

EXHIBITIONS



35. *Lytton Strachey*, by Dora Carrington. 1916. Panel, 50.8 by 60.9 cm. (National Portrait Gallery, London; exh. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).

face of the horror he referred to as 'unspeakable utterly indescribable'.³ Indirect responses to the War are also represented; Carrington's portrait of Lytton Strachey reading (no.49; Fig.35) is a quietly passionate statement about love and culture under threat. The biggest gap here is Gertler's definitive protest painting of 1916, *Merry-go-round*, which could not be lent (it is currently on view at Tate Britain), but is represented by a large preparatory sheet of head studies (no.49).

The final section, mostly of paintings made in the aftermath of the War, is the least satisfying part of the exhibition. After the spell that held them in thrall disappeared, the differences in the work of this group, who after all were not bound together by membership of a movement or shared aims, seem magnified. The last room is dominated by Bomberg's huge *Study for Sappers at work: A Canadian tunnelling company, Hill 60, St Eloi* (no.66), the painting that was commissioned by the Canadian War Memorials Fund, but – devastatingly – rejected. The composition refuses to cohere, lacking the incisiveness which makes Bomberg's other works included here so exhilarating and absorbing. Two large-scale works by Spencer, *Christ carrying the Cross* (1920; no.69) and *Unveiling Cookham war memorial* (1922; no.70), although impressive presences, lack the intensity that shines through his other major works included earlier in the exhibition such as *Apple gatherers* (no.30) and *Mending cows, Cookham* (no.40) – the latter completed shortly before his enlistment with the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1915. But the painting with which the exhibition closes, a self-portrait of 1920 by Gertler (no.68) – quizzical, subtly challenging – is a fittingly ambiguous conclusion to the compelling unfinished dramas that the show unfolds.

¹ Catalogue: *Nash Nevinson Spencer Gertler Carrington Bomberg: A Crisis of Brilliance, 1908–1922*. By David Boyd Haycock, with essays by Frances Spalding and Alexandra Harris. 176 pp. incl. 101 col. + 5 b. & w. ills. (Scala, London, 2013), £25. ISBN 978-1-85759-818-6. Quotation on p.100.

² Quoted in D. Boyd Haycock: *A Crisis of Brilliance: Five Young British Artists and the Great War*, London 2009, p.306.

³ Quoted in Boyd Haycock, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.137.

New Order: British Art Today

London

by CELIA WHITE

THE NOTION OF Britishness has languished under an interrogative spotlight in recent years. It was tossed playfully to and fro, verbally and visually, during the 2012 Olympic Games, the Royal Wedding and the Queen's Jubilee; it has recently been recast in right-wing political parties' favour; it continues to divide Parliament as the Eurozone stumbles. The only semblance of a consensus is that there exists no clear notion of what it is to be 'British today', so that 'diversity' is proudly (and inevitably) cited as its unifying feature.

New Order: British Art Today at the **Saatchi Gallery, London** (to 29th September),¹ offers the cultural embodiment of this, channelling the language of diversity and placing in doubt its own ability to form a cohesive picture of contemporary British art. The exhibition refuses the glittering buzz, the conceptual and aesthetic cacophony, that would be expected of a show with this title. Instead it performs the self-reflexive act of showing artists whose work tries to dismantle the language of British art as a means of constructing that language. Saatchi continues to make taste, yet he does so by unpicking taste as a concept and reassembling it in fresh form. Although this is achieved with respect for the subtlety of each work on show, it is also possible to divide the artists in the exhibition into those who

deconstruct received taste, and those who usher in a new era for British art to replace it. The former ride the coat-tails of the latter: the dismantlers – largely painters – carve a clearing in which the true newcomers – largely sculptors – can excel.

Nathan Cash Davidson's *So it is decreed and so it shall be done* (2010), for instance, is a deliberately bad rendering of Henry VIII in his regalia: a waxy, sinister figure moving forth from layers of melting paint. The effect certainly matches the intention of subverting history painting's received grandeur and its representational conceits in a way that highlights history's tendency to weave and reweave narratives. In a similar vein, Amanda Doran's paintings of fat, tattooed women and rambunctious sailors mimic the poor taste of their sitters, one of abundance and grotesquery as articulated through bulbous bodies and reverberating colour. Yet, while Doran's and Davidson's paintings may call into question the conditional nature of representation, this is hardly the stuff of a 'new order' in British art. Both present form as a fluid, indefinable mass in the literal sense, but neither quite responds to the curator's vision of British art as a *metaphorical* 'living body [. . .] transient, fragile, sometimes clumsy, but unflinching and relentlessly alive'.²

The exhibition's painting contingent is partly redeemed by the inclusion of Amir Chasson's series of canvases, each showing a portrait accompanied by some form of statistical representation: a topographical map, a pie chart, a pictorial graph (Fig.36). Although crude in their attempted realism, the care and



36. *Three dimensional topo using contour lines*, by Amir Chasson. 2010. Oil, pencil and household paint on canvas, 100 by 121 by 2 cm. (Courtesy of the artist; exh. Saatchi Gallery, London).

minimalism with which the faces are painted matches that of the graphs, resulting in a symbiosis in which the portraits take on a cool abstraction and the graphs a sense of the personal. In juxtaposing information and the frontal portrait these pairings function like identity cards, emphasising the unbridgeable gap between our known 'selves' and how these are interpreted using the supposedly fundamental, universal language of mathematics. At the same time, by indicating the aesthetic similarities between the surface of a graph and the surface of a face, these paintings indicate the non-existence of that gap: what is seen, heard and read is what we know, and therefore what *is*. Perception, representation and knowledge, even of oneself, are inseparable.

While the exhibition's two-dimensional work successfully deconstructs the laboured languages of representation, the 'new order' that will supposedly replace it is staunchly three-dimensional. It juts into the vision with an insistent tactility that makes it both beautiful and difficult to ignore. The opening gallery space of the show offers the viewer a perfect pairing: James Capper's reconstructions of heavy mechanical parts (*Ripper teeth*, 2011–12) and Sara Barker's series of pale, waif-like geometric sculptures (Fig. 37). Capper's works sit darkly and dead in their newly acquired context – the gallery space, an environment that both renders them obsolete and mocks that obsolescence through the contrast between its static cleanliness and their dense, ugly bodies. Despite their melancholic rigor mortis, though, the ripper teeth verge on the amusing, imbued as they are with an emotional weight giving the impression that at any moment they could crawl off, creature-like, in hopping, desperate movements.

Barker's sculptures, equally forlorn, consist of collections of delicate white aluminium frames that hang precariously around one another. Unlike the heavy presences of Capper's works, Barker's incite a level of uncertainty in the viewer by blurring the distinction between looking at and looking through. They imply that visual experience is entirely relational – that one mass or space is merely a frame for, or is framed by, another. Barker's is an art of the peripheral, a nebulousness worn on the sleeve that questions the integrity and self-containment of the art object, and of objects in general.

This placing of the peripheral and uncertain at centre-stage is also present in Nicholas Deshayes's sculpture series *Soho fats* (2012), polystyrene panels that mimic the patterns created by human fat deposits that form in central London's sewers. Here, liquidity and solidity are combined, monumentalising the unseen traces of urban existence in the form of five bright, white, large-scale sculptures. A subtle but irresistible dialogue emerges with Barker's white frames, with both highlighting the false differentiation between the liminal and the focal.

What is implied here is the prevalence in contemporary sculpture of what can be termed a 'contingent monumentality'. If



37. Installation view of *New Order: British Art Today*, Saatchi Gallery, London, 2013, showing works by James Capper (right) and Sara Barker (left). (Courtesy of Stephen White; exh. Saatchi Gallery, London).

visual language is to be re-thought, it is only with the requisite hesitancy appropriate to the emergence of a 'new order'. Adjacent to Deshayes's panels is a sculpture that crystallises this approach in one pithy aesthetic statement. *The world's local nomad* (2012; Fig. 38)



38. *The world's local nomad*, by Natasha Peel, 2012. Heat-treated Perspex and vinyl-covered plinth, 150 by 130 by 100 cm. (Courtesy of the artist; exh. Saatchi Gallery, London).

by Natasha Peel is a slippery, escaping sculpture, much like those of Barker and Capper. Made from colourless Perspex moulded into an almost arbitrary shape, it leaps erratically from its white cubed plinth to rest by one plastic corner on the floor beside it, yet it could conceivably continue to melt and move. Its supporting plinth is itself a statement. Painted red on one side, this possesses an ambiguity of purpose: it supports the sculpture, grounding its chaos, and yet the red paint brands it an ingredient of the work itself. Like Barker's frames, the plinth creates a conduit between the central and the peripheral, while lending solidity to the perceived contradiction between the contrived and the incidental.

The cumulative effect of such works is an impression of British art as a stimulating series of unknowns to be handled, explored, desired or discarded. Although not bold, showy or stunning, *New Order* is a surprisingly assertive collection of works, despite (or perhaps due to) the fact that it places at its heart the contingencies of language, aesthetics and British identity. Ironically, it offers a 'today' that is made up of yesterday and tomorrow: its paintings use the past to create a present, while its sculpture revels in the future's uncertainty with the fear, excitement and courage that characterises a commitment to the new.

¹ Catalogue: *New Order: British Art Today*. Edited by Roxie Warder, Rebecca Wilson and Philippa Adams, with an introduction and artist texts by Ben Street. 84 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Saatchi Gallery, London, 2013), £7.95. ISBN 978-1-909413-02-3.

² Ben Street in *ibid.*, p. 5.