

Nathan Cash Davidson

Burlesque in which we've thrown it on its head

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Edited by Ziba Ardalan
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Foreword

It is an immense pleasure to show the work of Nathan Cash Davidson in a solo exhibition at Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art. Cash Davidson's prodigious talent for painting revealed itself early on in his life and in just a few years he has amassed a body of work that has established him as a creative force in contemporary painting.

With centuries of painting behind us, it is tempting to think it must be virtually impossible to innovate in that medium, yet time and again there comes an artist who shows us the unexpected, and this is exactly what we find in the work of Cash Davidson. He tackles the most difficult subject matter with his unique vision and renders it with remarkable creativity. We can only be thankful to him for expanding our point of view and revealing yet another way of seeing and interpreting our world.

I consider myself blessed to have worked with Cash Davidson on this exhibition. His good humour, flexibility and fresh ideas, not to forget the generous introduction to rapping, have been most exhilarating. I am also enormously thankful to Sue Davidson and Nick Cash for their care and support of this project.

A word of thanks goes to Hannah Barry and her team at Hannah Barry Gallery, in particular Joe Balfour and Ben Eastham, who gave their unfailing support during the realisation of this exhibition. I cannot thank them enough for their kindness.

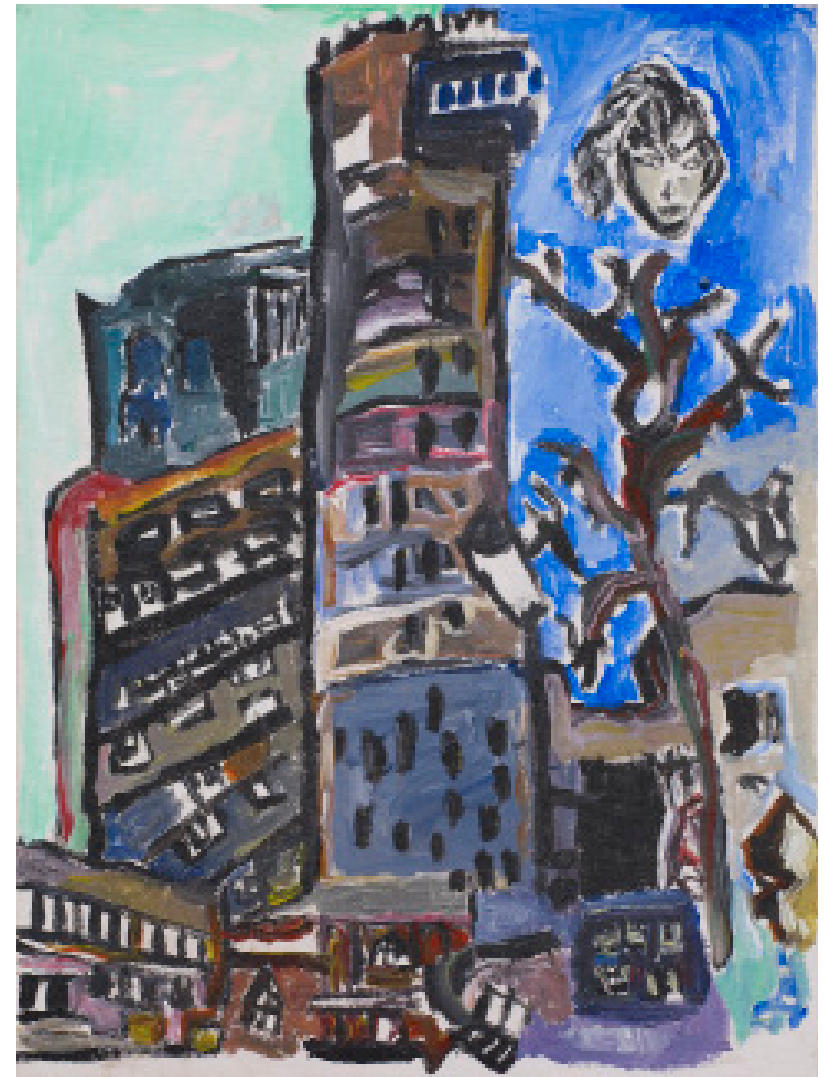
As ever I am grateful to Helen Wire for her editing skill and to Marc Kappeler and Markus Reichenbach for their creative design work throughout the realisation of this publication, and to my team at Parasol unit for their hard work and sustained motivation in the mounting of another outstanding exhibition.

Ziba Ardalan
Director/Curator

Trellick Tower GCSE, 2004
Watercolour, collage and ink
67×50 cm (26½×19¾ in)



Trellick Tower Small, 2004
Acrylic on canvas
40×30 cm (15¾×12 in)



Trellick Tower Burning, 2004
Acrylic on canvas
60×50 cm (23¾×19¾ in)



Trellick Tower With Ali G, 2004
Acrylic on canvas
60×56 cm (23½×22 in)

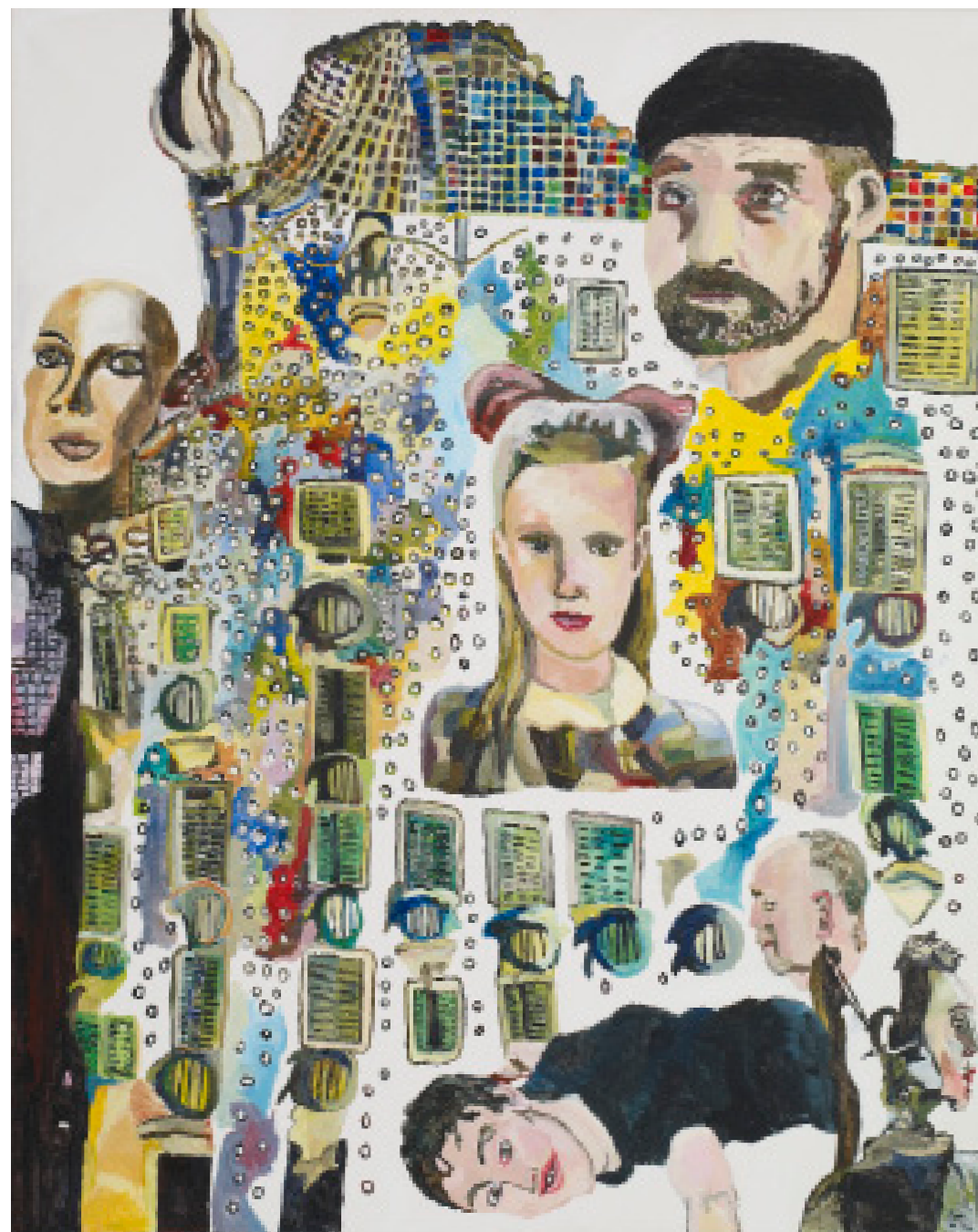


Smirking Cookie, 2006
Acrylic on canvas
153×122 cm (60¼×48 in)

I got lots of different references: the Gaudi book with the Gaudi Bridge in then I got the different faces... that's Jeremy Irons up there and that's a mannequin head in the corner and that actor in the middle is called Eliza Bennett from Nanny McPhee, the film I remixed, that's one of the actors in it she plays one of the kids in the film. And that's me at the bottom and that's meant to be my dad's head just above me and then that's the robot from the film A.I. [Artificial Intelligence]. I put things together just to see what happens.

You can run out of ideas if you don't have necessarily a strong idea of what you want – it's better just to do it rather than not do it... so you have to almost let it build itself getting the right reference or any reference and putting it together so I can actually make something. If you don't have all the pieces of a puzzle you can't make a puzzle. I would say it was complete because it's got the right amount of white [in ratio] to colour because if it was all filled in with colour it might be too much.

There's something really mysterious about my grandad's house I've always found it mysterious even when I was little... I always used to be afraid of mannequin heads... my auntie when she was seventeen, I was 4, and I think she had a mannequin head in her room. It used to create this whole thing – it wasn't just scary it literally created the house it was weird... it was like this missing... I remember someone said there was this secret passage that went from the shed all the way up to the attic with like sideways, waterfalls and mannequin heads. I think my auntie said there was a secret passageway that led up there and because I knew there was a mannequin head up there I imagined there were all these other heads and weird things on the way up now the painting is in the room, it's like the head is back there again kind of thing. The head went ages ago as soon as they grew up it went 'cause I think they used it for hairdressing and stuff... mannequin heads made an impact on my life. It reminds me of Christmas... you get those colours in the shops, it reminds me of my synagogue: all the colours.



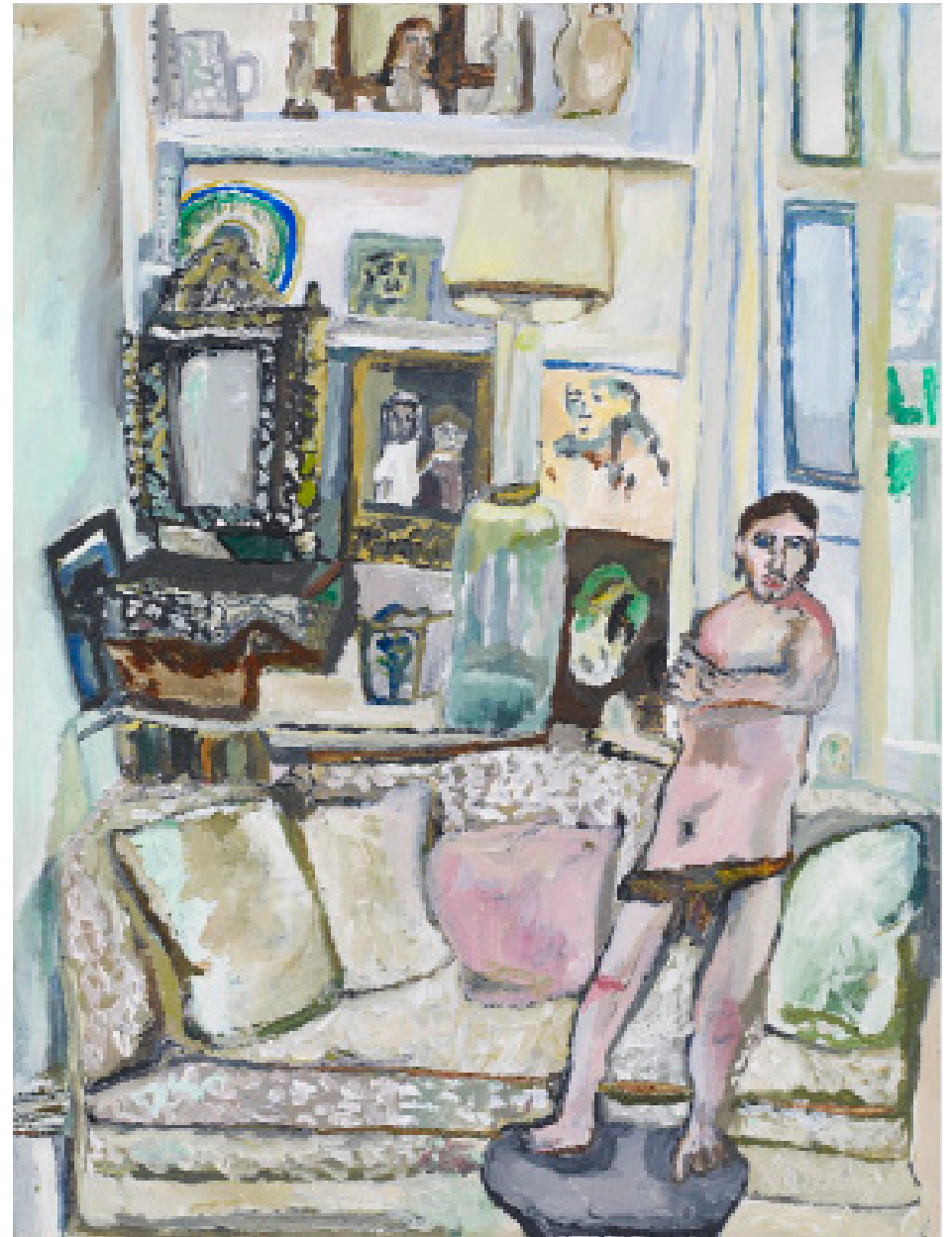
Golden Monkey Ridicule, 2006
Acrylic on card
104×150 cm (41×59 in)

These two people stand before their house. Someone has painted Kane, a wrestler, onto their flat wall. They decided to run away because he got painted on their wall, they run away forever. They just have this thing that they think that if anything is written on their wall, or if dust comes onto their flat wall, it will mean that they have to escape. They have a phobia of things drawn on walls.



Judith's Room, 2006
Acrylic on canvas
80.4×60 cm (31¾×23¾ in)

This is a picture of my grandma's living room and there's a statue, a sofa and everything else.



*Alan Sugar fires a duck because it is not
horse-headed, 2006–2007
Acrylic on canvas
100×100 cm (39½×39½ in)*

Alan Sugar gets loads of ducks and geese, like people to work for him, and then he fires one of the ducks because it didn't have a horse's head on its body, he has a delusion... and then he fired that duck because it didn't have a horse's head on its body and then the duck flew up and landed on his right shoulder. The person on the couch is just a random person I found in a magazine.

It was a photo of him on a couch and I just put him in for the heck of it and then I put all the other stuff as different images and then made that story. He is showing him that the duck had a horse's head on its body after all, even though it didn't, they thought that they would find one that did but they didn't really, they had to cut a horse's head off and then show him that the duck had a horse's head on its body even though it didn't because it had just flown on his shoulder.

They're inside a big building.

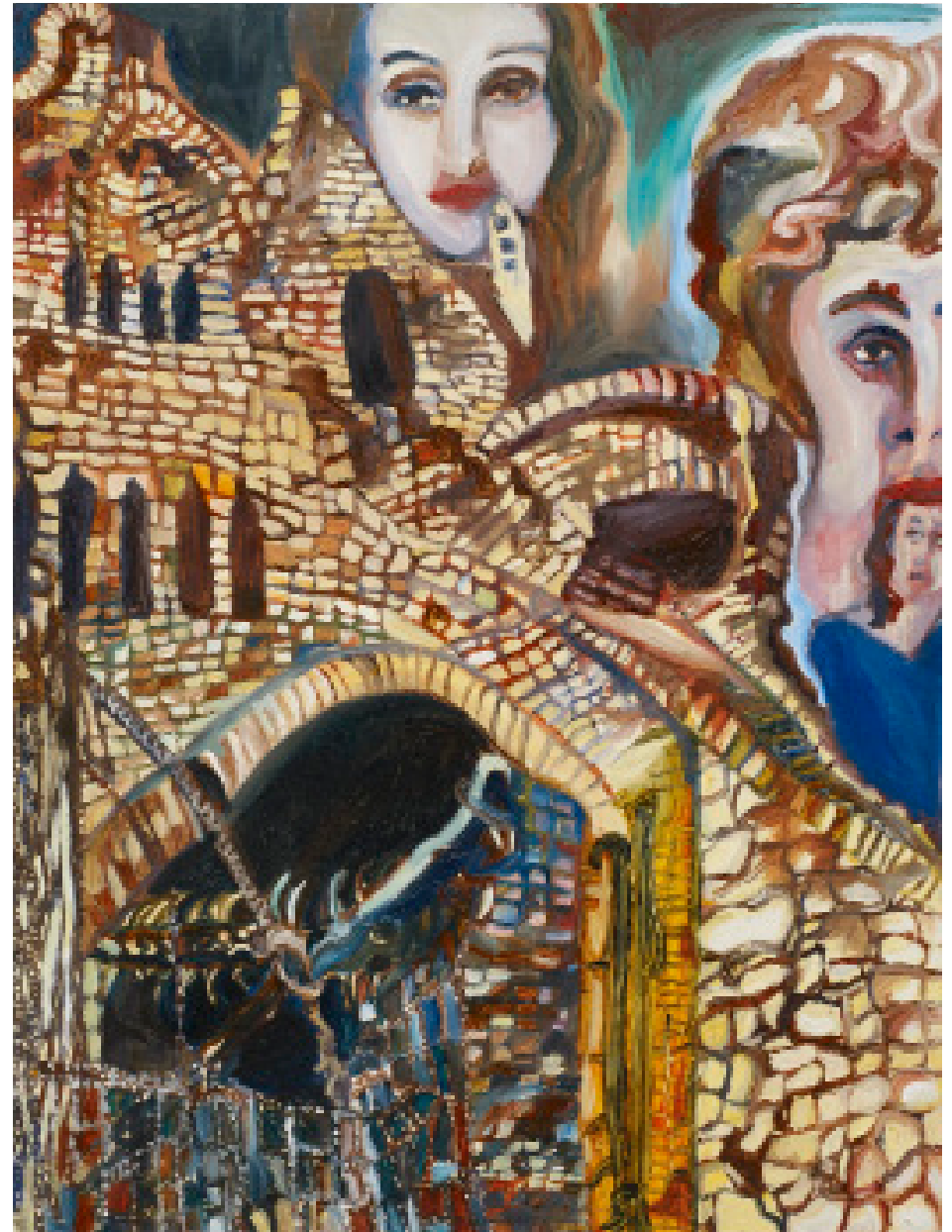


From the egg thy ducks do come, 2007
Oil on board
65×95 cm (25½×37½ in)

It's about this grandma every time there's an argument in the family she gets a straw and sucks herself into a baby and then the baby finds the wrinkles in the field and it sucks itself back into a grandma using the same straw. And she keeps doing that most of the day sucking herself into a baby and then the baby sucking the wrinkles back into a grandma. Every time that happens this family of white ducks move towards half of an egg... the ducks you don't see you have to imagine – these white ducks move towards it... and they move further towards it every time the grandma sucks herself into a baby. —The girl on the left is part of the family.— So basically she is sucking herself; as she is sucking she is sucking on her fat and everything and turns back into a baby... because she does that on a hill and the baby crawls towards the house, leaving the wrinkles of the grandma... like the shell of the grandma behind and then stays like that as a baby for a while and then whenever there is another family argument the baby finds the wrinkles on the field, crawls towards them and grabs the straw and sucks the wrinkles and suddenly they turn back into a grandma and then the white ducks start quacking on a completely different field hundreds of miles away and move closer to half of an egg. It was from a dream.



*I wouldn't want, is so you, they will and
they don't raves that they, 2008*
Oil on board
61×46 cm (24×18 in)



Can you see a hundred heads on my body?, 2008
Oil on board
61×44 cm (24×17¼ in)
Private collection.



As far as we're concerned, he's one of us, 2008
Oil on canvas
122×92 cm (48×36¼ in)



Sorry, wrong pocket, 2008
Oil on board
80x64 cm (31½x25¼ in)

A display of armour and shields. It's a quote from the film The Mask. I've always quite liked the window in this... does it feel like you are walking through a museum and the light's coming through?... That's a shotgun down there on the right... Do you think it looks like a mixture of different times like the old paintings?... Like if you had to guess when this was painted when would you think it was painted?



The Human Condition at its Most Fervent

*The mind loves the unknown. It loves images whose meaning is unknown, since the meaning of the mind itself is unknown.*¹

The above quotation from René Magritte's diary has been known to me for as long as I have been involved in art. In all its simplicity and clarity, it remains a challenging statement. It raises countless questions about representation, creation, art, why we are fascinated by this form of expression and, quite simply, why we continue to want to look at it. As a matter of fact René Magritte (1898–1967), a Master of the first half of the twentieth century, and Nathan Cash Davidson (1988–), a 22-year-old art school painting graduate of the early twenty-first century, have little in common other than that they have both made striking images which powerfully disturb our sense of the familiar. All similarities stop there. Magritte carefully selected what he wanted to depict in his paintings and was intent on making his extraordinary thoughts visible by juxtaposing familiar scenes and objects to evoke something unfamiliar; while Cash Davidson's paintings seem driven by human dramas, usually inspired by media images or his own dreams and elaborate thoughts. Despite

¹ Suzi Gablik, *Magritte*, (World of Art), New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1985, p. 12.

the differences in form and content the paintings of Magritte and Cash Davidson remain equally puzzling to the viewer.

Obviously, the medium in which he works has been of prime importance to Cash Davidson and has affected his choice of subject matter. In the early part of his career and up to 2006 Cash Davidson used acrylic paint to render contemporary subject matters, such as *Trellick Tower Burning*, p. 13
2004, *Golden Monkey Ridicule*, 2006, and *Alan Sugar fires a duck* p. 19
because it is not horse-headed, 2006–07. From then onward, p. 23
due to his growing interest in the paintings of Old Masters, Cash Davidson embarked on painting in oils. This medium offered him the greater possibilities and flexibility in the rendering of light and shade, contrasts, and the vibrant colours reminiscent of the work of Old Masters, such as Caravaggio, that he was after. Although Cash Davidson's paintings are rendered with apparent realism, viewers can find it difficult to make sense of what is going on in them. For sure, the titles Cash Davidson appends to his works add further to their complexity, but what is even more amazing is just how easily and naturally such complex titles come into Cash Davidson's mind. Indeed, his thoughts are so powerful and convincing that one gets the impression that his, at times haunting, scenes do actually reflect the reality of daily life. They are collages of unfamiliar events and thoughts through which the artist as creator and we as viewers live, benefit from and, finally enriched, come into dialogue with.

In equal measure a passionate lyricist and a painter, Cash Davidson writes poetry, raps, and paints. In his mind the intertwining of these thoughts makes everything seem possible, which is one of the many fascinating aspects of

his art. Cash Davidson's work bears no trace of inhibition, a feeling that can be death to creativity. Past mingles with present; history deals with contemporary issues; stories shared by adult and child become a dialogue between generations; locations change with their identity. Throughout his paintings, relationships are paramount. One senses in them a certain urge for communication and contact – a particular inclination towards storytelling, which refuses to be acknowledged as a need. Often warm and affectionate, if at the same time somewhat unsettling, these paintings seem like doors left wide open to interpretation. Everything is laid bare with disarming honesty as if the artist wants us to accept them as realities of life.

Architecture and space have considerable presence in Cash Davidson's paintings. One might think a contained environment would provide some sense of security, but in Cash Davidson's work it invariably functions as a stage for human drama, strange occurrences and unusual stories. Equally intimidating, mystifying and occasionally creepy, the often cram-packed scenes he depicts do not leave one feeling indifferent. In 2004, at the age of 16, Cash Davidson painted a series of works depicting Trellick Tower, a notorious high-rise residential building in west London.² This

2 Based on Le Corbusier's idea of a 'living unit', the Hungarian émigré architect Erno Goldfinger (1902–87) built the modernist high-rise block called Trellick Tower, completed in 1972, in west London. With its 322-ft tall brutalist concrete exterior it soon became known as the 'tower of horror'. All through the 1970s and 1980s Trellick Tower was associated with problems of modernism because of the horrific events that took place in its lifts and numerous corridors.

series perhaps reveals a certain fascination with building as container, in which much can happen. It seems to me that here, in particular, the issue is the interaction between architecture and human energy, whether that be positive or negative. In one painting after another, Cash Davidson almost obsessively depicts the same high-rise block of flats, where despite or because of the small and confined spaces in which people live, the most forbidding events can take place and life stories unfold. The building functions as an arena or stage for human theatre, but is at the same time a sort of Pandora's box of dark secrets. In one work, *Trellick Tower GCSE*, 2004, the high-rise is shown intensely crowded in amongst a crush of other buildings. In *Trellick Tower with Ali G*, 2004, the building seems exploded, and judging by the heads and bodies strewn out of it, it is obviously erupting with some uncontrolled fury of suppressed human energy. And one wonders whether the blazing fire in *Trellick Tower Burning*, 2004, is meant to be understood literally or metaphorically.

This extraordinary sensibility to the human need for freedom while trapped within an urban environment, finds resonance in some of Cash Davidson's later paintings, such as: *Smirking Cookie*, 2006, in which a Gaudi-inspired building provides the background to a number of heads and torsos, including those of a dummy mannequin on the left and his father and himself in the foreground; and *Golden Monkey Ridicule*, in which a young-looking couple are holding hands when they pass by a gigantic painting of a truncated torso and head as they leave a housing complex. In other paintings, such as the stunning *As far as we're concerned, he's one of*

us, 2008, and *The Veteran Coin*, 2009, the mood seems awkward and perplexing. In the former, the disturbing expressions of the contemporary figures are further heightened by the incongruous presence of a headless and almost limbless statue in the background and a donkey's head which enters the picture plane from the right of the painting. *The Veteran Coin* depicts the brick façade of a fortress-like building with the heads (or masks) of a man and a woman hanging from some dislodged beams that criss-cross the width of the painting, and evokes some of the most frightening scenarios to be found in Cash Davidson's work. It is interesting to note that such a painting looks contemporary to the artist because his use of sedate and darker colours is in contrast to the often boisterous colours used by the Old Masters.

In other paintings, where Cash Davidson depicts a building interior – for example in *Alan Sugar fires a duck because it is not horse-headed*, 2006–07, *Enticing Spiritualistic Device*, 2009, *You're far from dead a wrong'un having a laugh*, 2010, and *An Axeman's Heritage*, 2009 – not only is the space crammed with disproportionately large figures, but the use of various planes and diagonals together with intense colours all adds to the sense of unease. Here again, the size of the people and objects competes with the room space, as if they're trying to force the walls apart to make space for themselves.

With so much happening in his paintings, Cash Davidson's works tend to inspire a storytelling element in our response to them. Indeed, the juxtaposition of so many apparently unrelated images prompts us to try unravelling their mysteries and understand their meaning, but in truth his

p. 61 paintings deal primarily with the way he strives to depict reality. Interestingly, he is relaxed about leaving the task of deciphering them to the viewer. A work like *I told you a thousand times they go around in white sheets and carry chains*, 2010, might lead us to associate it with stories from childhood or to identify with the young girl depicted in it. Seated in a domestic environment, staring with wide-eyed innocence and painted beautifully with amazing contrasts of light and dark, she could be any contemporary young girl who, seated in front of an undesired bowl of soup, might be listening to a ghost story that supposedly distracts her from eating.

p. 55 More important than the obvious storytelling element, and despite their often traditional and historical settings, Cash Davidson's paintings emanate a sense of activity, a performance quality that keeps us in tune with their contemporaneity. This is seen in *You're far from dead a wrong'un having a laugh* that was apparently inspired by the story of *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens (1812–70). The Gothic structure, the supposedly wooden statue of a woman in the lower left corner, the image of a devil on the upper left and the impressive curving body of a snake transforming itself into a swan from one of the artist's own dreams, all seem keen to recount something; but it is the expressive figures of the actors (which do not include Oliver) who are ready to perform, here and now, that give the painting its contemporaneity. In *Alan Sugar fires a duck because it is not horse-headed*, a small room is occupied by several figures involved in some unexplained activity, while a horse's severed head intrudes at the upper left. The use of vibrant colours in this work gives it a remarkable spontaneity.

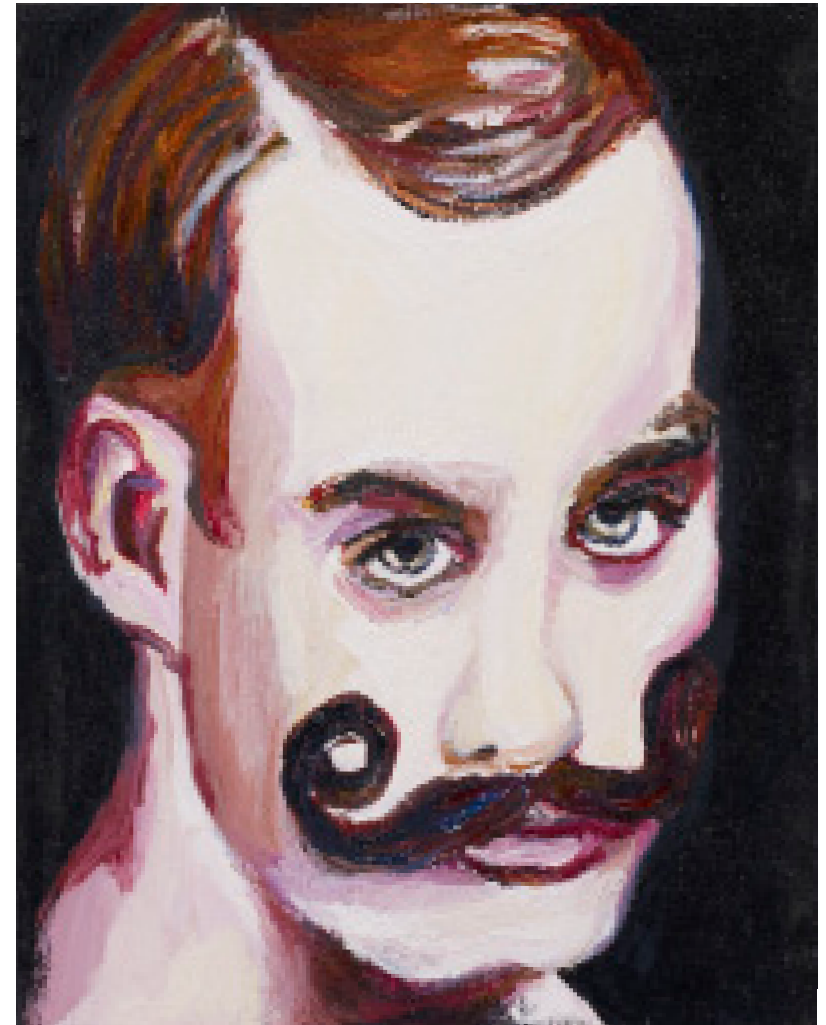
p. 23

The most fascinating aspect of Cash Davidson's painting is the unexpectedness of what we encounter in it. The diversity of themes and subject matter depicted spring from an original mind and richness of thought that are truly unparalleled. Over the past six years, painting with the assured brush and rich colours of a passionate painter, Cash Davidson has created remarkable pictures in which his use of space, and its creation, demonstrate a stunning and encouraging direction for painting in the twenty-first century. With so many years ahead of him, we should be prepared for yet more innovations and surprises.

Enticing Spiritualistic Device, 2009
Oil on canvas
153×122 cm (60¼×48 in)



The Anaesthetist, 2009
Oil on board
28×23 cm (11×9 in)



An Axeman's Heritage, 2009
Oil on canvas
125×95 cm (49¼×37½ in)



The Veteran Coin, 2009
Oil on canvas
76×61 cm (30×24 in)



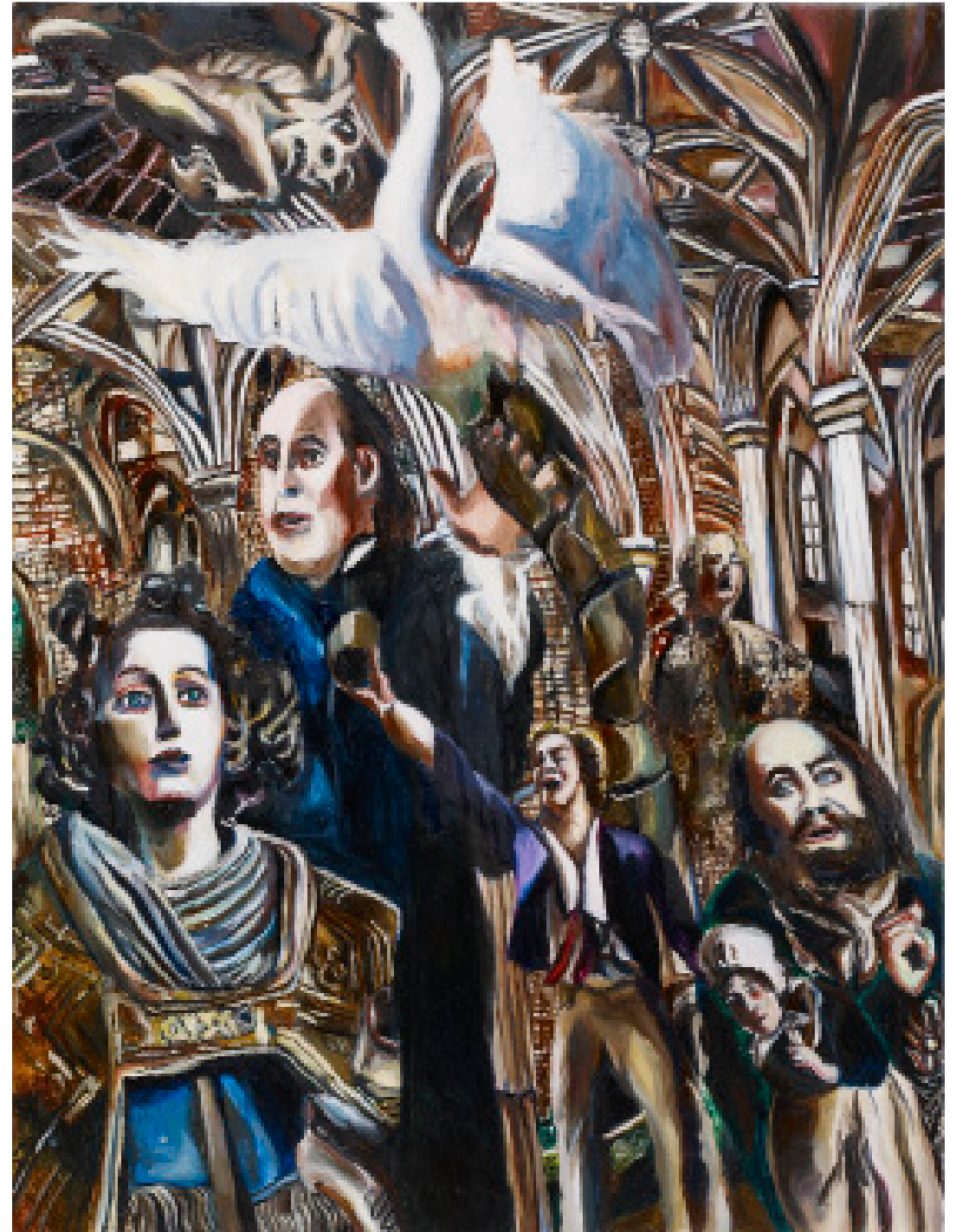
Our Garden, 2009
Oil on board
56 × 41 cm (22×16¼ in)



The cry boy with formula 44 D, 2010
Oil on board
46×34 cm (18×13½ in)



You're far from dead a wrong'un having a laugh, 2010
Oil on board
122×91 cm (48×35¾ in)



*Dizzier Than Roundabouts,
But Never Once Did You Fall*, 2009
Oil on canvas
123×91 cm (48½×35¾ in)



So it is decreed and so it shall be done, 2010
Oil on canvas
163×122.5 cm (64¼×48 in)



*I told you a thousand times they go around
in white sheets and carry chains, 2010*
Oil on canvas
131×101 cm (51½×39¾ in)



The Executioner, 2010
Oil on canvas
214×122 cm (84¼×48 in)



List of Works in the Exhibition

Unless otherwise stated, all works are copyright © Nathan Cash Davidson and reproduced by courtesy of the Artist. All photography is by Stephen White. Height precedes width.

- 08 *Trellick Tower GCSE*, 2004
Watercolour, collage and ink, 67×50 cm (26½×19¾ in)
Collection of the artist's family.

- 10 *Trellick Tower Small*, 2004
Acrylic on canvas, 40×30 cm (15¾×12 in)
Collection of the artist's family.

- 12 *Trellick Tower Burning*, 2004
Acrylic on canvas, 60×50 cm (23¾×19¾ in)
Collection of Alexander Churchill, California, USA.

- 14 *Trellick Tower With Ali G*, 2004
Acrylic on canvas, 60×56 cm (23½×22 in)
Private collection.

- 16 *Smirking Cookie*, 2006
Acrylic on canvas, 153×122 cm (60¼×48 in)
Collection of Edel Murrin.

- 18 *Golden Monkey Ridicule*, 2006
Acrylic on card, 104×150 cm (41×59 in)
Collection of the artist's family.

- 20 *Judith's Room*, 2006
Acrylic on canvas, 80.4×60 cm (31¾×23¾ in)
Private collection.

- 22 *Alan Sugar fires a duck because it is not horse-headed*, 2006–07
Acrylic on canvas, 100×100 cm (39½×39½ in)
Courtesy of Ben Eastham.

- 24 *From the egg thy ducks do come*, 2007
Oil on board, 65×95 cm (25½×37½ in)
Collection of Ruth Whaley.
- 26 *I wouldn't want, is so you, they will and they don't raves that they*, 2008
Oil on board, 61×46 cm (24×18 in)
Private collection.
- 28 *Can you see a hundred heads on my body?*, 2008
Oil on board, 61×44 cm (24×17¼ in)
Private collection.
- 30 *As far as we're concerned, he's one of us*, 2008
Oil on canvas, 122×92 cm (48×36¼ in)
Private collection.
- 32 *Sorry, wrong pocket*, 2008
Oil on board, 80×64 cm (31½×25¼ in)
Private collection, London.
- 42 *Enticing Spiritualistic Device*, 2009
Oil on canvas, 153×122 cm (60¼×48 in)
Private collection.
- 44 *The Anaesthetist*, 2009
Oil on board, 28×23 cm (11×9 in)
Private collection.
- 46 *An Axeman's Heritage*, 2009
Oil on canvas, 125×95 cm (49¼×37½ in)
Collection of Aisling O'Neill.
- 48 *The Veteran Coin*, 2009
Oil on canvas, 76×61 cm (30×24 in)
Private collection.

- 50 *Our Garden*, 2009
Oil on board, 56×41 cm (22×16¼ in)
Private collection.
- 52 *The cry boy with formula 44 D*, 2010
Oil on board, 46×34 cm (18×13½ in)
Collection of the artist's family.
- 54 *You're far from dead a wrong'un having a laugh*, 2010
Oil on board, 122×91 cm (48×35¾ in)
Private collection.
- 56 *Dizzier Than Roundabouts, But Never Once Did You Fall*, 2009
Oil on canvas, 123×91 cm (48½×35¾ in)
Collection of Anselm Kiefer.
- 58 *So it is decreed and so it shall be done*, 2010
Oil on canvas, 163×122.5 cm (64¼×48 in)
Courtesy of Hannah Barry Gallery.
- 60 *I told you a thousand times they go around in white sheets and carry chains*, 2010
Oil on canvas, 131×101 cm (51½×39¾ in)
Private collection.
- 62 *The Executioner*, 2010
Oil on canvas, 214×122 cm (84¼×48 in)
Courtesy of Hannah Barry Gallery.

Biography

Nathan Cash Davidson

Nathan's passion for painting began when, aged 16, he produced a work based on drawings of Trellick Tower, a famously brutalist building in west London. He went on to take a GNVQ in Art and Design at the William Morris Academy, before moving on to study Fine Art at Wimbledon College of Art, from which he graduated in 2010.

In 2006, Nathan painted *Alan Sugar fires a duck because it is not horse-headed*. The metre-square composition was seen by filmmaker Michael H. Shamberg, who included it in *TURTLE*, a salon exhibition at the Chelsea Space in Pimlico. Shaun McDowell, a fellow young artist, saw the painting and asked Nathan to show at the artist-led exhibition programme *78 Lyndhurst Way* in Peckham, London. His first solo exhibition, *To Complete My Education*, was held in November 2008 at the Hannah Barry Gallery.

The narratives that accompany Nathan's earlier works are not intended to explain the composition but rather allow Nathan to create lives for characters that extend beyond the canvas. The organic narrative development of Nathan's imagery – figures appear, a flower grows and a background of complex buildings spring up from Nathan's collected store of images and interests – is reflected in the teeming, inventive imagery of his written and spoken words. This lyrical talent was showcased at the 2009 Serpentine Poetry Marathon, at which he performed one of his signature raps.

Since his first solo exhibition, Nathan has moved away from the story-telling aspect of his earlier work to focus on developing a compositional style that consciously recalls the Old Masters, towards whose mastery of paint he aspires. A regular visitor to galleries since he was a child, Nathan was transfixed by the works of, among others, Rubens, Caravaggio and Holbein. His experience of these paintings has contributed powerfully to the development of his visual imagination.

In addition to painting prolifically, Nathan continues to write lyrics, make audio-visual 'mash-ups' and to rap. Nathan has always felt a particular affinity with Scotland, and in 2009 contributed to a group show celebrating the life and works of Robert Burns at The Mitchell Library in Glasgow. He has spent many holidays in the city, his mother's birthplace, and on the country's highlands and islands.

Biographical note courtesy of Hannah Barry Gallery.

Nathan Cash Davidson
Born 1988, London, UK. Lives and works in London.

Education

- 2006–10 Wimbledon College of Art, London, UK
- 2005 Slade School of Fine Art Summer School, London, UK
- 2004–06 William Morris Academy, London, UK

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2010 Nathan Cash Davidson: *Burlesque in which we've thrown it on its head*
Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art, London, UK
- 2008 *To Complete My Education*, Hannah Barry Gallery, London, UK

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2009 *Time Flies*, Hannah Barry Gallery, London, UK
Poetry Marathon, Serpentine Gallery, London, UK
Discerning Eye, The Mall Galleries, London, UK
To Paint is to Love Again, Hannah Barry Gallery, London, UK
Inspired, The Mitchell Library, Glasgow, Scotland, UK
- 2007 *Building and Breaking: Drawing in Pencil*, 78 Lyndhurst Way, Peckham, London, UK
Experiments with Figuration, 78 Lyndhurst Way, Peckham, London, UK
- 2006 *TURTLE, an anarchic salon by Michael H. Shamberg*, Chelsea Space, University of Arts of London, London, UK

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