

# Holography and the play of light

## Volumes

An exhibition of holography by Michael Wenyon and Susan Gamble, Photographers' Gallery, London

## Marina Benjamin

IN contemporary Western art and literature, there seems to be a longing to embrace science, almost lovingly; to make it speak to us in dulcet tones rather than dictatorial fiat; to appreciate its aesthetic and metaphoric content over its explanatory power; and to celebrate its subjectivity. Michael Wenyon and Susan Gamble are two artists committed to such a reading of science, and Volumes—a major exhibition of their holographic work—can be seen

at the Photographers' Gallery, London.

Using glass plates, projections, easels and stage lighting, Wenyon and Gamble have produced complex installations that explore not merely light and optical phenomena, but the ways in which science has shaped our understanding of them. A pair of installations inspired by Isaac Newton's *Opticks* are the most straightforward. In *Newton's Rings*, a spectacular hologram of fiery ripples of light is mounted on an easel in front of a photographic projection of library shelves crammed with books. In *The Fringes of the Shadows of the Knives* an easel-mounted hologram depicts the vertical bands of the spectrum seen through a spectroscope. Wenyon and Gamble are deaf to John Keats's accusation that Newton destroyed

the rainbow; they applaud the artistic merit of theory, the authored character of science, and the beauty of artifice.

Viewing *Radix*, in which large Airy's discs appear through tubes like stars sighted through telescopes, one experiences a sense of discovery, relishing the feeling of existing at the frontiers or margins of culture—the very places where meanings are made. The sense that science boldly negotiates the unknown is confirmed by *Stella Maris*. Here the image consists of optical caustics—a phenomenon inherent in light that is made manifest when light passes through water. This hologram of chaotic luminous pathways leading to nebulous clusters conjures up notions of alien geographies, quasi-stellar and

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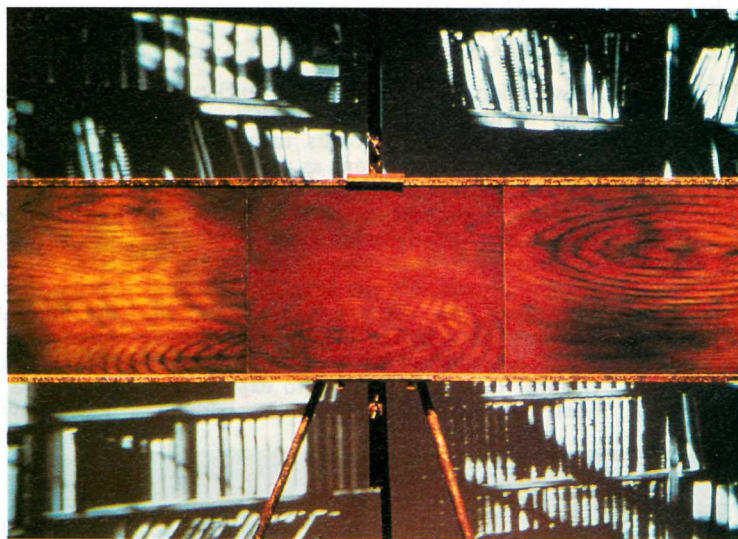
## REVIEW

NEW SCIENTIST

quasi-aquatic. Its warm orangey-yellow hues suggest glowing embers, lulling the viewer into a state of fireside reverie in which visual experience takes precedence over the mechanisms of comprehension.

In their most recent works Wenyon and Gamble have developed further the visual language that theorises vision and aestheticises knowledge. The key symbol of this new language is the book—but the book deprived of its textuality and rendered an optical artefact. *Bibliography* presents us with a library of holographic books, some Japanese, suspended intangibly in space. The books are icons and whether or not we understand them becomes immaterial. *Scroll* apes those displays of rare books found in the British Museum in which selected pages are laid open under glass. Using similar display cases, Wenyon and Gamble unfold scrolls in which patterns of computer gibberish pose as text.

*Scroll* and *Bibliography* hint at the redundancy of book-learning in the age of the computer where knowledge can be



On the easel: Wenyon and Gamble's hologram *Newton's Rings*

instantly and visually assimilated. But they also confirm the book as a worthy object of our veneration, because books are the repository of ideas and ideas are literally beautiful. Indeed, judging by *The Book by Its Cover*—a series of computer pictures of books that once again deal only with surfaces—the artists seem to suggest that books are virtually organic. The book-jackets in the pictures appear to have

lichen-like lifeforms clinging to them.

Wenyon and Gamble have so skilfully broached the complex nexus of ideas that deal with science, fission, knowledge and text, with light and enlightenment, that they have allowed themselves a joke at the expense of holography's tacky commercial image. *Zone One (From the Heavens)*—the title recalls 1960s SF B-movies—consists of a spattering of red globular forms seen through a black strip of glass reminiscent of wraparound glasses or X-ray specs. Aware that they have rescued the hologram from its association with cheap gimmickry and visual trickery, Wenyon and Gamble

poke gentle fun at the way popular culture has used holography to feed adolescent fantasies of alien life forms, strange intergalactic constellations and *Star Trek*-style exploration. Wenyon and Gamble are helping holography to grow up. □

Marina Benjamin is a writer and critic.

\*The Photographers' Gallery, 5+8 Great Newport Street, London WC2. Until 24 July, then on tour.