

Art Review
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KIND OF BLUE

The technical challenge of depicting the swimming pool, coupled with the ambiguous behaviour and relationships of the people it attracts, have been a productive source of material in the 40 years since it entered the art vocabulary, observes **Daniel Kunitz**

Dive with me for a moment into the aqua depths of a single image: a swimming pool. Crisp and blue like a shining sapphire, it stands there clean, defined by a sinuous edge, waiting to buoy you in the sun; it is a flat amnion for all of us who yearn for the carefree life of an embryo; it is a wheel we work in laps; it is leisure on a primal level. Who wouldn't love a picture of a swimming pool? Pools themselves have been with us at least since Roman times, of course; although it was only in the first half of the 19th century – in England, by the way – that they began to gain popularity with the middle classes, and it would take far longer, more than a century, for the image of the swimming pool to start tickling our optical fancy. Although its image in contemporary art is now ubiquitous, swimming pools were first embraced by artists in the Pop era, at about the same time that suburbia came to dominate the American landscape.

Which is why, I suspect, the swimming pool appeared to, and appealed to, an Englishman, one who had landed in suburban Southern California, just in time to become entranced with this symbol of middle-class luxury. As far as I can tell, no significant images of swimming pools occur in Western modern art before 1964, when David Hockney painted his first – a detail really, out back behind the house in *California Collector*. It didn't become the central image of a painting until later that year, with his *Picture of a Hollywood Swimming Pool*. Naturally, the canvas that sparked my interest in images of pools was *A Bigger Splash* (1967), seen at the Tate when I was a child. At the time Hockney painted it, it must have seemed the height of California

insouciance. Today it's hard not to regard that little spout of white water in the painting as the tinier splash: its abstract expressionist squiggles and gestures are like a passing emotional squall about to be absorbed into the flat, sky-blue plane of the pool and, more generally, into the hard lines and cooler aims of Pop art. Earlier artists grappled with oceanic feelings, it seems to say; the emblem of the new art will be the happy swimming pool, an ocean contained. To Hockney, who I believe still holds the record for swimming-pool images, painting them began, he has said, mainly as a formal problem – how to paint water, 'because it can be anything... It has no set visual description.'

That explains the water but not the pool. My point is that, like an empty canvas, a swimming pool is something of a tabula rasa, a blank screen on which any number of notions or emotions might be projected. Yet a swimming pool is a canvas that tends to reflect back only a narrow – though intense – range of colours.

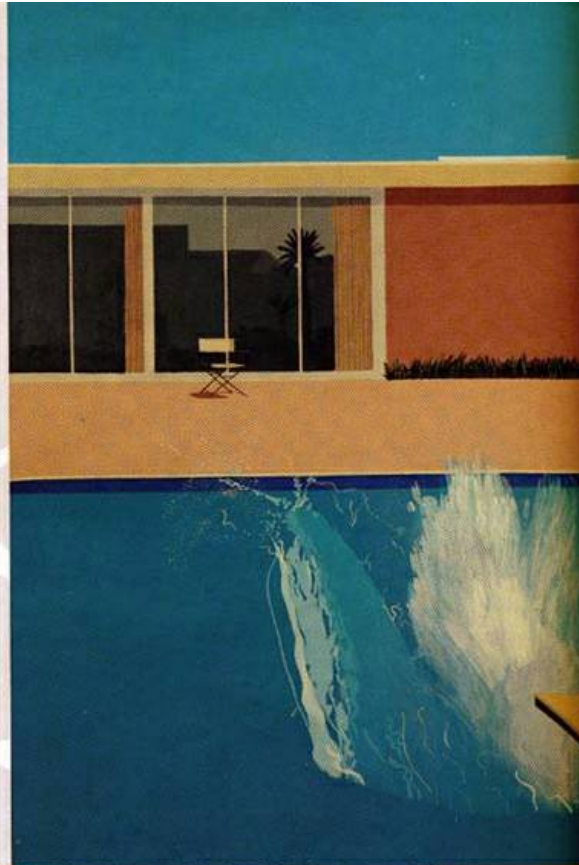
It is not surprising that the other inaugurator of swimming-pool imagery, Ed Ruscha, was also a denizen of Los Angeles. Taking a serial and bluntly documentary approach, he produced 'Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass', a set of photographs, in 1968. That same year he made *Pool*, a gunpowder drawing of the word. As a conceptual refraction of the image, it remains, in my mind, unsurpassed. Martin Kippenberger had a photo taken of him in 1988, standing in a pool in Seville, while holding one of his *Street Lamp for Drunks* sculptures. There the bent lamp was further bent by the refracting water; but the photograph wasn't part of the work, it was just commentary. In that sense, it is similar to Helmut Newton's *David Hockney, Piscine Royale*. ▶

A pool is a visual metaphor for a painting, a background of colour against which the image floats

▲ *Paris*, a 1975 image in which a shirtless Hockney stands next to a pool. Newton has another iconic image of a pool, *Saint Tropez, June 1975*. It depicts a woman in goggles and cap floating on her back in a pool, ignoring the woman sitting on a zebra-print couch, in a striped dress, before a zebra skin: a wonderful study of contrast and affinity between the reflected blue-and-white lines in the pool and the black-and-white lines on land. Very glamorous.

That sense of sport-as-luxury, sport-as-leisure has been continually updated. There is Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #6*, from 1979, where only the lovely, sun-striated water (in black and white) counterbalances the eeriness of the swimmer's eyes looking out from her absurd and giggle-inducing dive mask. More recently, the photographer Ryan McGinley put together, in 2004, his 'Olympic Portfolio', capturing the allure of Olympic swimmers' perfect bodies as well as the surreal silliness of gravity-defying underwater views, goggles and bathing caps. This month, Oliver Wilson also explores the underwater world of pools, and people ottering through them, in a comedy show at the Mark Jason Gallery in London.

More intriguing than the obvious glamour of the swimmer is the empty glamour Ruscha found in 'Nine Swimming Pools'. Nothing distracts us from their ordinariness, they are unused pools: fancy or plain, commercial or private. Even the quietest



Above: David Hockney, *A Bigger Splash*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 240 x 240cm Left: Julian Opie, *We played in the hotel pool, 1*, 2002 Right: Ryan McGinley, *Michael Phelps*, 2004, C-type print, 50.8 x 61cm

among them can't help standing for our common yearning for free time and sun and a good body – they're objective correlatives for *Vogue*. As though in homage to Ruscha, a newbie photographer, J Bennett Fitts, this winter exhibited a series of documentary-style images of motel pools, called 'No Lifeguard on Duty', at the Los Angeles gallery Paul Kopeikin.

Clearly there is no lifeguard policing the activity in Dash Snow's untitled Polaroid of a girl poolside holding two cherries to her nipples. And there isn't much help for the dead, naked women floating just at the surface of *Senioritas Suicidio*, a magnificent 2005 C-print by Luis Gispert and Jeffrey Reed. Both partake of what one might call dirty glamour, which isn't something we normally associate with those heliotropic folks one usually finds poolside. Then again, if one ignores the louche aspect of pools, one necessarily ignores their dark psychological implications: fear of death by drowning; the womb; sex. For me, both Snow's Polaroid and the *Senioritas* are close in spirit to Eric Fischl's murky pool scenes, such as the painting *Sleepwalker* (1978-9), in which an adolescent boy wanders in a backyard wading pool. And he has others: *Barbeque* (1982), *Far Rockaway* (1986). Each reflects the seamier aspects of the blue suburban jewel. Equally lurid is painter Helen Verhoeven's canvas *Near Death Material* (2003), a night scene in which one bikini-clad woman waste-high in water watches another doing the dead man's float. Under artificial light illuminating the scene, the deck glows red.

So a pool is a scrim for our fantasies, be they gloomy or cheerful. Or, as in the case of the Turkish-born painter Elif Uras, cheerfully parodic and thus tinged with menace. Her painting *Sung* (2004) puts a swimming pool at the centre of a kind of

Eden, the kind one encounters in the better Miami hotels, and above the pool swings a nude Venus, or Eve – it depends on how one feels about the surrounding foliage. Unlike Uras, for whom the hotel is the setting for her story, Julian Opie, in his series of paintings called 'We played in the hotel pool' (2002), brackets out everything but the water. These are formal studies in which colour sets the tone – the royal blue wavelets of morning, the grey blues of a cloudy day – and everything is reduced almost to the point of abstraction. Entirely abstract are Sarah Morris's *Pools – Century (Miami)* and *Pools – Cocoualk (Miami)* (both 2003), vertiginous grids of syncopated colours, patchwork quilts of pools as seen from the air.

What the abstractions chiefly suggest is that a swimming pool is a visual metaphor for a painting: a background of colour against which images float. Make the image literal, as in the sculpture *Vectras* by Los Carpinteros, and you have a sort of painting contraption: two squat structures float in a fibreglass pool the size of a small table or medium-format canvas – as they move about, the picture changes. Even more literal was Leandro Erlich's contribution to the 49th Venice Biennale, *The Swimming Pool* (1998-9), a 540cm high shallow-bottomed pool that one could actually walk into, get behind and beneath the picture plane, as it were. Inside one could stay submerged as long as one wanted, considering the pool from its least common vantage.

We could remain submerged in the image – there are myriad other pools in which to dip a toe – but it's time to come up for air.

Oliver Wilson: *Refracted Realism*, 2-24 Feb, Mark Jason Gallery, London (+44 (0)20 7258 5800, markjasongallery.com)

