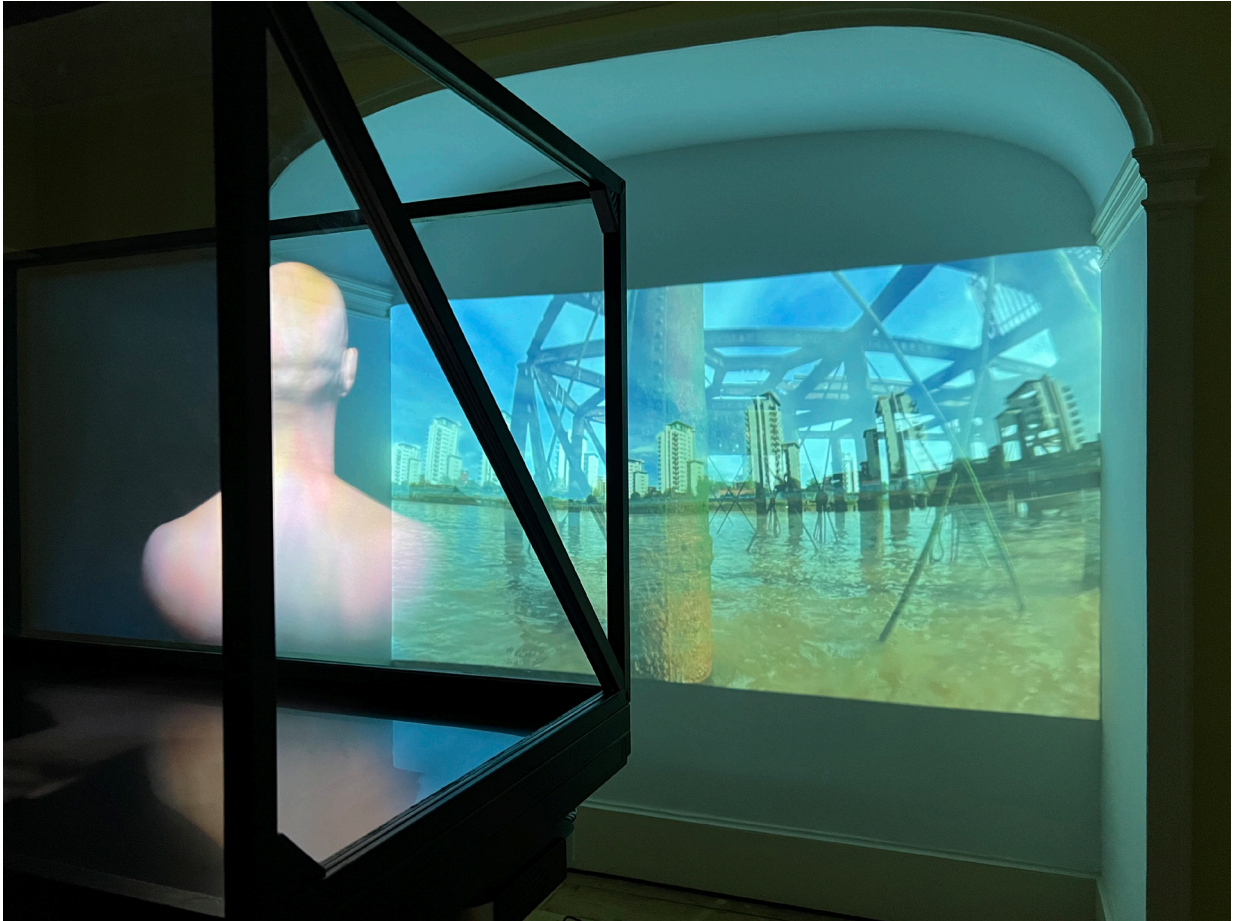




Paul Gogh
The Illusion of Evidence

On the ground floor, as we enter, we are presented with a suite of six identical metal stands, each a simple black structure supporting a glass orb that shimmers like an opal of light. Within each vitrine, suspended like the swirl in a glass marble, we watch as a swell of water pulses at eye level. Screened on the far wall, a river moves to a matching rhythm, the eye held inches above the water as the far bank slips in a low rumble to the left.

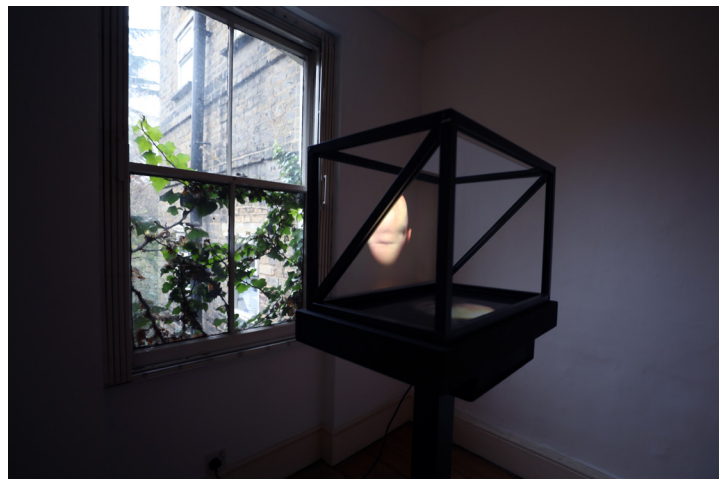
The imagery is uncannily familiar, the contexts possibly known, but the narrative as yet unknowable. The separate parts still to be resolved, disparate elements waiting to be fathomed or at best absorbed beyond their evanescent beauty.

Upstairs, the installation sustains the technical prowess that is central to David Cotterrell's practice. Here, a suite of three seemingly holographic vitrines house the bare shoulders and the naked heads of three figures who unflinchingly face a wall on to which is screened a very different landscape. Compared with the fluid wafting of the river immediately a floor below, we look out here on the barren boundlessness of a mountainous desert. But this is not a static panorama: the prospect shifts almost imperceptibly as one vista appears to meld with the next, as though two deserts are being morphed into a third memoryscape.

For this, his sixth solo show at Danielle Arnaud, Cotterrell presents an entirely new body of work, which considers the illusion of evidence and his continuous search for context. For the past four years he writes of wrestling with where he belongs, negotiating the terms of his habitation within morphing domains. Searching for a contextual reference, he has found himself cycling through suburbs, wandering in deserts, drifting at sea, navigating great rivers, and immersed in archives.

Conjoining disparate places – London, Afghanistan and Texas - this new series of experimental responses explores the contradictions of dreams, evidence, and perception. Revisiting a curiosity with shadow projection, he explores the dynamics of body scanning, of holographic imaging and the potency of unfolding storytelling to unpick what might at first seem an unconnected, idiosyncratic range of influences and recent experiences. They compel beyond their constituent components: a poetry of parts unified by questions that Cotterrell ponders with habitual seriousness.

What are we to make of these two levels of visualisation, the presentation of seemingly incongruent narratives separated across two floors of the gallery? How does this exhibition further his fascination with the social and political tendencies of a world that is simultaneously shared and divided? What more can the work tell us about his interest in the intersection that has long typified the practice? What are the optics we might need to fully absorb and appreciate this new work?



David Cotterrell (*Prisoner 1*), 2025. 8 channel lenticular videos presented through auto-stereoscopic 3-D screens. 55cm x 37cm x 37cm

Here, I posit several psycho-geographical domains that could underpin Cotterrell's new work. These are places that appear benign yet resonate with alarm and foreboding. They are edgelands where danger is omnipresent but well concealed, spaces that are confined, codified and fraught with latent potency; places that produce their own taxonomy of unseen moral anxiety. Cotterrell has sought exposure, even confrontation, within such domains – the militarised terrain beyond Kandahar, the heavily patrolled margins where West Texas borders Mexico, and the suppressed intensity of the incarcerated interior of Swaleside. Arguably, it is this third domain - repressive and fraught with unease – that has shaped *Shadows & Lies*.

Few may have heard of Swaleside. Despite its bucolic name, it is not a tract of moorland in some distant English national park. Far from it. Swaleside is a Category B prison for adult males, more than half of them serving life sentences. Containing – literally - some 900 prisoners, it is one of three prisons in the Sheppey Cluster of Kent, an isolated isle off the far east tip of east England, some sixty miles from London. A record of

overcrowding, random bouts of violence and high levels of illicit drug use, the prison simmers with the latency of unrest.

Ineluctably drawn to remote and ill-at-ease places, Cotterrell became the first artist to be authorised unrestricted access to the buildings, officers and prisoners. Approved at the highest level to visit, carry keys, wander unescorted, use cameras, video equipment and audio recording devices throughout the facility, he became an uncensored observer inside Swaledale spending in recent years long days, over an extended period of time, observing, interacting and engaging with inmates.

It is a world apart, an edgy contentious and sensitive environment, a hermetically sealed landscape as tense as any deserted battlefield or contested borderland where Cotterrell has frequently served time and art. Here in Kent, on home turf, the inequities are glaring, social disadvantage palpable, anger latent. Here, he astutely observes, 'wider issues of economic inequality, mental health neglect, educational disadvantage, community polarisation and failures of empathy, care and community, can be witnessed through perverse amplification.'



David Cotterrell *Oneiric 518000*, 2025. Digital video projection on acrylic sphere. Diameter 52cm

Despite (indeed perhaps because) of the grim density of the experiences in Swaledale, Cotterrell has yet to fully shape the work that might result. While platforms for public, academic and institutional debate have been negotiated, the outcomes, he confides 'are not yet known. The project is about to start.' Arguably, *Shadows & Lies* is the first tentative outing for the idea; the early tangible reflections on unconnectedness, on incarceration and on the edgelands that are as much in the mind of the artist as they are in Sheppey, Texas or Afghanistan. Discourses around discomfort and danger help nurture Cotterrell's tentative thinking. 'An unfamiliar conversation, perspective, or reflection' he writes, 'can sometimes be a powerful method for reminding ourselves of some of the approximations of assumptions.'

Following conversations with the artist, yet wary of the multiple illusions of evidence, one might loosely hypothesise about the sources for this show. Cotterrell's journey to the Isle of Sheppey was most often made by boat, a familiar route but invariably tinged with foreboding and trepidation. Does this explain the sluggish, almost reluctant movement from left to right, accentuated by deliberately slowing the film by one third? Under the vitrines the watery journey remains hermetically locked, glowing like the floating buoy lights marking safe channels through dangerous waters. However, the screened film has no destination, instead a self-serving circularity offers some security, a mute realisation that the destination – much like an interminable prison sentence – may have no endpoint.

Directly above, the installation offers some, but not much, obvious resolution. Again, Swaledale offers a potential route. The three holographic figures, each scanned meticulously using medical technology, display in their naked shoulders and shaved heads the points of maximal bodily vulnerability. As techno-voyeur the artist retains authority and power, denying any eye-to-eye engagement that might generate empathy or arouse rapport. Instead, they cannot but endlessly scan the barren stonemasonry that confronts them in its sublime, dreadful grandeur.

Faceless for us, each of these men has in fact been selected by the artist who knows them and their personal circumstances. That story may yet be told but here, each individual is a character at a crossroads or tipping point in their own lives. Here, they are as locked

in place, as isolated, and helpless as inmates. They are as sealed in their mental space as they are in the physical confines of a small solid room, behind a door with no handles.



David Cotterrell *Shadows & Lies* installation view 2025

And what of the screened landscape. It is in fact six panoramas combined into one continuous span of attention. Three are filmed from the Big Bend National Park in West Texas, a red, raw terrain patrolled relentlessly by heavily armed drug-enforcement officers. The other is the equally dramatic landscape beyond the fortified bases of Eastern Afghanistan. Outwardly deserted, it remains a contested and treacherous zone, strewn with unspent ordnance, crammed with difficult memories of those who fought there, a void of war that is not empty at all, but crowded with emptiness.

Cotterrell worked there as first an official war artist under the protection of the military and latterly as a visitor aiming to revisit sites once regarded as strictly off limits, wandering the pulverised remains that once only merited the mesmerising thousand-yard stare. Both lands are unified by a near identical creation myth: at Big Bend museum a quotation on display (attributed to an indigenous legend) states that when God had finished creating the world, he took the leftover elements and made the Texas landscape. This same story on the origin of Afghanistan was recited to Cotterrell by an elderly man in Mazar-i-Sharif. The legend is present in both communities profoundly divided by thousands of miles, history, politics and religion. Is the Isle of Sheppey yet a third leftover

land? Here, locked in the gaze of three unwavering heads there is a poetic simplicity of the juxtaposition of the twinned landscapes and their ambiguous locations.

Prison, parched desert, perilous personal voyages. These profound places, their otherness and their trade in knowledge and power deeply inform this exhibition. Whether fleeting encounters or heavily orchestrated events, Cotterrell's works explore the human condition and the breaks or nuances that can lead to a less ambiguous understanding of the world they inhabit.

David Cotterrell is an installation artist who uses various media and technologies to explore the social and political tendencies of a world that is simultaneously shared and divided. An interest in the intersection typifies the practice: whether fleeting encounters or heavily orchestrated events, Cotterrell's works explore the human condition and the breaks or nuances that can lead to a less ambiguous understanding of the world they inhabit. Encapsulating the roles of programmer, producer, and director, Cotterrell develops projects that embrace the quiet spaces that are the sites for action. Cotterrell's work has been commissioned and shown extensively in Europe, the United States and Asia. He is a Research Professor of Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University.

Paul Gough, painter, broadcaster and writer, is Dean of the Bristol School of Art, Media and Design at the University of the West of England. His research interests lie in the processes and iconography of commemoration, the visual culture of the Great War, and the representation of peace and conflict in the 20th/21st centuries.

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Cover: David Cotterrell *Prisoner 3*, 2025. 8 channel lenticular videos presented through auto-stereoscopic 3-D screens. 124 cm x 72 cm x 72 cm

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