An aerial photograph of a fleet of submarines on the surface of the ocean. The submarines are dark blue and arranged in a loose, scattered pattern across the light blue water. The perspective is from directly above, showing the hulls and conning towers of the vessels. The water has a slightly grainy texture, and the overall color palette is dominated by various shades of blue.

Uwe Wittwer
In The Middle Distance

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In The Middle Distance

Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal
18 January - 16 March 2013

Curated by Nick Rogers, Curator, Lakeland Arts Trust with Uwe Wittwer and Kevin Müller. Guide text by Nick Rogers

The Lakeland Arts Trust would like to thank the following institutions and private individuals who lent works to this exhibition: Nolan Judin, Berlin, Kunstmuseum Solothurn, The Artist courtesy of Haunch of Venison, Private Collection, Berlin, Private Collection, Basel, Private Collection, Zurich, Private Collection, UK

Supported by

swiss arts council

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Supported using public funding by

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ENGLAND**

Sir John Fisher
Foundation



Printed by Absolute Digital Print Ltd, Kendal

Swiss artist Uwe Wittwer (b.1954) does not believe in the hierarchies of painting media and materials; that the watercolour is inherently superior to the print, for instance, or that both are inferior to the oil painting. This is evident in the varying scale of his works, which do not conform to the traditional formats that artists are expected to adopt. His watercolours, for instance, are often very large; larger, in fact, than many of his oils. Likewise, his inkjet prints can be enormous: his *Riders negative*, 2008, in the last room of this exhibition, is two by three metres wide.

Despite this egalitarian approach to materials, however, it is clear that Wittwer has a special affinity with watercolour. This medium that is so often associated with the small-scale sketch or the amateur 'Sunday painter' is anything but in the hands of Wittwer; he relishes the daring involved in pulling off a successful watercolour, especially in the large scale that he works in. It is, as he describes it, about 'control and freedom'. **Control**, in that watercolour can be an immensely unsympathetic medium to work with if not handled properly; every stroke of the brush is irreversible, every mark permanent, the transparency of the paint unforgiving to error. **Freedom**, in the sense that watercolour is a hugely expressive medium; the fluidity of the paint allows swathes of colour to be applied in one sweep, the absorbent paper sucking in the quick-drying medium in an instant with no time to deliberate or calculate. Watercolour is an instinctive act, a tightrope walk between unbridled expression and controlled restraint. It is this tension that underpins much of Uwe Wittwer's art.

Gallery 1

Gallery 1 comprises watercolours executed after oil paintings by old masters. Wittwer has spent a great deal of time in museums and galleries over the years, observing and absorbing images to form a database in his mind from which he can draw inspiration. His is not a purely deferential attitude to the old masters, however; rather, they are simply used as source material, the same as the fading family photographs appropriated from the internet that serve as the basis for a number of inkjets later in this show, or the interior 'hooch' (hut) snapshots taken by US troops stationed in Vietnam that were used by Wittwer for a series entitled *Monsoon I-III* (2005). It is that non-hierarchical approach again.



Interior Negative after Hogarth, 2002
Watercolour 152 x 215 cm



William Hogarth (1697-1764)
The Graham Children, 1742
Oil on canvas 160.5 x 181 cm
The National Gallery, London

The first gallery of the exhibition is dominated by **Interior Negative after Hogarth**, his imposing watercolour

interpretation of William Hogarth's *The Graham Children* of 1742 (in the National Gallery, London, a museum which holds a particular attraction for Wittwer) in which the offspring of Daniel Graham, Apothecary to the King, are shown in negative, their leering faces and half-dissolving forms floating in the near-foreground. Hogarth's original is not just a jovial depiction of innocence within a safe, bourgeois interior, but is, in fact, suffused with a sombre atmosphere: the hourglass and figure with scythe on the clock



Landscape after Constable, 2007
Watercolour 180 x 153 cm

in the background and the predatory cat are reminders of mortality, while, most devastatingly of all, the baby bottom left had already died by the time Hogarth's picture was painted. In Wittwer's version some details are jettisoned, but the caged bird in the original remains and the near-monochrome watercolour is tainted with a sense of death.

His **Landscape after Constable** uses as his model *The Cornfield* of 1826 (also the National Gallery, London), one of Britain's best-loved, and most ubiquitous, paintings (in 1995, the National Gallery staged an exhibition comprising solely of chocolate boxes, jigsaws, table mats, mugs etc. emblazoned

with the image). In Wittwer's version the boy, the sheep and any other signs of this bucolic idyll are eliminated to leave a lone dog stranded under an ominous, glowing red orb that is most decidedly not present in the original.



Four Siblings after Gainsborough, 2012
Watercolour 130 x 114 cm

Children play a prominent role, again, in **Four Siblings after Gainsborough** which depicts the offspring of Charles Marsham, 1st Earl of Romney, although this time the setting is outside rather than the suffocating interior of the Hogarth-inspired work. There is something uncanny and otherworldly about the bleached-out figures, as if they have already departed the picture frame for another realm, while the third-eldest child in the original, Harriet, has been obliterated completely by a brilliant flash of light near the centre of the composition.

These intense bursts of luminosity are a regular feature of Wittwer's recent work, and a similar symbol occurs in his **Sea Piece Negative after Van de Velde**, a seascape based on a painting by the Dutch marine painter, Willem van de Velde (1633-1707), who spent his later years in England. The

calmness of the original, depicting various ships in anchor in an inland sea, has been replaced by a dark, brooding sky, with a highly ambiguous flash of light which, if the colour register of the picture reverted to a non-negative state, would resemble a giant, menacing black sun.

The same is true of the enormous burst of incandescence at the centre of **Wall Piece**, one of a number of similarly-titled works that deploy a repeated motif so as to resemble wallpaper; it is the type of pattern that might adorn a child's bedroom wall, but there is something mildly sinister about the use of a battleship in such a design. Any sense of innocence is further corrupted if we view the boats in the frame not as part of a flat, two-dimensional design but as a multitudinous fleet in an infinite sea, silently primed and ready for invasion.



Sea Piece Negative after Van de Velde, 2012
Watercolour 65 x 80 cm

Gallery 2

Lady Anne Clifford (1590-1676), known locally as the Queen of Westmorland and Craven, finally inherited her estates in 1646 after a 40-year battle to obtain what she believed to be rightfully hers. Abbot Hall's enormous *The Great Picture* was commissioned by Lady Anne to celebrate this event. At 494 cm wide (the exact same width as *The Great Picture*) **Doppelgänger after van Belcamp** is Uwe Wittwer's largest painting to date, a monumental piece of deconstruction that takes the pantomime portrayed on the smooth, flat surface of the original and tears it away to reveal the inner workings of the Clifford bloodline. There is a strange, mystical element to Wittwer's interpretation, with the mysterious floating spheres like orbiting planets suggesting a cosmic dimension to the proceedings. Figures are effaced and doubled (Lady Anne herself has been erased altogether), faces are deathly white or shown in negative, while the red paint that stains the canvas is a reminder that the family saga depicted took place against the bloody background of the English Civil War. Despite the allusions to death and violence, however, Wittwer has deployed and arranged the elements within the work to create a strangely beautiful patterned surface, as seductive as a medieval tapestry.



Doppelgänger after Van Belcamp, 2012
Oil on canvas 254 x 494 cm total (3 parts)



Attributed to Jan van Belcamp (1610-53)
The Great Picture Triptych, 1646
Oil on canvas 254 x 494 cm total (3 parts)
Abbot Hall Art Gallery, The Lakeland Arts Trust, Kendal



Interior after De Hooch, 2011
Oil on canvas 220 x 150 cm



Pieter de Hooch (1629-84)
Council Chamber of the Amsterdam Town Hall, c. 1666-8
Oil on canvas 112.5 x 99 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Similarly opulent is the heavy blue curtain that is lifted to reveal the **Interior after De Hooch**, in which the studied and theatrically-arranged figures in de Hooch's original (*Council Chamber of the Amsterdam Town Hall*, c. 1666-8, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid) are transformed into ghostly marionettes, forced to enact what the artist has referred to as a 'dance of death' in the grand, echoing council chamber.

Wittwer is drawn to interior spaces, and, in particular, those of the Dutch artist, Pieter de Hooch (1629-84), whose paintings typically show everyday domestic scenes bathed in a brilliantly-rendered daylight glow. While Wittwer undoubtedly admires de Hooch's masterful technique, he is, at the same time, slightly



The Dance Negative after Watteau, 2010
Oil on canvas 110 x 130 cm



Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721)
The Dance, c. 1716-8
Oil on canvas 97 x 116 cm
Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

repulsed by the cosiness of these bourgeois interiors. Works such as this one urge us not to forget that the superficially egalitarian Dutch republic of the seventeenth century was, to a large extent built on the profits generated from trade wars, colonialism and slavery.



Luis Meléndez (1716-80)
Still Life with Lemons and Oranges, 1760s
Oil on canvas 48 x 35.5 cm
The National Gallery, London

It is not Wittwer's intention solely to condemn or dismiss these old master works, not even those of Rococo artist, Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), whose *fête galante* paintings feature aristocrats, musicians and Pierrots frolicking in dreamy, Arcadian pleasure gardens. Rather, it is as if Wittwer is suggesting that these grand frivolities are merely the decorative manifestations of a much darker impulse. In **The Dance Negative after Watteau**, he zooms in uncomfortably close on the group of cloyingly sweet children in Watteau's original (four of them, yet again, as in the Gainsborough and Hogarth), decapitating the standing girl with the edge of the canvas, and focusing on the blood-red blooms that play such a minor, decorative role in the source painting. The sickly-yellow background further squeezes any remaining sweetness from the scene.

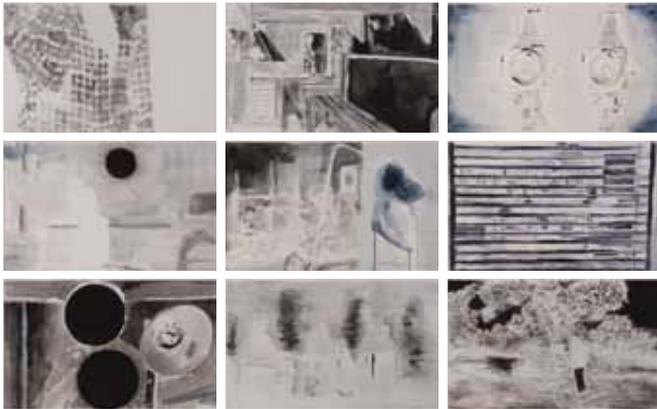
In **Still-life Negative after Meléndez**, Wittwer does the reverse, and extracts all colour from the succulent lemons and oranges that spill from the table in Luis Meléndez's significantly smaller original (1760s); these are not fruit you would want to eat.



Still-life Negative after Meléndez, 2011
Oil on canvas 130 x 110 cm

Gallery 3

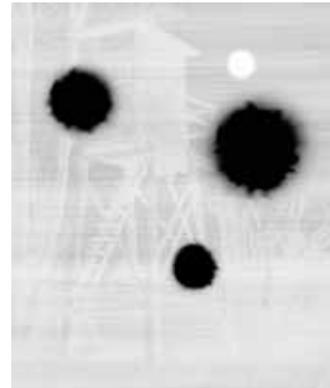
Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni's cult British film of 1966, *Blow-Up*, tells the story of an unnamed photographer, played by David Hemmings, who, on developing the pictures he has taken of a canoodling couple in a park, realises he has inadvertently witnessed a murder. Its central themes – the capacity of the image to mislead and deceive the viewer, the blurring of legibility and meaning through the distortion of scale, the way the most seemingly benign picture can carry intimations of terrible violence – all chime with those of Uwe Wittwer's art. His new work, **Black Sun after Antonioni**, is made up of 78



Black Sun after Antonioni (detail), 2012
Watercolour 78 parts: each 31 x 51cm

'stills' extracted randomly from the film. Some carry meaning, some depict insignificant details, some, when removed from their original context, are almost abstract in design. This work does not tell a story: it is the fragments of a narrative that is itself elusive and ambiguous.

The photographs in the film become increasingly unintelligible as they are blown up, with crucial pictorial information disintegrating into a field of patterns and shapes. The effect is not dissimilar to that achieved by Wittwer in his large-scale black-and-white inkjet prints, whose stark, high-contrast



Raised Hide, 2011
Inkjet on paper 180 x 150 cm

compositions emerge like ghostly apparitions from the tiny, multi-coloured dots that form the image.

Raised Hide continues the theme of observation and surveillance with its depiction of a hunter's hut raised on stilts that cannot help but bring to mind the watch towers at a prison camp. Are we observing it, or is someone, or something, observing us from within?

As with his oils and watercolours, Uwe Wittwer sources his images from the Internet. The original photographer, as well

as the people depicted, are unknown, providing a sense of distance that is important to the artist. He hunts for suitable material in a state of reverie, browsing the Internet until the right image presents itself, some crucial element resonating and suggesting possibilities. The process is far from being purely mechanical, however, with each image being extensively manipulated and reworked by Wittwer, who has commented that his inkjets (each one unique) can take as long as his watercolours or oils to produce.



Three Sisters, 2008
Inkjet on paper 150 x 227 cm

Three Sisters

possesses a feeling of melancholy and nostalgia, as if we are viewing a faded family photograph. We sense that there may be a deep personal engagement

between the artist and the subject but this assumption would, in fact, be entirely false; neither we, nor the artist, know who these people are, and it is all too easy to be lulled into fabricating a fictitious narrative around these three young women. These spectral figures are viewed face-on in the middle distance (a term used by writer Brian Dillon in relation to Wittwer's work), appearing flat and detached, observed from



Boat, 2008
Inkjet on paper 180 x 150 cm

the same low camera angle that is used elsewhere.

As with the three sisters, the figures in **Boat** seem to be dissolving into the pale sky, on the verge of vanishing altogether. Wittwer has talked of the influence of composer Franz Schubert's late song cycle, *Winterreise*, 1827, the all-pervasive melancholy

of which can be detected in a number of the artist's works. The libretto tells the story of a world-weary and lovelorn poet who takes to the road, with the harsh winter landscape acting as a metaphor for his despondency and fatalism. In the penultimate song, *Die Nebensonnen* (*The Phantom Suns*), the lover observes 'three suns' in the sky:

*'I looked long and fixedly at them.
And they, too, stood there as motionless
as if they would not leave me.'*

Wittwer has used the image of figures journeying by boat repeatedly and has identified *Isle of the Dead* by Swiss Symbolist painter, Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), as a source of visual inspiration. Böcklin's picture, with its overriding sense of stillness and (once again) melancholy, exists in a number of versions, painted between 1880 and 1886, and was an immensely popular image in Germany in the early twentieth century; Adolf Hitler acquired a version during his rise to power. Wittwer's variations on the boat theme take a number of different forms, both painted and printed, but all convey a feeling of quiet stillness and immobility.

If a significant proportion of the works in the exhibition carry a sense of imminent disaster, in **Escape Vehicle** we

see that anxiety realised. The crumpled wreckage blurs into a mass of twisted forms; like the protagonist in *Blow-Up*, we are left trying to decipher the chaotic shapes and jagged outlines that fill half of the frame. The bucolic landscape and feeling of rural isolation suggest we are the first at the scene, alone to disentangle a narrative from the distorted evidence before us.



Escape Vehicle, 2008
Inkjet on paper 180 x 150 cm

All of this takes place under the attentive eye of the family on the merry-go-round in the enormous **Riders negative**, whose gallant steeds are frozen in heroic poses, like the rearing horses in Paulo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano* (another old-master painting that has been given the large-scale inkjet treatment by Wittwer). Trapped on the giant contraption that spins them endlessly round and round, the children grip the reins of their mounts, riding under the illusion that it is they who are in control...that they have freedom.



Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901)
Isle of the Dead (third version), 1883
Oil on board 80 x 150 cm
Alte Nationalgalerie,
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin



Riders negative, 2008
Inkjet on paper 2 parts: 215 x 150 cm each

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Adult admission £6.20

The Lakeland Arts Trust manages
Abbot Hall Art Gallery,
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Windermere Steamboat Museum
Registered charity no. 526980

Cover
Uwe Wittwer
Wall Piece, 2012
Watercolour 130 x 114 cm



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