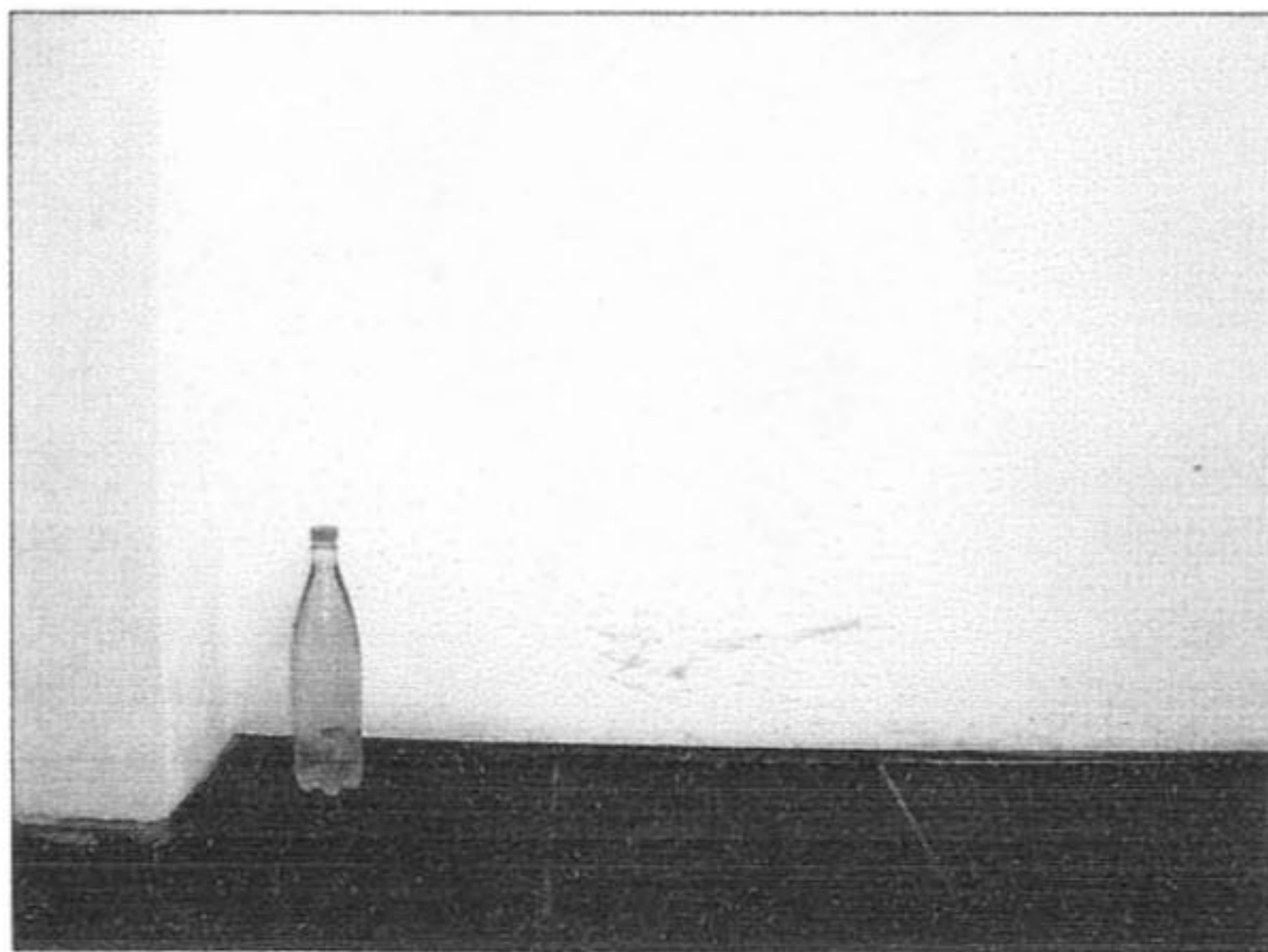


Richard Hughes

If you have ever driven to Glasgow on the M74 from the South you will have entered the hinterland of urban sprawl that extends about twenty miles from the city centre outwards into the countryside. The tower blocks and housing schemes of Carlisle, Larkhall, Hamilton, Motherwell and Wishaw, stand in gritty contrast to the green, rolling fields of the Clyde Valley and form a tract of social housing that signals your proximity to the city. A similar phenomenon occurs when you travel through the Midlands (although, there you have to look harder to find the traces of the rural) as the urban conurbations of Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley, West Bromwich, Birmingham and Solihull slip seamlessly together to create an ambiguous, dirty no-man's-land: a place that is neither town, nor country, but retains vestiges of both.

During the 1960s and 70s both of these areas underwent a rapid and drastic process of urbanisation, as councillors, planners and architects attempted to erase the past and build a bright new future for these post-war, bombed-out cities. Their aim was to create vibrant, multi-functional, social spaces that would generate a sense of civic pride amongst their occupants. Instead, the concrete jungles they built have left a legacy of melancholic, unloved areas, the hang-out of Britain's underclass of shouters and limpers, muggers and lurkers.

Richard Hughes was born in Birmingham in 1974; a true child of the urban sprawl. At an early age Hughes joined the ranks of skateboarders and BMXers, who, seeing the potential of these



deserted, concrete civic spaces, appropriated them for their own use: ad hoc skate parks in lieu of the real thing. Hughes' engagement with such locations has continued through his artistic practice, which unflinchingly reflects the

Roadsider
2003

more prosaic aspects of urban existence, using a combination of found and made objects. *Roadsider* (2003) for example, presents a familiar object, a bottle of pee filled and discarded by someone caught short on a long journey to somewhere. In this case, however, Hughes has chosen to place this item within the context of the gallery and has cast the bottle and its contents in poured polyester resin; a process suggested by the original.

Likewise, the BMX bicycle tyre has made an appearance in a number of Hughes' works reflecting the flotsam and jetsam that litters gap sites and roadsides. *Stuntnutter* (2003), three interlocking tyres that would appear to have been tossed over a crash barrier at the side of a road in Frankley, Birmingham, existed briefly as a public work and has subsequently been shown as a photographic piece. While *Goldenboy* (2003) presents a tyre that has become wrapped inexplicably around a metal stair banister and dangles precariously over the edge of the landing. An air of mystique surrounds how these objects arrived at their particular location but through their making they have become Hughes' tributes to the unknown heroes, 'the dead homies', the kids who could pull all the tricks. Cast in silicon, Hughes' adaptations from life have crashed and burnt, and found themselves washed in the context of the gallery: a head on collision between the slacker aesthetic and high



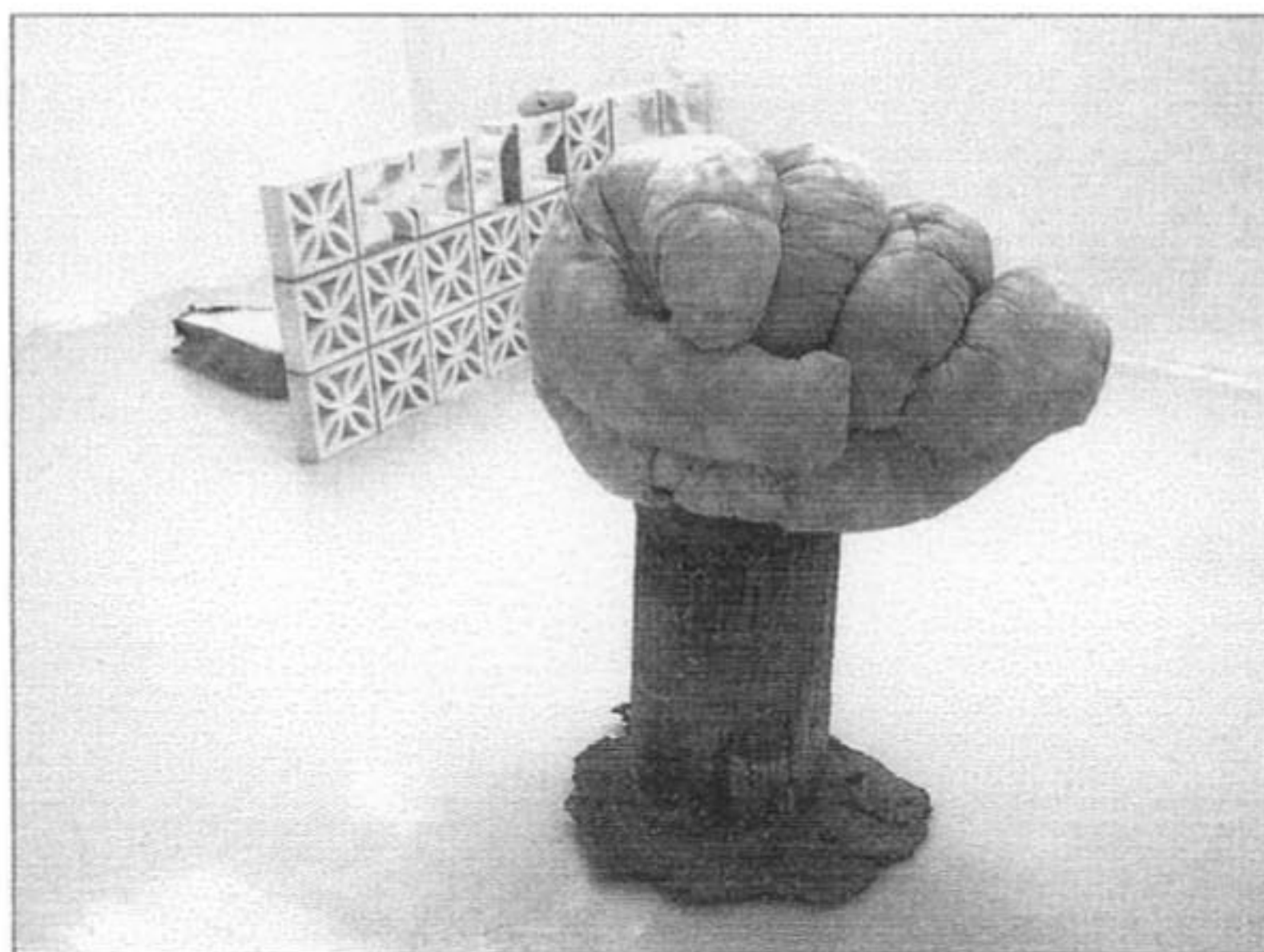
Hughes' has a sharp eye and a wry sense of humour that builds a gentle commentary on collective states of being and the group experiences found in any subculture. This is evident in works such as *Dunbreathin'* (2003) which consists of a mountain of matching grey rubbish-bags that have been filled and piled up in a corner. Spilling out of the rubbish are a number of decorative breeze-blocks in various states of disrepair; only on closer inspection does it become apparent that some of these spell out the expression 'rave on'. As the eye picks up on the detail

Dad's Bag of Rags
2003

and assembles the words, the mind begins to work through the associative connections. Returning to the rubbish pile the lolling red tongue hanging out of a set of yellow, broken teeth becomes apparent, a hobo's crown for the kingdom of trash. By allowing us to assemble the image piece by piece through a process of visual recognition and a personal set of associations, Hughes immerses us in a collective process of reminiscence and discovery: a shared memory of the physical effects of having too much to drink, or seeing someone left to sleep it off at the end of the party.

Dunbreathin' continues Hughes' preoccupation with urban environments and the subcultures that they spawn. And his work often locates points in recent cultural history, for example *Dad's Bag of Rags* (2003) presents a version of the group Love's 1967 psychedelic album cover, *Forever Changes*, depicting portraits of the five band members melded together to make one likeness of a face. In Hughes' interpretation, this iconic image would appear to have happened by chance, assembled by the random coming together of different coloured clothes in a clear bag perhaps destined for the charity shop. This work and many others are tinged with nostalgia for a lost moment; the point when the party ends, the scene moves on and the hippies and ravers grow-up.

There is a soft materiality about *Dunbreathin'* and *Dad's Bag of Rags* that forms a link to Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures, which were made throughout the 60s and 70s and presented flaccid, sagging versions of everyday items rendered in stuffed fabric and paint. This connection is reinforced by works such as *Pffist* (2003), which appears to be a grubby duvet that has been



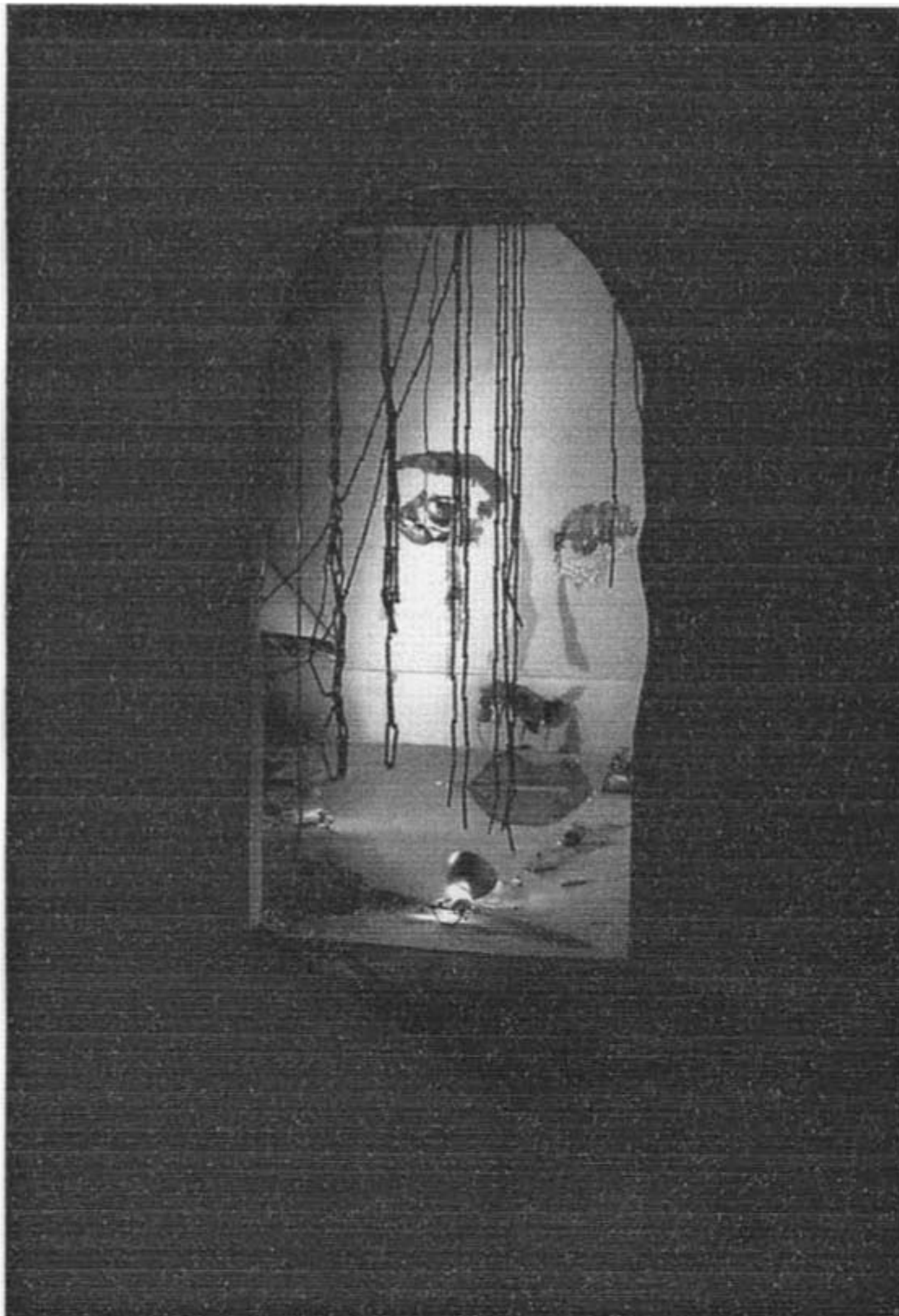
hurriedly stuffed into a burnt metal bin. However, to look again reveals a clenched fist punching the air; a Black Power salute reappropriated for the rave generation.

Hughes practice is diffused with this

Pffist
2003

combination of high art and subcultural references. *Broken Thumb* (2003) has been described by Hughes as being his tribute to the 'Brummie salute' or the thumbs-up, the internationally recognised short-hand for good. The work also makes a passing nod to Cesar, who in 1968 made a giant bronze cast of a thumb, a version of which is currently sited in the middle of a roundabout in Marseille. This connection with public art will not be lost on Hughes' as his thumb is cast in cement and has a fleeting resemblance to a broken bollard, making reference to an earlier version of this work *Broken Bollard* (1999). Recently, Hughes made a large-scale *trompe l'œil* installation, *Crash My Party You Bastards* (2004) that used everyday materials and called to mind a work by Salvador Dali. Here Dali's painting *Face of Mae West* (1935), now endlessly reproduced in posters has transferred itself from the adolescent's bedroom wall into a three-dimensional work that depicts the teenager in all his sullen, pouting glory.

Kirsty Ogg
Gallery Director



Crash My Party You Bastards
2004