening is a performance using 'smoke and mirrors' to baffle the jury, asking them at the same time to take a closer look at Crane. To open their eyes. That the closer they looked, the less sense it would all make, "he is 'The Barber', for Christ's sake", just like them - "an ordinary man" - guilty of nothing except living in a world that had no place for him, and he called this man, 'modern man'.

Unlike classic Film Noir of the early 1940s and 1950s, Neo-Noir films, such as *The Man Who Wasn't There*, often acknowledge modern conditions and technological advancements of the time, and utilize details that are typically absent to the plot of classic Film Noir: Initially shot in colour, and later transferred to black and white, it has led to some Film Noir bloggers claiming they could actually see tinted dark green and pearl grey shadows in the film (after rumors that some versions of the film were accidentally released in colour), but it is the mention of 'modern man' in the courtroom scene that takes the movie into an all together different line of commentary to film noir.

The word 'modern' originates from the Latin 'modo' meaning 'just now'. It has travelled through history (much like Ed Crane travels through the plot of this movie) unassuming of its surroundings. The word was first spotted in 1585 to signify 'of present or recent times', and has moved slowly through the centuries as it is assigned to all manner of things that inevitably - and paradoxically - have become 'old-fashioned'. From the 16th century we see the word used in contrast with the word 'ancient' and aligned with the technology of modern and early modern times, but it is not until the 19th and 20th centuries that the word appears to find a new identity as a way of describing movements in art, philosophies and the new contemporary audiences that define our current times.

Like the main protagonist of *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the word 'modern' often sits in the shadows, showing only its outline and profile. A profile that is filled with whatever projection or interpretation we bring upon its encounter. The word, like Ed Crane, seems to have no identity of its own. It only seems to borrow from or reflect the circumstances it faces. Often uncommunicative and unresponsive<sup>1</sup>, it is content to be adopted by every era, even when criticised and rejected by its era as a negative 'sign of our times', or its declining standards in education. Secondary Modern<sup>2</sup>. Whether it be the pace of modern life that is critiqued in contrast to those times when things moved a little slower; the word 'modern' seems guilty after all. Guilty in a world that still has found no place for it, and blamed for the existential angst that envelops 'modern man'.

Its respite and pardon comes via a popular vote, as the word has been rapidly adopted by every aspect of our lives in modern times at an exponential rate; cloned at every opportunity to mean

<sup>1</sup> While waiting on death row, Ed Crane dreams of walking out to the prison courtyard. Seeing a flying saucer, he simply reacts with a nod.

<sup>2</sup> A Secondary Modern school, was a type of school in the U.K between 1944 and the early 70's, for students who had not reached scores in the top 25% during their eleven plus exams (final primary school year).

something else. From its use by TV chefs describing 'modern British cooking', to sport analysts describing the faster pace and more aggressive style of 'modern rugby'. The word is typically assigned to trends in fashion in an affirmative, empowering and liberating way, describing the wardrobe for the 'modern woman' or 'modern man', and it has been assimilated by interior design and 'trend forecasters' to repackage the seasonal look of the 'modern home': now available in matt blue and grey. Recent suffixes such as 'Post' or 'Alter', have given the word a new lease of life, but on the whole a continuing ambiguity, ambivalence and transmutability defines the word as it travels through time. We want to be modern, yet at the same time escape the modern world; its pressures and demands. In the words of Deep Patagonia Adventure Holidays: "In a world overwhelmed by modern life, Robinson Crusoe's experience can today be your own." To escape. To be free. To be the Anti-Modern.

The paintings by the artist Günther Herbst employ facets of familiar modernists' symbols, as the signifiers for our current times. From Bauhaus, to De Stijl, traces of these seminal movements' imagery appear and disappear in his work in the form of recognisable grids, colour schemes and checkered-boards; a fragmented Piet Mondrian transported into one of his own works (*High Holborn 4/Cyan, Magenta, Yellow*, 2012), like an unmanned raft left by modernism's drifting legacy. These emblems are the footprints of 'modern man'. They act like barcodes that can be scanned (or as a form of carbon dating), as these schematic signifiers are encoded into his practice. Placed within urban settings, they are unequivocally titled to reflect the synergy between these image's indexicality and the settings they inhabit: *Tottenham Court Rd. 3/Black Blue Red*, 2009, *Whitfield St. 1, 2/ Red Blue Yellow*, 2010, and *Waterloo Rd. 3/Red White Blue*, 2009/12, to name a few of his works.

The world occupied by these paintings within paintings, points to corners of society inhabited by those who have been evicted, ousted or perhaps just forgotten. Those overwhelmed by modern life. We don't see these 'modern men', we only see the structures they inhabit, and the familiar brown card board boxes and delivery palettes used in this architecture. We don't see the reason or history or names of these modern dwellers, but we recognise these as an integral part of our lives as we pass by the homeless and dispossessed. However the paintings never descend into social commentary. They neither condone nor defend the circumstances surrounding these vistas, deliberately choosing not to exploit sentimental deviations and the loss of hope preceding these moments in an individual's life. Like *The Man Who Wasn't There*, they are about the meaning the observer brings to these images; the observed absorbing or reflecting the process of interpretation.

Recently I heard a story about a man who was living like a castaway near Glover's Island in the Borough of Richmond upon Thames. I had heard how the man had built a makeshift raft and how he had defied the authorities staking a claim on this part of the River Thames. I also heard rumours that his raft had burned down and I decided to investigate. I found nothing about him, but discovered instead a BBC interview about a man who had been living on a small island in Chiswick Eyot, and I wondered whether perhaps this was the same man. The Caucasian well-educated man in his sixties had taken residency for six months in a diminutive island in the River Thames, not far from Glover's Island. He had apparently built a hut and sometimes also slept in a tree. When asked why, he simply said: "Because I have achieved freedom. Things are now simple and uncomplicated". Opinion was divided; with some local residents praising this modern day Robinson Crusoe, and some condemning his actions. Although some speculation followed as to what would happen and whether he would eventually be evicted, the story goes that when officials visited to discuss this matter, he could not be found. Inexplicably, he was no longer there.

Juan Bolivar  
2012



Glovers Island 4/Red White Yellow Black 2008 Oil on canvas 1260X1620 mm



High Holborn 4/Cyan, Magenta, Yellow 2012 Acrylic on paper 180X260mm



Raft 2012 Acrylic on paper 200X260mm



Tottenham Court Road 3/Black Blue Red 2009 Acrylic and oil on board 300X220mm



Whitfield Street/Red Blue Yellow 2010 Oil and acrylic on board 290X420mm



Tottenham Court Road 3/Black Blue Red 2009 Acrylic and oil on board 300X 220mm



Whitfield Street/Red Blue Yellow 2010 Oil and acrylic on board 290X420mm