

## Richard Powell

### *Moth*

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*Moth* appears to be an exhibition of two halves: On the ground level of Turner House, a strip of about two hundred and fifty post-card sized prints stretches around the gallery, and upstairs, there is a video installation, and works in other media. Despite this apparent dichotomy (upstairs and downstairs: one media and another) artist Richard Powell - for whom installation and performance is a vital part of his practice - presents an unusually varied yet coherent body of work.

The project is the result of a residency at Cardiff International Airport, and Powell's photographs are testimony of his detailed survey of and access to all parts of the airport. As well as close-ups of typical motifs (duty-free shops, luggage trolleys), Powell documents the fire engine depots and air-traffic control rooms, the areas behind locked doors and off the edge of the travelator that channels the passengers through the airport's various systems. The opening image is of a sign which says "hazardous zone: please move with caution". Other warning and dictatorial signs crop up along the series, which makes the airport look almost contaminated; a place where one wrong step could prove fatal. In the final images Powell focuses on the sky, clouds and aeroplanes, dwelling upon their vapour trails.

Despite the huge volumes of people airports function to disseminate, Powell's images are completely devoid of people, or even signs of life. The photographs are far from spectacular, but in any case their installation is as important as their content: The size of the prints, and their concertina arrangement demands that the viewer steadily shuffles along the series at a very intimate distance to the prints. This layout leads to a reenactment by the viewer of the movement of people through the airport, and thus this physical engagement almost becomes a substitute for the people absent from the images. This is a very

cunning and ingenious method to draw out a performance from the audience.

At the top of the stairs is Powell's own performance; a video piece consisting of a static shot of a corridor, on top of which a spinning figure fades in and out. It is set to a soundtrack of bird song and a typical airport security announcement. Then as the viewer turns the corner the mysterious figure from the video is presented in a purpose-built cabinet, much like the costumes on display at the V&A museum. It is a hand-made copper suit, on which hang badges, buckles, padlocks and all sorts of things eaten by luggage carousels. The presentation of it in a cabinet, rather than suspended or standing on a plinth like a sculpture, makes it more like a relic or trophy (something real); a symbol of some mythological beast that has been captured and destroyed. It is extremely impressive, and in contrast to the murky figure in the video, it is quite unexpected. There is also a parallel between the lack of people in Powell's images downstairs and the empty suit upstairs. The suit was inspired by the tale of Icarus who (*like a moth to a flame*) was fatally attracted to the Sun, and has come to represent Man's obsession with flight.

The remainder of the works upstairs repeat the vapour trails introduced in the photographs. Some are abstract works on paper, but on the far wall is a huge bank of square metallic panels that are punctuated with yet more vapour trails. The scale of the metal panels does feel a little like looking up at the sky, although the reason for the use of copper as a material for this, and indeed for the suit, is unclear. It is difficult to fully connect these works with the video piece, the suit and the photographs.

It is unusual to visit an exhibition by one artist presenting a variety of pieces in different media under the same title. It is not clear what Powell's conclusions are about Man's obsession with flight. Given that the airport is now synonymous with security checks and machine-guns, and planes are more a source of irreversible climate change than an icon of progress and excitement, the copper suite – Powell's own figment of mythology – is perhaps a mute premonition.