

INTERFACE

Visual art exhibitions and events with a platform for critical writing

REVIEW

Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2008

A-Foundation, Liverpool. 20 September - 22 November 2008 Reviewed by: Paul Cordwell

Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2008.

In the centre of Liverpool, opposite the A-Foundation's Greenland Street complex, is an ice-cream van garage. It came as some surprise that at least one of the exhibitors in 2008's Bloomberg New Contemporaries didn't take the opportunity to drive a chiming, attention-grabbing van into the large Coach Shed area, mid-launch party. In the accompanying catalogue, selector Richard Billingham observed that "a lot of students were trying to find a style before they knew what it was they were trying to say", and some of this polished juvenilia has inevitably reached the final 57. Above and beyond a discussion of style and content, there is the sheer jackhammer volume of the sculptural objects' demands for attention. Although this may serve to emphasise the ease with which the stuff of the everyday can now re-camp into the gallery without raising a single eyebrow, here is sculpture which primarily exists as commodity-event. But the best work also has a nagging presence, or, probably more accurately, present-ness, which momentarily amends the stuff of the world; announces the imaginative potential for meandering encounters among the nonsensical objects of everyday life.

It may seem slightly unfair to be too critical of fish because of the waters they swim in but, then again, there is Steve Bishop's "Suspension Of Disbelief"; a wigwam of illuminated fluorescent tubes penetrating the body of a stuffed fox. It looks passably odd in the catalogue photograph and pointlessly cynical in the flesh. That said, when considered against the clumsy white cube frame containing crossing mannequins forms in Joseph Long's "Uni-titled", it seems almost elegant. More intentionally cack-handed is the rickety assemblage of odds'n'sods; clothes and workbench; welding mask and umbrella, of Jeanine Woollard's "George"- a bargain shop Saint George on horseback- which is so formally clumsy it grates. Another easy shot which actually manages to pull it off is lower-case duo littlewhitehead's corner facing group of clothed, life-sized plaster rubberneckers and feral hoodies; uncomfortably intrusive, whilst the seedy soiled fluidity of Neil Hedger's aroused and abject wax, plasticine and tin-foil figures remains irritatingly memorable.

The horizontal spread of Joe Doldan's "Untitled" cardboard floor at least shows a considered restraint; the cardboard gives slightly when walked on allowing the potential for physical destabilisation to be a momentary unease, a touch of subtlety missing elsewhere. Naomi St. Clair-Clarke's "The Unconscious Significance Of Hair: Queen", a tall sculpture of curving papier mache and the baroque curls of hair extensions is idiosyncratically seductive, as are Pio Abad's two floor sculptures. Looking like a dismembered, permed wookiee decorated with strings of pearls they manage to be both amusing and disquieting in equal measure. In this exhibition the rule seems to be the hairier the sculpture the better.

R Crumb and Breughel successfully collide in the unhinged watercolour decorations on the outside of Paul Westcombe's used coffee cups. However, this year's labradoodle of inappropriate elements co-existing can be seen in Jane Maughan's inkjet photographic prints: nude middle-aged people and household pets posing in their suburban gardens. They may be layered photo fictions but the impression left is not one of immanent Blue Velvet style debauchery but a rather sweet and dogged eccentricity.

Photography and its digital offspring invariably feature quite prominently in contemporary group shows, I rather liked Sarah Michael's large digital prints

of tiny figures isolated in the bland sublime of uneventful landscapes. Less so Gerd Hasler's slick, brooding but overly tasteful seascapes of "Monochrome 7" and "2". Also from the less-is-definitely-more end of the spectrum, Eva Kalpadaki's "Empty Space" sequence of 80cm x 100cm prints on Verona art paper shows the point of contact between architectural surfaces. Embellished with small cracks of decay, and an occasional fine diagonal line, they initially have the appearance of spartan abstract paintings. They are materially confusing, spatially confusing and quite compelling. The intelligent focus in these pieces is a welcome break from the brash theatrics of other exhibitors. With the exception of Ellen McDonald's large paintings of rickety stage-sets in the foreground of the implied space of a Dali-esque landscape, as is often the case, the best paintings are the small works: Stewart Cliff's oils on canvas, traces of mysterious simple objects centred on muted grounds, and Chris Hanlon's sequence of the hermetic world of childrens' games, adolescent ennui and the destructive vagaries of chance should have a show of their own.

The soundworks, Jeremy Evan's looped submarine blip and Allison Malet's desperately repeated word-name, use their repetitive simplicity to reasonable effect, the 15 DVD-videos selected being a much more mixed bag. Paul Bratt's slight but entertaining stop-frame animations proved popular with both the selectors and the audience. A number of monologues to camera may have worked better on the larger projection screens. More intriguing were the forlorn, elderly character building Allsopp and Weir's "Amplification Device", and the static camera pieces, David Theobald's 'Requiem'; black and white computer-enhanced product packaging moving on a supermarket conveyor belt, and Patricia Pinsker's "Davey"; a man wearing a native American head-dress and gesturing proudly to an Elvis soundtrack, which benefits tremendously from its 16mm origins.

Selector Ken Lum apparently found his experience as a juror "a rather despairing one", as, "many young artists don't see art as the proper arena for effecting change in the social and political milieu". Fair point, 'credit crunch' UK and spiralling debts do seem to have focused art students on a game of second guessing the market, but there is enough here to suggest that a few are in it for the long haul and they are not necessarily the noisy ones.

Paul Cordwell, September 2008.

Paul Cordwell is an artist based in Manchester.
paulcordwell@hotmail.com |