



Graham Chorlton
Hotel Minerva



4 SEPTEMBER —
3 OCTOBER 2009



Curated By Matt Price



MASTER PIPER

Graham Chorlton
Hotel Minerva / 2009
Photos: © 2009 Alex Minchin, Stuart Whipps
Courtesy the artist and Master Piper, London
www.masterpiper.com

Curated by Matt Price
Published by Master Piper, London
For the exhibition *Hotel Minerva* by Graham Chorlton

Designed & printed by modernactivity / 2009

Supported by 
Coventry
University



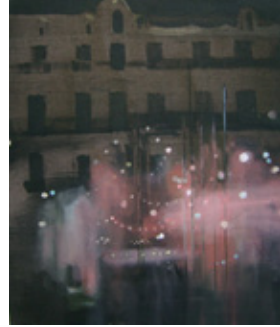
HOTEL MINERVA / 2007



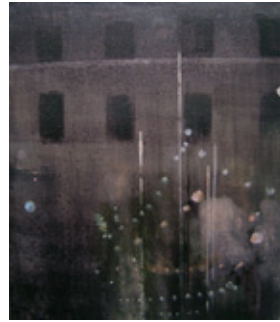
It's a strangely melancholy place, HOTEL MINERVA. Today it is overcast, perhaps even stormy, with that peculiar bright light that only seems to come with the darkest clouds. On a summer's day it must look quite resplendent, showing off its high modernist curves and balconies in the sunshine like a cruise liner on the Adriatic. At the time it was built it must have been the grandest building on the block, a monument to concrete elegance and international tourism.

Of course, those were the days before budget airlines and package holidays, when most people in Britain could only dream of continental holidays and European style. It was a place of haute couture, of unknown royal dynasties, of jigsaw puzzle castles and yachts, of chocolate box lakes and mountain ranges, grand historic buildings, expensive jewellery, the best restaurants, fine wine, racetracks, sports cars and casinos. This romanticised vision of the continent is reflected in Chorlton's paintings CASINO I and II—an evening in Monte Carlo with the fairy lights and fountains shimmering beneath the shadowy façade of an imposing casino. The excitement, the glamour, the romance of a holiday in the French Riviera!

Graham Chorlton has never been to a casino in Monte Carlo nor stayed at *Hotel Minerva*—indeed, his only encounter with the hotel is through an old postcard he once found. The painting is not a document of one of his own memories or experiences, just an imagined destination filtered through a reproduction, a record of someone else's souvenir. As a result of this step remove and by means of his bleak yet endearing rendering of the building, Chorlton's painting somehow manages to capture the British imagination of continental Europe of yesteryear and a sense of longing for places we may never know.



CASINO I / 2009

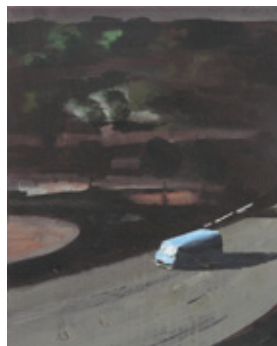


CASINO II / 2009

The postcard reveals little about the hotel. All we know is that it is somewhere in Lugano in Switzerland, or once was. The petrol sign outside the front entrance suggests *Hotel Minerva* is on one of those mainland European roads that seem like a motorway but are by the side of a lake, or on the seafront, or a vertiginous cliff face. Such roads somehow seem too wide and the traffic too fast for their setting, and are far from accommodating to foreigners on foot. The hotel and its position on the road evoke a sense of this being an in-between location, of being *en route* somewhere else. It's a recurrent theme in Chorlton's oeuvre — we are only ever on the way.

This is perhaps articulated most literally in ROAD in which the viewer looks down at a blue van making its way along a country road. Here we are watching the process of travelling, of being in transit from somewhere to elsewhere. It's unclear whether the scene is depicted by day or by night — whether the acute shadows cast are from sunshine, streetlights or moonlight. The van drives on the right hand side of the road, so it's clear the scene is not in the UK. The landscape, rendered darkly and with an economy of painterly means, gives few clues, though has something more of the American landscape than that we might associate with Europe.

As with both HOTEL MINERVA and ROAD, in GARAGE the artist and viewer are similarly located on one side of a road, looking across. Like a hotel, a garage is a building that is visited only for a short period of time — simply a means to another end. The architecture of the garage is more utilitarian than that of *Hotel Minerva*, a design that is probably repeated in its hundreds, if not thousands, across Britain and Europe. It's generic — we could be almost anywhere. Chorlton depicts the garage at night, the lights of the forecourt glowing blue and reflected in the road in front, as if in a river or stream.



ROAD / 2007



GARAGE / 2008

Small spots of bright blue-white light punctuate the picture plane, somewhere between stars, lights and reflections on a camera lens, serving to bring a luminescent haze to the scene, capturing the glare of the garage's bright lights against the night sky. While the painting speaks of solitude, of being a late-night passer-by looking on from the shadows on the other side of the road, the lights tell of the comfort afforded by the 24-hour garage, a place where you can find someone to help, should you ever need it.

Unlike *Hotel Minerva*, the *garage* is located in a place that Chorlton knows well. It's a garage he passed almost every day for many years on his way to work on the Bristol Road in Birmingham. One of a series of works of the Bristol Road produced in 2008, several of which are included in the exhibition, it opens up a dichotomy between known and unknown buildings and locations in Chorlton's work. The fact that Chorlton is familiar with the garage scene and yet it could be almost anywhere is significant for penetrating Chorlton's paintings and his approaches to the built environment. In part it is about architectural types that reflect different periods of the modern era — *Hotel Minerva* looks like it is from the early 1960s while the *garage* looks as though it might have been built in the 1970s or 80s. They both encapsulate their time of construction rather than their place, their geographical location. It almost doesn't matter where they are. They are simply buildings that function somewhere for a while, some outlasting others and leaving their imprint from a past time on the present.

At the same time, Chorlton's practice is a conversation between different levels of observation and experience of buildings and structures, a dialogue between familiarity and detachment, engagement and estrangement. We may pass a building every day and yet observe little about it, while on the other hand, we may visit a far away building just once and be left with a vivid impression of its form and details. We have many kinds of psychological and emotional relationships with buildings and architecture, and Chorlton's paintings offer an understated yet sophisticated insight into such dynamics. It's a curious combination in which concrete mixes with perception, aesthetics interact with memories and paint becomes intertwined with the self.

BRIDGE continues the theme of travel or of being on a journey. Another nocturnal scene of the Bristol Road, and again depicted from what seems to be one side of a road (the darkness yields little information) the subject of the painter's focus here is what looks to be a railway bridge stretching over the road. The muted browns, beiges and greys suggest a slightly run-down area. As with *Garage*, there is a mildly menacing undercurrent to the painting—it could be dangerous round here, but as before, the glow of light hitting the bridge is somehow reassuring. A second image, BRIDGE II has a similar atmosphere, but this time with what looks like a footbridge spanning the road below. In this work, Chorlton treats acrylics almost as watercolours, using only a very limited amount of pigment to convey a complicated pictorial space—just a little colour and very few brush marks communicate both the physical environment and the ambience of the scene.

The two bridge paintings are un-peopled. There's nobody around. Perhaps it's really late at night. Perhaps it was just a moment when no one was passing. But then it dawns that none of the paintings in the exhibition feature people. In fact, they are notable by their absence. Even the two interiors—BAR and PUB—have no signs of life. It's as if we are there after hours, whether with or without permission. The absence of figures makes the bar and pub seem like theatre stages, spaces in which action has taken or may yet take place.

Indeed, a strong sense of narrative is implied in Chorlton's paintings—narratives that are more often cinematic than theatrical. The bar looks like it could be the location for a scene in a 1960s or 70s film—a stylish, modernist, futuristic bar waiting for characters to enter and the plot to evolve. While the bar has something quite European about it (as it happens it's the bar inside *Hotel Minerva*), the pub looks more specifically British—a type of



BRIDGE / 2008



BRIDGE II / 2008



BAR / 2007



PUB / 2008

drinking house that is fading away as contemporary refurbishes and cosmopolitan bars gradually replace them. While the bar is an imagined place interpreted from a postcard, the pub is one Chorlton has sat in many times, and watched its décor change over the years. It is the kind of pub that could be a setting in any number of films or television programmes at any point in the last half a century. It's strange what dates and what doesn't, what can evolve and what has to be replaced. Rather than being a protagonist in these scenes, Chorlton assumes the role of narrator, cinematographer, scenographer or director, and places us in the same position.

Even more than cinema and TV, though, Chorlton's works exude a sense of literary narrative, like images created in the mind in response to reading fiction. The darkness, sadness and vaguely threatening locations are evocative of detective novels, thrillers and murder mysteries. One could easily imagine Philip Marlowe — Raymond Chandler's regular lead character — featuring in Chorlton's paintings, or seeing the locations depicted through the enigmatic American private detective's eyes. Chorlton is a great admirer of Chandler's writing along with other detective authors such as Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, and their influence might be sensed in his paintings. It's a combination of suspense and intrigue, mixed with something poetic and emotionally charged that lends the paintings their fiction-like qualities, and this goes some way towards explaining how it is possible for the locations to be both anonymous and meaningful simultaneously. Places we don't know can suddenly become charged through a piece of information about them, or by being exposed to something that takes place within them.

And this comes back to the idea of our psychological relationships with buildings.



RIVERSIDE / 2004



FACTORY / 2008

What might be just any old building that we pass on a daily basis, such as RIVERSIDE or FACTORY can take on a whole new significance through connections we make to the building, whether this is by means of the building becoming a site for something out of the ordinary such as through an episode in a novel, or by having cause to engage with the building on a personal level in real life.

The workers of the factory will inevitably have a complex array of emotions and feelings about the place in which they work, and even more so if the factory has closed down, as this former motorcycle factory on the Bristol Road has. Buildings become injected with meaning through use and through human activity, and locations become loaded with significance if we have reason to engage with them. What Chorlton presents us with are scenes that open up our liminal space, our focused consciousness and contemplation, to buildings and our constructed environment — contexts that set us up to consider our formal responses to places we might not know and that compel us to speculate about the infinite possible events, conversations, interactions and activities for which they are sites.

What unites the places and buildings that Chorlton knows and those he does not is the notion of the imagined — the process of projecting thoughts and ideas onto and into architecture and its surroundings. The imaginary is often inspired by the aesthetics of the architecture itself, such as in SWEDEN BUILDS I and II, whereby two sizeable concrete structures are rendered in subtle glazes of paint, almost like watercolour washes. The technique softens the hard edges of the buildings, and allied with the bleached, slightly washed out colours, brings a sense of nostalgia and of fading memories to the images. As with *Hotel Minerva*, these are buildings Chorlton has never been to, but only seen through reproductions in an ageing book on



SWEDEN BUILDS I / 2007



SWEDEN BUILDS II / 2007

Swedish modernist architecture. They could be almost any kind of building—museums or bus stations, law courts or telephone exchanges. When pressed, Chorlton reveals that they are a civic building and a shopping centre, but this information is almost surplus to requirements in Chorlton's mind. The interest is in imagining their purpose, in not quite knowing, or in not having to know.

The sense of time having passed invites the viewer to wonder what the world was like when they were built, and, indeed whether they still exist. Chorlton's paintings ask two sides of the same question about buildings, locations and people: how do buildings and places change through time in response to society's use for them, and how do people's uses of buildings and places change over time? What Chorlton's paintings present to the viewer is only ever a transitory moment—an image of the present at the crossroads of the past and the future, a temporal intersection in a physical space. As with BORDER it's not surprising that so many of the actual places Chorlton depicts are in-between places, junctions, bridges, roads, railways, No Man's Lands. It's about us moving through the world and time passing, a study of us going about the daily things we do while fashions, styles, generations and eras come and go around us. It's a question of progress and memory, the past and imagination, what changes and what remains. All of these things are reflected in the built environment and captured, for those who take the time to see, in Chorlton's work.

So come make a reservation at *Hotel Minerva*, book yourself a room with a balcony and ensuite—even without staying you'll remember it forever...

Matt Price



BORDER / 2009

Hotel Minerva

List of works

HOTEL MINERVA / 2007

Oil and acrylic on canvas
63,5 × 76.2 cm

CASINO I / 2009

Acrylic and oil on canvas
61 × 50.8 cm

CASINO II / 2009

Acrylic on canvas
35,6 × 30,5 cm

ROAD / 2007

Oil and acrylic on canvas
50.8 × 40.6 cm

GARAGE / 2008

Oil and acrylic on canvas
122 × 152.4 cm

BRIDGE / 2008

Acrylic on canvas
50.8 × 61 cm

BRIDGE II / 2008

Acrylic on canvas
50.8 × 61 cm

BAR / 2007

Acrylic on canvas
55.9 × 55.9 cm

PUB / 2008

Acrylic on canvas
50.8 × 40.6 cm

RIVERSIDE / 2004

Acrylic on canvas
40.6 × 50.8 cm

FACTORY / 2008

Oil on canvas
40.6 × 50.8 cm

SWEDEN BUILDS I / 2007

Acrylic on canvas
25.4 × 33 cm

SWEDEN BUILDS II / 2007

Acrylic on canvas
25.4 × 33 cm

BORDER / 2009

Acrylic on canvas
61 × 76.2 cm