

The Arts

An upside-downer

EXHIBITION

Rodney Graham

Whitechapel Gallery, E1

Nick Hackworth

RODNEY Graham is, at first glance, difficult to categorise. In his first major retrospective in the UK, the Canadian, in his early fifties, presents a bewildering array of photographs, architectural models, films, slide shows, music and installations that tackle a variety of seemingly disparate subjects. He is, however, the perfect example of an as-yet-unnamed type of artist that has come into prominence in the past few decades. They are recognisable more by their behavioural traits than the work they produce: like cultural flâneurs, they wander romantically through the well-lit streets of today's popular culture and through the darker alleys of the past, picking up whichever cultural tidbits take their fancy.

In work that oscillates wildly between being amusing and interesting, and pretentious and boring, Graham deals with the inventions of various scientific pioneers of the Enlightenment; the memory of Kurt Cobain; the camera obscura; the writings of Freud, Wagner, James Bond; and the legacy of Albert Hoffman, accidental discoverer of LSD.

In the first — and duller — of the exhibition's five sections, Graham shows work that indulges his interest in the mechanics of perception and specifically the workings of camera obscura. Clamber inside

the 19th century wooden US post wagon that has been converted into a camera obscura and you will see that the weak light, successfully, but to little effect, filters through the lens to project an upside-down image of the gallery outside.

Also upside-down are a number of large-format photos of solitary trees, an ongoing series for which Graham is well known. Even less exciting than all this upside-down-ness is a series of 75 Polaroids taken in a forest at night that provide a tedious meditation on the miracles of flash-induced retinal after-images and the photographic process.

Elsewhere, however, there is more joy. A number of short, amusing sketches, executed in period dress, form the content of a series of well-shot films.

Vexation Island is a visual shaggy-dog story featuring a pirate who hilariously brains himself with a coconut. In another, City Self/Country Self, a bumpkin is kicked up the backside by a 19th century urban dandy. Better still, though, is a slide show of images of Kurt Cobain's small home town, Aberdeen, in Washington State, shown to an accompanying soundtrack of Graham's own rock music, inspired by Nirvana, that succeeds in heightening the poignancy of the stark images of this barren town.

Though frustratingly random and often irritatingly focused on the obscure, Graham's wandering — and wondering — at least sometimes takes him down some interesting and unusual paths.

● Until 17 November. Information: 020 7522 7888.



Wrong way to go: Rodney Graham's Oak Tree, Banford, Oxfordshire, England, Fall (1990)

Bad break for Lucky's top-rankers

JAZZ

African Jazz Allstars

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Jack Massarik

BOB Crow and his merry militants cost jazz promoter Biyi Adepegba a bundle yesterday, since each thwarted ticket-holder to telephone this venue became entitled to a full refund. Stragglers continued to arrive up to the interval, but the concert was only half full.

That was unfair on a pan-African group who played with passion and greater ensemble precision than usual. Lucky Ranku, the South African guitarist who wrote most of the material, had clearly insisted on adequate rehearsal time. Ranku, a somewhat repetitive soloist whose township-based style contains touches of Wes Montgomery and Chet Atkins, gave himself a little too much solo space, although the front-liners all had chances to impress.

Tanzanian trombonist Fayyaz Virgi and Nigerian tenorist Bukky Leo produced original ideas, but the emotive alto sax of Ghana's Tony Kofi created the most excitement. Someone should tell Tony, though, that those Parkerian licks of his are more than 50 years old and not getting any fresher.

Most valuable was South African trumpeter Claude Deppa, who took exciting, high-ranging solos and led the delectable arrangements with bravado. His hand-signals brought each number safely home.

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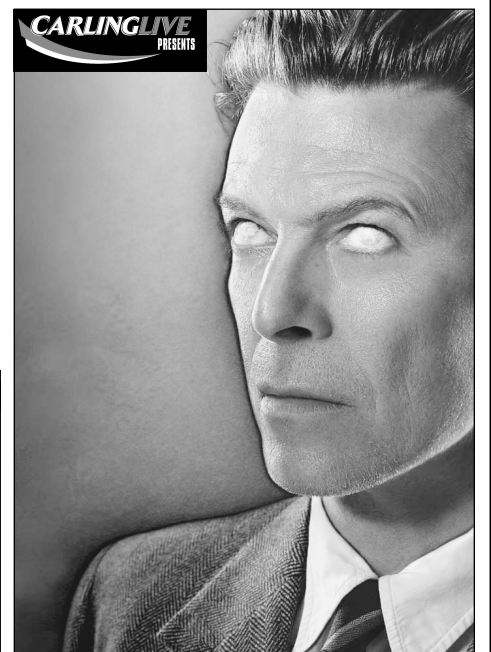
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