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THE SAATCHI GALLERY

LAURA K JONES ON TOP 20 AT 39, LONDON



There is one place left in London where you can find a Tracey Emin or a Chantal Joffe for sale and know that the gallerist or curator is not going to pocket fifty per cent of your money - a place where the artist takes all, a place where, to be honest, no one's even that bothered about the money.

39 "is not a gallery" yet it curates and plays host to big name shows that are full of humour and light. 39 makes not a sausage and so remains the art world's best-kept secret.

Alan Miller and John Strutton are a jovial pair. The former was Head of Painting at the Royal College for many years; his pal Strutton took over some time after his departure. Their baby - 39 - sits next to Max Wigram's old gallery, behind the church where the London Symphony Orchestra practice on Old Street. I was lucky enough to be invited down for a sneak preview of their upcoming show 'Top Twenty' which opens on 9 August.

As with all ideas for their shows, this one sprung up "organically" from Strutton and Miller's many conversations with their artist friends and extended family.

"The show is based on the public's favourite artists in the National Gallery, a study based itself on the sale of postcards from the gallery shop during 2006," says Miller. "Twenty artists were each given one of these postcards along with a board or canvas in the same proportions - but at a reduced scale - and were asked to make a work based upon their response to the image on the card." The results are truly scrumptious, but semi secret, although I am allowed to mention "a few".



Hannah Maybank has painted a gloopy black canvas as her interpretation of Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' (the nation's No. 1) - the outline of the flowers is gouged in to the gloop; George Shaw has done a blocky Monet 'WaterLilies' but minus the waterlilies; John Kindness has omitted any facial features from Arnolfini's seemingly airbrushed newlyweds, and Chantal Joffe has reworked Picasso's 'Girl with Dove'. There's a luminous yellow budgie looking into a mirror by Kate Belton; it's Velazquez's 'Venus', "you know, a bird looking into a mirror", quips Miller.

Peter Harris has painted his interpretation (a forlorn little head) of Da Vinci's 'Virgin and Child' in blood. Stubb's 'Whistlejacket' is now a donkey ridden by a disturbing white monkey dressed in little girl's clothes. I asked Miller how he paired each postcard with an artist. "Something in the work reminded me of something in their work. For example, Lothar Goetz, who is an abstract artist fascinated by the geometry in buildings, is doing something based on the Vermeer painting 'Young Woman Standing at a Virginal', a painting which is full of geometric shapes."

And so we went on round, the paintings seemingly ratcheting up the humour as we progressed. There are no labels here; the list of artists - old and new - will be up at the door on opening night, but no further clues will be given as to who did what. Miller and Strutton seem genuinely unbothered by things like labels, explanatory texts and the like. "We never suggest anything to anyone. We just, if anything, like to give a simple request and then to see what happens. There are certain specifications, but only because of space restrictions".

39 is also planning to photograph the work to make postcards - a book of which will be the catalogue for the show. "We will make a display of these new postcards together too, with the original postcards alongside", says Strutton.

A few years ago they asked a bunch of artists to make a pub sign, based on the often peculiar names of actual pubs in

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the capital; all of which could be seen swinging at 39. They then asked another group to make a birdhouse; then another 52 to reinterpret each card from a traditional pack of playing cards. Great things have arisen at 39, but quietly. The artists that get involved seem to like being part of something so simple, where money isn't really an issue.

"It's about doing something collectively, allowing people who've perhaps been bashing away carving something heavy out in their lives, to come back and do something that's almost pop," Strutton enthused. "There is serious work created, but there's a lightheartedness of intention there too. The conversations we have with friends and the art community bring the shows to fruition."

A lot of the works sell but "those that don't, don't even get picked up. If John and I benefit in anyway, it's that we now have the best free art collection in London," says Miller. "We're always expecting the artists to collect, but they rarely do. Of course, if they want to, they can."

I left them both preparing the walls to look like the National Gallery; a deep Georgian plum colour for the top half of the wall, simulated marble for the lower half. They've even added a dado rail and a faux velvet rope "made out of some old rope we found on Rivington Street".

As I leave, they shout after me, "Don't forget to say we're adding air-conditioning, a parquet floor and a bored looking security guard at each corner of the room."

That's a joke, isn't it?

Laura K Jones

'Top Twenty'
10 August - 9 September
Private View 9 August 6.30-8.30pm
Mitchell Street
London EC1
Opening hours: Thursday - Sunday 2-6pm
www.39london.com

Participating artists:

Roger Kelly
Lee Maelzer
John Kindness
Varda Caivano
Peter Harris
Chantal Joffe
Elinor Evans
Saron Hughes
Kate Belton
Catherine Moorland
Ellie Howitt
Emma Talbot
Lothar Goetz
David Fletcher
Dominic Kennedy
Harry Pye
Bettina Von Zwehl
Tim Stoner

Next show:

130 artists have been asked to design a Penguin book with a blank cover. No other instructions have been given. Watch this space.

Laura K Jones is a London-based journalist and a regular news correspondent for Saatchi Online's daily magazine.



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