John Wood and Paul Harrison: Things That Happen, review by Henry Little

Carroll/Fletcher’s new gallery on Eastcastle Street is clean and crisp. Making a decisive entry into the market at the established end, Jonathon Carroll and Steve Fletcher have emphatically staked out their ambitions. And, with a stable of established and mid-career artists working largely in new media, the gallery has set itself a clear curatorial remit.

Any first show, especially one so long in preparation, is bound to be read as a statement of intent. John Wood and Paul Harrison: Things That Happen reads like a mid-career survey for these artists. Featuring works created over five years (2007 - 2012) the collection of moving image, photography, sketches and prints gives a rounded insight into their universe. Wood and Harrison combine a dedicated studio practice with key interests in seriality and repetition, conceptual proposition, outmoded movie effects and deadpan humour. Mainly asserting the repetitive futility of human activity, the conclusion seems to be that it’s fun all the same.

Bored Astronauts on the Moon (2011) is a key example. The artists, wearing homemade space suits and exploring the darkness of their own studio, suggest that for all of the hyperbole surrounding man’s greatest achievement, the moon is probably quite a boring place. There is a comparable anti-climax in Unrealistic Mountaineers (2012). Having reached the summit of their makeshift mountain, the mountaineers take a snap on their camera, look a bit bored and then descend. Again we are reminded of what may be a duller place than we had hoped.

In their makeshift sets, which do little to hide their nature, the scenes Wood and Harrison stage enjoy their own artificiality. English Disaster (2012), an HD video and a scale model, explores their interest in early special effects. In the video we witness a picture-perfect seaside pier consumed in a bite size inferno and are reminded that fire and water are the notorious enemies of realism when it comes to pre-CGI special effects. We are given little context or clues with which to construct a narrative and this adheres to a pattern in the artists’ work, where actions, processes and sequences are explored without recourse to any external cause or effect.

10 x 10 (2011) continues the exploration of scenography and outdated movie devices. A camera pans up and down an imaginary building. As the camera moves the viewer peers into room after room, each with a different character, action and atmosphere. Each room has a bright monochrome rear wall so it can be identified. Within each the artists inflate balloons, lie on the floor, ride a bicycle or perform any number of other repetitive tasks.

In the world of Wood and Harrison, the grand aspirations of humanity (reaching the moon, climbing a mountain) are given the same attention as apparently pointless tasks, like using an electronic sander to spray a kilometre of A4 paper on to the floor. Using repetition and conceptual jokes their studio practice embraces a childlike sense of the ‘what if’ and boyish daydreams.