

Exhibition Guide

Robert Groves *First Light*
28 February – 13 May 2006

Robert Groves *First Light* is a selection of small-scale crayon drawings on paper. Inspired by the topiary in the gardens of Packwood House, an extraordinary National Trust property in the heart of Warwickshire, it reveals the artist's continuing preoccupation with abstraction derived from the real world. The sculptured shapes of trees and hedges, seen in the transitional light of early morning, feature more as a formal arrangement within a shallow pictorial space rather than as the masses of foliage they actually are. Shadows thrown across the lawns are dark stripes against a yellow green and the sky, as a backdrop, is often an unmodulated aquamarine, likewise flattening the scene.

Groves' pictures are deserted. There are no figures in these contrived landscapes. This again enhances their formal qualities and, at the same time, engenders a mysterious atmosphere. There is something ethereal, something symbolist that suggests a longing for times past – perhaps when these gardens were a place for long forgotten activity – or an invisible presence. This is very much in keeping with the artist's work overall. He counterbalances the abstract tendency in his work with reference to an otherworldliness; in different ways, simultaneously, he conveys an interest beyond what he apprehends in everyday life.

Robert Groves is one of the founding artists of Ikon Gallery. In 1964, with the support of an anonymous patron, he and three other Birmingham-based artists set up the gallery as a cooperative in the city's Bullring area. Housed in an octagonal glass-walled kiosk, its unpretentious beginnings anticipated Ikon's current programme, which aims to be at once experimental and accessible. As part of the gallery's off-site programme, *First Light* is a project that encourages audience development for contemporary art outside of conventional gallery spaces.