

Ivan and Heather Morison. *Study for Earthwalker (caribou)* 2006 lambda print 42 x 42 cm. Courtesy the artists and Danielle Arnaud contemporary art.

OUT THERE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS FROM THE WEST MIDLANDS

THE NUMBER OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS EITHER FROM, OR BASED IN, BIRMINGHAM AND THE WEST MIDLANDS WHO ARE HAVING NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS IS RAPIDLY RISING. Even just five or ten years ago it would have been a challenge to think of artists with high profile galleries representing them in London – apart, perhaps, from Richard Billingham, David Rayson, George Shaw and Gillian Wearing (who now mostly live outside the region). Today there are considerably more, and it's not just a question of London galleries – some are also now represented in Europe and the States. With many emerging artists working on exhibitions and projects with public and private institutions around the world, the indications are promising for the region's contemporary art industry.

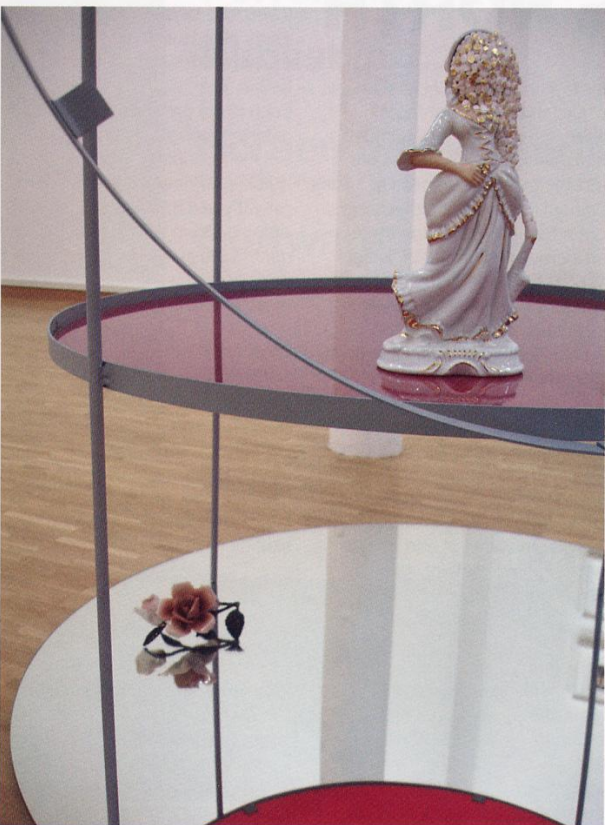
Roger Hiorns is one of Birmingham's highest profile figures and in 2006 had his first major solo exhibition in the UK at the Milton Keynes Gallery. Having studied at Bournville before moving to London to undertake a BA at Goldsmiths, he is now represented in London by Corvi Mora, and in the States by Marc Foxx, LA. The London-based artist works in a variety of media, though is particularly known for his sculptural works about decay, in which various materials undergo chemical reactions. In one of his key bodies of work he dipped car engines in copper sulphate, creating crystalline forms; in another series he presented ceramic structures suspended from the ceiling with a soap solution inside, through which air was circulated, pumping out foam into the gallery space. Earlier this year he was commissioned to make work for Camden Arts Centre, including a curious performative piece involving art students and critics hiding around the gallery, eventually emerging to the sound of a braying donkey. Hiorns has just been awarded a major commission by the inaugural Jerwood Artangel Open to develop

a large-scale site-specific crystal project between 2008 and 2010. He has exhibited at the UCLA Hammer Museum in LA, as well as at Tate Britain and in the British Art Show 6, and can be seen in the West Midlands in June at Hanbury Hall.

The British Art Show 6 was actually a bumper edition for artists from the West Midlands, also featuring Birmingham-born Staffordshire University and Goldsmiths graduate Richard Hughes, Birmingham-based Juneau/projects, and UCE graduates Ivan and Heather Morison. The Morisons, who moved from Birmingham to North Wales in 2005 on purchasing woodland that they plan to convert into an arboretum, have been selected to represent Wales at the 2007 Venice Biennale – the world's most prestigious showcase for contemporary art. The artists, who have exhibited extensively in the West Midlands, including at Ikon Gallery, Shrewsbury Museum and the New Art Gallery, Walsall, have also had shows in France, Spain and Canada to name just a few. In November last year they presented 'Earthwalker,' their second solo show with London-based gallery representative Danielle Arnaud. Mixing together all kinds of materials and mediums, their practice incorporates sculpture and installation, photography, literature, sonic work, appropriation, time-based pieces, performative projects and documentation, all delicately held together by a conceptual thread. The press release for the exhibition intriguingly asserted: 'Their work mixes fact and fiction, constructs narratives through different personas, takes us to Transylvania, China, Ecuador, New Zealand and Wales to investigate myths, roses, mushrooms and woods...'

There's clearly something going on in the woods at present as Birmingham-based Juneau/Projects/ (aka Ben Sadler and Phil

TOP: Roger Hiorns. *Unsettled*, 2006. Steel, disinfectant 296 x 148 x 105cm. Courtesy of Corvi-Mora, London. MIDDLE: Juneau/Projects/. *The Man of Speed's Helmet*, 2005. Motorcycle crash helmet, enamel paint. The Zabludowicz Art Trust, London. Courtesy of a projects, London. BOTTOM: Ruth Claxton. *A place of rainbows* (detail) 2006. (detail) painted steel, glass, vinyl, mirror, copper, found ceramic figurines, fimo, gold-leaf, plastic buttons, tin, 100 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist and ARQUEBUSE, Geneva.



Duckworth) also seem to have been spending a lot of time there – their recent exhibition 'Woodcraft Folk' at a projects in London was a weird and wonderful show involving lots of gnarled branches, tree stumps and pine needles that had been transformed into mysterious sculptures and installations. As if forming their own secret society, they combined pagan motifs with rock and Emo imagery, fusing old myths and legends with a passion for electric guitars. Juneau/Projects/ also currently have a major national touring exhibition underway that continues their exploration of the themes of the natural world, handcraft, music and digital technology. Initiated by Ikon Gallery where the tour began in 2006, the show recently finished its stint at FACT in Liverpool before heading off to the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery in Swansea, where it will be on display from 28 April – 22 July. The duo's work can also be seen at Vivid from 23 May to 2 June, including a performance of some of their customised musical instruments on 23 May.

Sculptural installations are a medium in which the West Midlands seems to be excelling at present – not only do Hiorns, the Morisons and Juneau/projects often use it to great effect, but it is a significant component of the practice of Royal College of Art graduate Ruth Claxton. Comprising glass, mirror and steel structures and a variety of furniture configurations, Claxton's elegant sculptural installations often support small, kitsch, china figurines that she has altered and abused by means of colourful ribbons, fabrics, Fimo and any other suitable bric-a-brac she can lay her hands on. The Birmingham-based artist was invited to have the inaugural exhibition at Arquebuse gallery in Geneva in the autumn of 2006, which she titled 'A place of rainbows', and was both a critical and commercial success. Having previously exhibited in East International, Zoo Art Fair and at the Drawing Room, this March she will be showing work in Artfutures, organised by the Contemporary Art Society at the Bloomberg Space in London (a show, incidentally, that Juneau/projects, Ivan and Heather Morison and Simon and Tom Bloor will also be participating in); Claxton also has a forthcoming solo exhibition at Ikon Gallery and a residency with Spike Island in Bristol.

Another of the region's highest profile artists is photographer Idris Khan. Khan grew up in Walsall, where he undertook a BTEC in art and design before doing a BA in photography in Derby, followed by an MA at the Royal College of Art. On completing his degree in 2004 he was awarded the prestigious Photographer's Gallery Prize and has been based in London ever since. He came to prominence for photographic works in which image after image is layered one on top of another, creating complex palimpsests in which the figurative becomes abstracted, boundaries blurred and that which was certain becomes unclear. Subjects he has treated in this way include every Turner postcard from Tate Britain; every page of the holy Koran; and Eadweard Muybridge's early photographic studies of motion. In 2006 he had his first major UK exhibition at his London representative, Victoria Miro, coinciding with a specially commissioned film work at inIVA, and at the end of March will have a show at Thomas Schulte in Berlin. He then has just a few months to prepare for the next major show at Yvon Lambert in Paris, where he will be showing a new body of works including a 16mm film piece featuring pianist Warren Mailey-Smith performing Schubert's last piano sonata – though not as you might expect it.

Others artists who instantly spring to mind who have exhibited nationally or internationally in the last year or will do so in the coming months include Simon and Tom Bloor, Mona Casey, Graham Chorlton, Ravi Deepres, Darryl Georgiou, Reuben Henry and Karin Kihlberg, Jon Jones, Kate Pemberton, Stephen Earl Rogers, Ian Skoyles, Stuart and Anna Tait, Gail Troth, Karen Trusselle, Lois Wallace, and Justin Wiggan and Oona Luras. Indeed, the list of artists from the West Midlands who are 'out there' today is actually too long to be able to offer a comprehensive account. The climate is changing for contemporary art, as is the region's economy – something that is evidenced by the New Art Birmingham festival, taking place in mid March. Building on the current success of the region's artists, hopefully in a few years' time there will not only be more artists 'out there' but also more for whom it is viable to 'live here'.

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