

John Gerrard

SIMON PRESTON GALLERY

John Gerrard's *Cuban School (Community 5th of October) 2010* is a projection of a slow pan around a very large building that is whitish, filthy, and decaying, with two long parallel rectangular structures and a shorter one in between, all joined by a breezeway. The view of the building along one side is close enough to allow audiences to see the patterns in the window screens and the busted-out shutters; at the short side of the building and then all the rest of the way around, the view becomes more expansive, with yards and yards of lush grass, a rickety fence punctuated with skimpy trees, and wires leading away from the building toward—well, toward nowhere, it seems. The whole thing has a slight air of the unreal.



John Gerrard, *Cuban School (Community 5th of October) 2010*, still from real-time computer simulation.

The projection is not a video; it is a digitally generated simulation that exists in real time, continually recalculated so that the qualities of light, shadow, and landscape are based on the time of day and prevailing weather patterns. The building depicted is a school outside Havana, built in the 1960s in the Brutalist Soviet style. Although in terrible disrepair, the real school is still attended by children, who in fact live there. In Gerrard's work, the decay of the bunkerlike architecture is evident, suggesting (perhaps) that the ideology it represents is mismatched to this environment; at other times the structure achieves a kind of grandness, as though it were a large ship plowing through an empty ocean. In the evening, as the sky grows dark, the building's fluorescent lights flicker on, and in the morning they go off, both events effected by a caretaker who makes otherwise very infrequent appearances. (You may well never see her.) It is easy to be too impressed by the technology, by the fact of the building's ongoing existence in the projection and the constant changes it undergoes as day turns to night and clouds gather on the horizon, as well as by the work's reduction, conversely, of an actual structure to a series of complex algorithms. But to some extent, the metaphoric qualities bestowed by the technology help to clarify the point of the piece.

Other of Gerrard's works are digital simulations of similarly isolated structures—pig sheds and corn silos in Kansas, and, in *Universal (near Iron Spring, Alberta) 2010*, on view here in the gallery's office, an oil field in Canada. His fine balance of concept, content, and material suggest a theme and variations on the idea of the virtual. The computer-generated landscapes bring to mind, of course, virtual worlds, video games, special effects—that is, ways of producing unrealities. Here the format manifests something quite real, albeit at the periphery of most of our worlds—the discomfort of this admission is part of the work's impact—since for many of us, the arrival of food in our markets and the availability of oil are things we take on faith, if we think about them at all. Their existence remains provisional—more or less virtual—whether in life, on a gallery wall, or on a computer chip. (The artist Jon Haddock has done something similar for cultural history with his series of drawings from 2000 that render iconic historical and cinematic moments as computer games.)

Technology is the vehicle for the work, but it is not only the vehicle. Through it Gerrard manages to invoke the history of landscape painting, photography, and Earth art, and situates his work somewhere between documentary and fiction—between images that bring us news of places and situations that are foreign to us, and the kinds of invention (ideological, narrative, moral) that we undertake in order to comprehend them.

—Emily Hall