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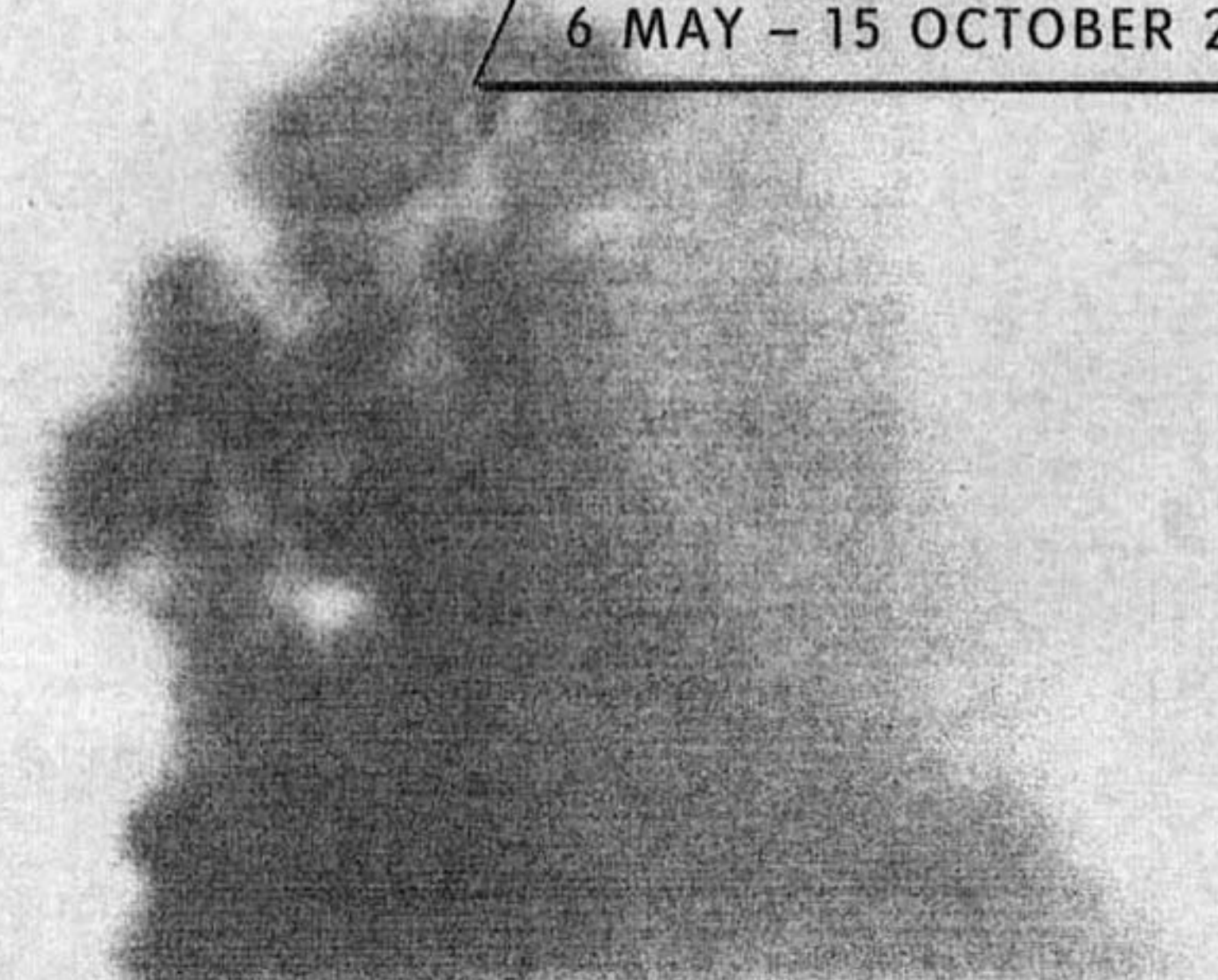
ART NOW

RICHARD HUGHES

KEEP ON ONNIN'

SCULPTURE COURT COMMISSION

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**RICHARD HUGHES**  
**KEEP ON ONNIN'**

Richard Hughes makes intricate illusions that trick the viewer and expose the artifice of their making. His sculptures and installations resemble the aftermath of good times gone sour. Bags of jettisoned old clothes, rising damp, burnt-out hedges, bottles of urine, and dog-end residues – are all used to create elaborate histories. Hughes revisits specific cultural moments, as his practice taps into shared memories and bittersweet feelings often reserved for things past their best.

*Keep On Onnin'* is a three-dimensional recreation of a lens flare; the visual phenomenon caught on film that is caused when a sharp light shines on the lens. Described by Hughes as 'the ghost that haunts visions of summers past', the lens flare has specific nostalgic connotations. It has especial association with the rose-tinted optimism of the hippie era when lens flares cast a magical light on films such as *Easy Rider* 1969, *Woodstock* 1970 and were a regular feature of album covers. Their apparition in films and photographs seemed to provide a documentary equivalence to psychedelic experience – as though proof both of heightened perception and the drug-induced visions that were seen. When cine-cameras became affordable in the 1970s, the lens flare became a feature in home movies and for a generation it epitomised the perfect summer's moment caught on film. They occur most frequently at the start and the end of a day when the sun slices low through the sky, the in-between times when the world feels at its most transient.

Hughes' title conflates the lens flare with another trend from the same period that came out of the counterculture comics movement in America. It is a variation on 'Keep On Truckin', a catchphrase coined by cartoonist Robert Crumb in *Zap Comics* in 1967. This slogan spawned a thousand imitations and adorned everything from t-shirts to bumper stickers and television sitcoms. The phrase 'Keep On Onnin'' appeared in a cartoon Crumb made five years later entitled *Remember 'Keep On Truckin'?* which vented his bitterness at the way his idea was continuously co-opted and ripped off. This cartoon was composed of twenty-seven panels in continuously decreasing size which featured variations on the theme, each less faithful to the original and increasingly emptied of meaning. Hughes' title insinuates that *Keep On Onnin'* is a poor equivalent, close to the thing it copies, but not close enough. Rather like, Hughes suggests, a 'pound shop' version of a name brand.

A copy without an original, Hughes' lens flare offers a kind of enhanced realism. Bearing only an external and deceptive resemblance to the generic representation, it has a very different nature from its subject. Whereas lens flares are fleeting, intangible accidents only witnessed as images after an event, Hughes' installation is deliberately contrived out of physical objects and designed to last. The blatant discrepancies between what it is and what it represents are provocative. Constructed out of perspex and gradually accruing grime, *Keep On Onnin'* grubbies the ideal that it refers to. It creates a parallel between the way this installation will age over time and the way the hippy dream has been sullied throughout the decades.

In other works Hughes has subtly transformed objects so that they meld vantage points from different historical moments. *After The Summer of Like* 2005, features a sagging sofa that has been infested by a host of magic mushrooms, which combines drug culture with its drab legacy. The upholstery has been hand-dyed by the artist so that the work embodies both the faded dirtiness of the old and psychedelic tie-dye design. It is dingy and banal – the sort of couch where casualties from taking acid wash-up.

*Studios 5to4*, a work that the artist has recreated several times for different locations, is a facsimile of a mirror-ball. Like *Keep On Onnin'*, it is fabricated out of very different materials from what it imitates. Instead of using mirror fragments, Hughes took photographs of the space that it would inhabit and systematically pasted tiny squares cut from these images onto a sphere, so that they accurately depicted what a real mirror-ball might reflect. A superficially convincing stand-in, Hughes' sculpture strips its subject of all its life and sparkle. In both the lens flare and the mirror-ball, Hughes manifests momentary plays of light into concrete physical objects. The title is a play on words that references New York's famous 1970s disco and also provides a description of the location and time of day when the work was made. Static and grey, the work speaks of the demise of the disco scene. It also invokes some of the loss involved when life is transformed into art.

While his sculptures often resemble readymades, the notion of transformation is crucial to Hughes' practice. What appear at first glance to be found objects and scenarios, are actually constructed from scratch so that the viewer of the work undergoes a moment of realisation when expectation is up-ended by humour. Rather than attempt to provide mystic truths, Hughes works conjure mundane miracles: the pebbles stuck over an ugly street post are actually hundreds of tiny smiley faces that the artist has made out of Fimo modelling clay, old piles of clothes that look ready to be thrown away are deliberately swirled together to suggest faces from an album cover, and in this installation, visions of light are constructed out of plastic. In Hughes works, revelations reveal themselves to be just another form of rubbish, but are no less worth believing in for that.

Text by Gair Boase