

Britart's New Wave

Rob and Nick Carter are set to illuminate the art world again with their Postcards From Vegas series. Here, they shed light on pairing neon with nostalgia, melding highbrow with lowbrow and turning kitsch into 2011's most collectable contemporary work



STORY BY Sophie Loris
ART BY Rob and Nick Carter



Break with tradition: old postcards salvaged from the attic were the inspiration for the Cibachrome with neon 'Hawaiian Surfing'

STEPPING OFF THE RAIN-SOAKED STREETS of London's Acton, and up into the white, sky-lit studio of Rob and Nick Carter, I find myself surrounded by a collection of the most delectable artworks I have seen for a very long time. The room is a candy shop, aglow with intense, mouth-watering colour: neon signs are layered over blown-up images of casinos and vintage cars, ski lifts and lidos and, having absorbed the succulence of the initial hit, the eye leaps between the two elements of the works, engaging first with the 3-D foreground and then the flat, photographic background. One is forced to make associations between the neon Pioneer Pawn 24 Hours lettering, for example, and the image behind, in this case the Neuschwanstein Castle used in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. The effect can be jarring and yet the works are so visually arresting, I want to consume them all, not just with my eyes but with my arms, to pluck them from the walls, take them home and hang them in every room of the house. They are slickly produced and deceptively flat, these pieces. But in fact, as Rob swiftly explains, there is a slim box behind each one containing electrodes, transformers and cabling so that any unsanctioned acquisition would require a working knowledge of electronics and sturdier biceps than mine.

"Do you like them?" asks Nick, anxiously. "Which is your favourite? We don't have one, of course, they're all equal to us, but everyone else seems to want one in particular." The Carters are a married couple (Nick is really Nicky) and have two daughters of their own, but this new body of work has clearly assumed the emotional significance of a birth of some kind. The show opens at the Fine Arts Society on 14 January and the artists seem proud and nervous in equal measure. Four years in the making and a clear departure from their previous work, *Postcards From Vegas* has emerged from a prolonged exploration of different artistic avenues, "but as soon as we'd made our first 'postcard', we knew this was the way forward," says Rob. The germ of the idea came from the fact that both artists collected postcards as children and, "we both had mothers conscientious enough to save all our crap," says Nick. They raided their parents' attics for their old collections and scanned hundreds of cards, which they then converted to transparencies. "Digital is no good for our purposes because you don't get the detail and it fades," explains Rob.

The couple own one of only two remaining Cibachrome printers in the UK, housed on the ground floor of their studio next to a vast dark room, and they are so worried about the availability of Cibachrome paper that they are buying a huge length of it that they intend to freeze. "We use traditional processes to produce contemporary work," says Rob. "We want our work to be of archival quality and we've done a lot of tests with digital, but you don't get the richness of colour. Cibachrome did an experiment in a desert where they left half a photograph outside for

six months and compared it to the other half that had been kept inside. The difference was infinitesimal." In the same vein, the Carters chose older postcards over modern ones because now they're printed digitally, while vintage ones were hand-tinted photographs. It was also the resonance of the subject matter of the old cards – mostly from the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies – that drew them, as well as the creases, drawing-pin marks and blemishes of age. "We are treating the postcards and the neons as ready-mades," says Nick, "so it was important to keep all those marks, to be as close to the originals as possible. We're changing the scale, but apart from that, we consider them to be found objects."

If the postcards were resurrected, the neons had to be recreated. "They are mostly from Las Vegas," says Rob, "from a similar period to the postcards, and not in existence any more. We spent weeks in the British Library, months trawling the internet and bought every neon publication available." They got the odd surprise, they say, and pass me *Moon Motel*, a book featuring Nazi S&M lesbians having oral sex, with the odd neon thrown in for atmosphere. But in general they were lucky, cross-referencing neons to ensure they had the colours exactly right, and creating thousands of mock-ups that they put together with the postcards, jigsaw style. "The associations mean different things to each of us," says Nick, "but it was always clear to us both what worked and what didn't. We didn't want to be kitsch or obvious; we want the juxtapositions to be ambiguous enough to mean different things to different people." Differing interpretations are part of the process, they explain. "We want the viewers to create their own narratives and in that way become part of the piece they're looking at. That's why we chose the name *Postcards From Vegas* – it's rather vague and doesn't tell a story."

AS CHILDREN, the Carters' imaginations were fired by postcards, tangible, personal, something to treasure: "Now kids can look on the internet for images, everything's so accessible, but for us, collecting postcards was real; significant." Indeed, one of the cards that came up in Rob's collection was sent to him by Nick when she was at Goldsmiths and went on an art trip to Moscow, aged 18. (The couple met at school in the Eighties, kept in touch and got together in 1997.) Many of the cards they've used are family-orientated – happy, holiday images, which sit interestingly with the lurid neon. As Lock Kresler, head of Christie's post-war and contemporary day sales, puts it, "The postcards inspire a sense of fun and adventure – 'we've been travelling!' – but the overlay of cheap signage suggests a darker, edgier side to the cityscape. It's a contrast of high and low, the idealised American Dream meets the cultural underbelly." Nick, 41, agrees but adds that she and Rob, 42, are both huge fans of "the seductive quality of neon. It's so gorgeous it draws you in." It's true that both postcards and neon are used for advertising and are intrinsically >

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Kings of neon: like all of the Carters' new series, 'Topless' and 'Pioneer Pawn' (opposite), featuring Neuschwanstein Castle, are Cibachrome prints, giving the vivid colours a sense of timelessness





Light entertainment: Rob and Nick Carter's inclusion of a dimmer switch can hide or bring out the neon glow in works such as the Cibachrome and neon 'Blue Swallow' and 'Pink Flamingo' (opposite)

➤ commercial – even magnetic – yet juxtaposition of the two mediums is as haunting as it is ingenious.

"Blue Skies", once the sign for a trailer park, is placed over a formal bouquet of daisies, bluebells and hyacinths. Rob thinks the flowers are funereal; I think they're garish; Nick thinks they're "totally joyous". The words and the image, both vintage in feel, conjure up different associations for all of us, but their combined effect is new and powerful. A photograph of a Butlins indoor swimming pool has been hand-tinted, all the swimming caps are painted scarlet like the flowers in the overhanging foliage. "You can see 'Lasses' written on the changing-room door, which appealed to me, the Northern girl that I am," says Nick. "Tip Top just felt like the perfect [neon] comment." A curved red neon arrow on a picture of Californian surfers points insistently to the top of a wave: "It could be saying, 'Someone's drowned', or, 'Watch out, there's a shark!' or, 'Jump on your board now!'" says Rob. A giant cross, emblazoned with the words Sin Will Find You Out has been placed over a scallop-edged postcard of the Eisenhower Expressway – a concrete tangle of roads leading to the biggest sorting office in America. "It's a sign from a chapel," says Nick. "It's so enormous, so didactic, it puts me off religion and I do actually go to church." Rob, though, doesn't, and has a completely different take on it: "All roads lead to the sorting office," he says, darkly. In "Well Pressed", the dry-cleaner's slogan sprawls laconically over the centre of a photograph of the Baden-Baden casino. "This was obviously a black and white photo that has been coloured by hand in a very slap-dash way," says Rob. "You can really see imperfections when you blow it up that aren't visible on the postcard. Brush strokes on the chair seat, a few numbers painted red on the roulette wheel, but not done in sequence. We chose the neon because it points to the glamour of the place, the impeccable suits, the heavy chandeliers, and yet it's the punters who are well pressed for their money. It's the seduction of the idea and the grimmer reality that we're interested in."

IN THE PAST, the Carters have referred to themselves as "colourists", pioneering a method of projecting light onto photosensitive paper that produced abstract pictures using a build-up of colour that were breathtakingly beautiful. Known above all for their colour-changing light boxes (one of which hangs at the Groucho Club, where Nick has been curator for 20 years), their most recent show, a sell-out in 2007, developed their practice further, using light shone through prisms slicked with coloured gel to produce luminograms, or still-lives of light. At the same time, they have created a series of neon sculptures for large public commissions, several of which are interactive, with movement sensors that respond to human traffic. The Carters' ability to combine tradition, even anachronism, with a contemporary sensibility is always apparent, not least in

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their work with a Harmonograph, a 19th-century after-dinner diversion, whose apparatus, used in complete darkness, makes two circular movements at different ratios, one for the paper and one for the light source. The resulting piece is now in a permanent collection of camera-less photography at the V&A Museum in London. Collectors of the Carters' work over the past 15 years include the David

Roberts Art Foundation, Sir Elton John and Matthew Williamson.

Their collectors will undoubtedly be surprised by *Postcards From Vegas*, hence the nerves. It is a new direction for them, with its use of language, figurative images, ready-made and found objects, but they've worked with neon for more than a decade and, as Nick says with understatement, "We have found our own language and that feels good." This exhibition will catapult them from relative obscurity – they're not out to shock or show off and the beauty of their work has distracted critics from its seriousness – to art-world celebrity. As Lock Kresler points out, "It is a departure but also a culmination of their work. Neon is inherent to the YBAs but here it's done in such a unique way, using the original concept and making us think about where it's from, while playing with the underlying image. This series is a *tour de force* and these images will become iconic; a great pop comment on today's culture." The Carters have worked with language before, on a piece called "Read Colours Not Words" (2009). Inspired by tests used to catch Russian spies, the Carters spelt out different colours in coloured neon, but the words did not correspond to the colours they described. "Different parts of the brain deal with language and colour and it's difficult to identify colours quickly if the words are different – you can't help reading the words. So spies who said they didn't speak Russian would betray themselves by looking at red and reading green," says Rob.

Postcards From Vegas takes language further in its exquisite symbiosis of photography and neon: the words are vigorous, burning with schmaltsy insistence and yet they are made momentarily abstract by an apparently random pairing with the picture beneath. Some of the neons are pictorial – a curvy pink showgirl in high heels against a background of flamingoes; a large green cactus almost obscuring a policeman looking down benignly at two girls – but that does not detract from the conversation occurring between the neons and the raw, pixellated nostalgia. A typical Carter touch is to have supplied each work with a dimmer, so you can enjoy the neon at full force or turn it down to concentrate on the picture behind. These most contemporary of retro "postcards" are the thinking-man's eye candy and I will eat my neon hat if there is anything left on the walls after the five-week show. **GO**

Postcards From Vegas. Fine Arts Society, 148 New Bond Street, London W1. 13 January–15 February. robandnick.com