

Dimensional ability

A holographic celebration of astronomy

Michael Wenyon and Susan Gamble are a husband-and-wife team who began working together in the early '80s at the Goldsmiths' Holography Workshop, London. Wenyon has a background of physics and optics, and Gamble is a former student of the fine arts, so their complementary abilities suit the technically-sophisticated field of fine-art holography.

A hologram may be considered, in very crude terms, as the three-dimensional equivalent of a photograph, but in the hands of the best creative artists it can transcend representationalism, and the holograms of Wenyon and Gamble are a long way from the Ukrainian images of art treasures recently on show at The Nave, Uxbridge. This is their second show at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery, the previous one having been a group exhibition by Goldsmiths' Workshop alumni in 1982. In the meantime, Wenyon and Gamble have been Artists in Residence at the Royal Greenwich Observatory, until recently based at Hurstmonceaux Castle in Sussex.

Wenyon and Gamble's work has in the past frequently included the artistic exploitation of optical phenomena that more prosaic makers of optical imagery tend to regard as nuisances, such as laser speckle, multicolour effects produced by uneven processing, and 'black hole' images resulting from movement of part or all of the subject matter during exposure, but in the case of these artists always resulting in a new creative revelation. In this exhibition, consisting of six large setpieces, the inspiration is cleverly derived from their experiences at the Royal Observatory, exploiting some of the optical phenomena associated with the work of Sir Issac Newton and his successors.

Airy's Discs is a homage to the 19th century Astronomer Royal Sir George Airy, who first explained the circular pattern that is the image of a star seen in a telescope. Wenyon and Gamble have used Airy patterns to form a simple composition in brilliant spectral reds and blues, some in the space behind the plates and some suspended in front like ghostly fireballs, the backdrop being a projected

transparency of the Hurstmonceaux Observatory.

Newton's Rings is a similar treatment of this phenomenon, most familiar to ordinary people in the coloured patches of oily puddles in the road, and to holographers as a (usually undesired) wood-grain effect overlaying the image. In this case the wood-grain is greatly magnified, appearing in vivid golds and browns, in front of a projected view of a projected view of part of the Hurstmonceaux library. The third image in this group is *The Fringes of the Shadows of the Knives*, a less familiar effect seen when a knife-edge is placed in an expanded laser beam. Greatly enlarged, these patterns of lines appear as vertical stripes in dazzling primary hues in front of a backdrop of cumulus clouds. All these holograms are triptychs of 30x40cm glass plates mounted on artists' display easels in front of large screens bearing the background images in black-and-white.

The Heavens is one of the best-known of the recent work of Wenyon and Gamble. It is unlike any other hologram ever exhibited. More than 6m wide and only 42mm high, it is displayed against a background brilliantly lit by floodlights in a hue that is graduated from deep blue at the top through magenta to red at the bottom. The image, appearing far behind the narrow glass plates, is of myriad points of light — the stars themselves!

Stella Maris is an array of five 50x60cm plates mounted on a large white wall. The images are optical caustics, the snake-like focused lines of tracery often seen when light shines through a window of hammered glass onto a wall opposite. The final piece is entitled *Radii*, and is a whimsical impression of telescope tubes which protrude out of the image space and through which can be seen brilliantly-glowing Airy discs — a further celebration of astronomy, with a touch of humour ●

Graham Saxby

In the Optical Realm shows at [redacted] Wolverhampton Art Gallery until 20 November.

Michael Wenyon and Susan Gamble are currently Visiting Professors at Tsukuba University, near Tokyo, Japan.