

Brian O'Connell: Palomar

Laure Genillard London 27 February to 16 April

The eponymous hero of Italo Calvino's last novel, *Mr Palomar*, 1983, is a keen and fussy observer of the world around him for whom looking shades into philosophical thought. Whether he is examining waves breaking on a shore, a gecko waiting to catch a gnat or the moon in the afternoon sky, Palomar seeks out underlying structures that, for all his concentration, tend to elude him. Mirroring his protagonist's fastidiousness but playing it in a gently ironic key, Calvino offers the reader an 'Index' at the end in which he accords numerical values to Palomar's three central concerns – visual experience (1), anthropological inquiry (2) and speculation as to the nature of things (3) – and outlines their distribution across the chapters of the book.

Brian O'Connell's show is named after Palomar and reprises some of Calvino's themes. The works on display are titled after chapters in the book and demonstrate an obsessively quizzical attitude towards natural phenomena that recalls Palomar's painstaking curiosity. *The Loves of Tortoises*, 2011, for instance, is named after a chapter in which Palomar observes 'with a cold attention' the awkward motions of mating tortoises and speculates on the erotic satisfaction available to creatures with bony shells. It consists of a pair of ceramic objects modelled on gömböc, which are near-spherical forms that return naturally to a single point of equilibrium when tipped over. Gömböc were mathematically described in 2006 by two Hungarian scientists, Gábor Domokos and Péter Várkonyi, who studied tortoises at Budapest Zoo and postulated that some can right themselves when toppled on account of the gömböc-like proportions of their shells. *The Eye and the Planets*, 2016, named after a chapter



Brian O'Connell
Palomar 2015

in which Palomar gazes at Mars, Saturn and Jupiter through a telescope, is a series of prints made using a mid-19th-century process to render the positions of coloured steel balls in a hoop. Long predating the invention of colour photography, the process is a cumbersome one that exploits the properties of gum arabic and bichromate salts to fix colours in succession, each colour requiring a new exposure, in prints that resemble watercolours as much as photographs. In these pieces, O'Connell's eagerness to ground his work in Palomar's habits of observation is complemented by a taste for technological and scientific arcana and a view of technical difficulty as its own reward.

The show's central exhibit is a 12-minute 2015 film of a solar eclipse, shot on Mount Wilson, near the artist's Los Angeles home, and titled, simply, *Palomar*. Again, the making of the work is a technical feat, the artist attaching a box to a telescope and using a 16mm camera to record the veiling of the sun as projected onto the bottom of the box. Shooting on black-and-white reversal film, O'Connell then coloured passages with the help of one of the few analogue colour timers still active in Hollywood, using one colour at a time. The colours are keyed – so the press release informs us – to the three central concerns highlighted in Calvino's 'Index', with red for visual investigation, green for anthropological inquiry and blue for far-ranging speculation. Technically complex as it is, the film has a DIY look, with its shortish takes, shifting angles and scratchy celluloid, but it is also remarkable for the starkness and economy of its imagery and in this it seems to look back to the experiments of Bauhaus artists like László Moholy-Nagy and Walter Peterhans. But the crucial precedent remains *Mr Palomar*. O'Connell not only adapts the coding in Calvino's 'Index' and assimilates Palomar's interest in planetary motion, he also mimics Calvino in playing slyly on Palomar's name, which echoes that of the famous Californian observatory, as Calvino acknowledges at just one point in the book when he notes that Palomar 'can boast some friendships among astronomers', perhaps 'because he bears the same name as the famous observatory'. Just visible on a clear day from Mount Wilson, Palomar Observatory houses a telescope that was in Calvino's day the world's largest.

This is on the face of it a dispiritingly well-behaved exhibition, with its pastel-coloured prints, its small, near-spherical forms sitting tidily in a corner, its tinted crescent shapes shimmering on screen. Thankfully, this tasteful air is a red herring in a show that is lifted by the artist's obtuseness as he resurrects obsolete technologies and embraces unnecessary technical difficulties. He is like Palomar chiefly in the expansive, inexpedient character of his curiosity, that inexpediency giving the presentation something of the 'atmosphere of spacious and buoyant reverie' that Seamus Heaney admired in Calvino's book. ■

MARCUS VERHAGEN is an art historian.

Mark Wallinger: ID

Hauser & Wirth London 26 February to 7 May

Mark Wallinger's exhibition effects a discernible power shift, whether this is through the Vitruvian-dimensioned paintings in the North Gallery or the silently turning triangular sculpture *Superego*, 2016, in the South (which, although stripped of all text or meaningful signifiers, is instantly recognisable as the revolving