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Review

Early One Morning

Paul O’Kane

*All that is asked of you is not that you produce,
nor that you make an effort to surpass yourself . . .
but that you be socialised.*

(Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*)

A strong desire for a neo-modernism appears to motivate the Whitechapel’s ‘Early One Morning’ sculpture show. The selection and accompanying texts produce fears of a largely white, middle-class and British power nexus insisting on retrieving art – from amid a tense and complex multicultural milieu – as a playground of aesthetic liberty.

For over twenty years, political commitment has been increasingly unfashionable for what the exhibition claims as a new ‘New Generation’ (*sic*). But this generation has had little alternative but to be complicit with a culture industry laundering ‘cool’ as the prime currency.

Cool equals consensus, community, and therefore survival or possible success and this ‘generation’ has therefore not so much aestheticised politics (as Walter Benjamin warned us Fascism always will) but *supplanted* politics with a play of attitudes and *beliefs*. These have included fashionable nationalisms, proud localisms, trendy paganisms, and now a neo- (or ‘new’?) modernism. Like ‘cool’ itself, these innovations of belief and attitude are invariably attributable to the past and evidenced as aspects of lifestyle.

Despite the rapid expansion of a populist art world which builds museums, soaks up post-industrial leisure and buys the time of numerous graduates, curators, artists, writers and professors, the burgeoning culture industry – while evincing a more tolerant, open and questioning culture ‘for all’ – has assimilated, tamed and contained art’s vitally troublesome and questioning edge so as to re-embrace art as an aspect of design, desire and media-soluble novelty nestling comfortably amid tourism, foodism, style, investment and sport within brimming newspaper supplements.

Now lifestyle is the horizon for all aspiration, and ‘back’ is the new black as the greatest bourgeois revolution proves an eternal return corralling within its curling tail formerly critical and pioneering trajectories of art, philosophy, psychology and politics to leave us ineffectually at the mercy of brute commerce.

Hence, the avant-garde direction, having-been ironised, discredited as a male idyll or supplanted by inventive *arrière-garde* strategies, is sometimes sorely, if secretly, missed along with the ‘new’ which, according to a popular reading of the PoMo paradigm, should now come only ‘second-hand’. Perhaps this regret is the motivating force behind subtle suggestions in the show’s accompanying literature that a retrieval of freedoms might be available through the revival of hi-modernist abstract art. But if ghosts of art’s history *do* walk these galleries they may perceive the contents less as an art exhibition and more as a fringe event for an ‘Ideal Home’ show.

Having progressed from cave to church, to salon and white cube, art here gets into bed with gentrification, adapting scale, tones and forms to the desirable air of numerous loft apartments erected or converted in once industrial or working-class city zones earmarked for ‘renaissance’ and territorialised by a cool-hunting, cod-bohemian influx.

At the Whitechapel we witness repeated attempts to regain the transcendent realm reputedly enjoyed by an earlier generation of artists for whom troublesome postmodern questions raised by feminist, postcolonial, class and race issues had not yet burst a bubble of faith sustaining an art in quarantine from such worldly uncertainties.

‘Tra-La-La’, an exhibition featuring Philip King, Anthony Caro et al. and held concurrently at Tate Britain, confirms that such a modern art world persisted into the post-pop 1970s, existing as though upsetting irregularities such as difference, exploitation and the everyday genocide that is class, did not exist or were issues unworthy of representation.

From certain perspectives, the colourful abstract sculptures at Tate Britain *do* appear seductively joyful. Looking back up the long hall on leaving the gallery it appears as though the gods had spilled enormous Smarties® onto the floor of the museum. But back at the Whitechapel, dreams of *regaining* this earlier generation’s playful confidence are manifest only as a disappointed shortfall, a decisive *lack*

of belief on behalf of both the artists and the overfed consumer culture they fail to critique and therefore – by default – *represent*.

Faith and belief continue to play a part in making or breaking any art that aspires to satisfy both the hungry eye and noble conscience but, for the 1990s graduates featured in 'Early One Morning', hopes of transcendence and wished-for conviction are disturbed and dishevelled by the nagging presence of plural realities that their forebears could ignore due to the privilege of impregnable social status.

For Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore or Philip King and Anthony Caro, the force of belief in art seems to have been impressively strong and the legacy they bequeath to the present is the outcome of lives led luxuriously considering little *but* their art. All latent neo-modernists – for whom the temptation to recapture the lost world of these ancestors has been hard to resist – will quickly take the bait of a revived modernism and thereby hope to enjoy a conviction lately tempered and tampered-with by a meddlesome, conscience-inflaming, justice-inducing multicultural critique which insists upon a comprehensive rethink of what society and its art could be while working for a redistribution of expropriated cultural wealth.

It may now be *universally* necessary to blow some bubbles of faith to lift us up and away from the ironising loops and painted horizons proffered by voraciously globalising Capitalism's trailblazing wars. And it is true that, with such disturbing issues out of sight and mind, we might automatically regain a little faith through the *very practice* of our art – just as rosary beads, like 'faith machines', might help repetitively demonstrate and renew otherwise intangible beliefs.



Jim Lambie, *Zobop*, 1999/2001, Vinyl, Private collection, Turin, courtesy of Sadie Coles HQ, London, and the Modern Institute, Glasgow



Shahin Afrassiabi, *Studio 01*, 2002, Mixed media, courtesy the artist

Such an art – no longer acting primarily as representational evidence – would perhaps dispense with the grand bourgeois apparatus of *exhibition* and historicisation, and might, instead of concealing a multitude of sins behind signs of a 'good life', become integrated as a modest but nevertheless crucial enhancement of daily necessity. We might thus discover the happy secret that we need art, not 'like we need God' (as Tracy Emin once claimed of herself), nor as a means by which to proclaim our convictions, but as a way to *produce* a kind of faith, i.e. we might need art not as iconic *evidence* of something that we might believe to exist but as the means by which to repeatedly bring an unattributed belief into existence.

It is this very precipitous journey that both proves and produces a secular faith of the kind once associated with the avant-garde. Furthermore, if today we are forced by current affairs to paraphrase the polarised logic of George W Bush and 'be either *with* belief or *against* it' this might explain why the avant-garde spirit can now regain its attractions – albeit in need of some re-packaging or 'spin'.

In whatever way we come upon whatever faith sustains us, it will necessarily be tested, and repeatedly so, but much of the work here shows little sign of having been subjected to rigorous question before being whisked onto the influential stage of the Whitechapel. Not daring to ruffle feathers or rock boats for fear of ostracism, the work is generally complicit with a consensus of cool. No one here sticks a neck out any further than when choosing clothes for evening drinks, but art will need to reach way beyond the strata of acceptable opinion and social chat before contributing anything to a bewildered humanity fed relentlessly to greedy corporations, intimidated by so-called leaders and threatened by angry religions.



Claire Barclay, *Homemaking*, 2000, mixed media, installation view, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden, courtesy the artist

When we enter Eva Rothschild's Halloweeny room we find ourselves looking past the merchandise at numerous ways in which an object can be hung up, pushed into walls or rest on floors, i.e. attending to the work's *inability* to either transcend its materiality or successfully direct its quasi-cultish message any more convincingly than would a sharp shop-fitter.

Jim Lambie immerses us in tacky lo-fi inspired by teenage bedrooms, where childhood clouds disperse into the relative dystopia beyond clothes-rails, mirrors and double-glazed windows. Here, the haunting presence of the Real lies just below elaborate surfaces of defensive and inventive identities. An oversized false eyelash droops over the entrance, and a tattered glove, grotesquely elevated by extensive bamboo 'fingers', bleeds nail varnish onto a floor expansively flattered by glittering tapes.

From this glamorous surface arises what could be described as a 'minument' in the form of a pink fashion-accessory belt reaching up as if appealing for a longer shelf life. Meanwhile, spanning a corner at head height, colourful plastic hair bands attempt a

Tatlin-esque gesture only to invoke the image of a creative shelf filler with ambitions frustrated by miserably minimum wages.

Like a man in fear of lightning strikes, Gary Webb comprehensively 'grounds' himself and his practice with modular rubber matting everywhere monogrammed to over-determine authorship to the point of satire. The scent of irony pervades those areas overtly territorialised by the artist and, though his show-in-show appears designed to launch Webb's international career, we are reminded that where irony is in full flow, belief is often at a low ebb.

The work is strongly reminiscent of 1980s New York simulationists like Ashley Bickerton and Haim Steinbach who sustained a convoluted critique alongside a strained love affair with Reaganomic consumer deluge. But Webb's equivalent looks like an in-store promotion for a wannabe-who-surely-will-be as flashy materials, costly custom-builds and well-chosen readymades produce 'faith machines' of the pricey kind. For all their allure these spectacular objects are strangely soured by sombre tones and lumpy forms revealing some less self-assured sub-



Eva Rothschild, *Bad Hat*, 2002, Perspex, courtesy Modern Art, London and the Modern Institute, Glasgow

jectivity and invoking the low-sky fancies of a shopaholic mall-rat or bric-a-brac maniac.

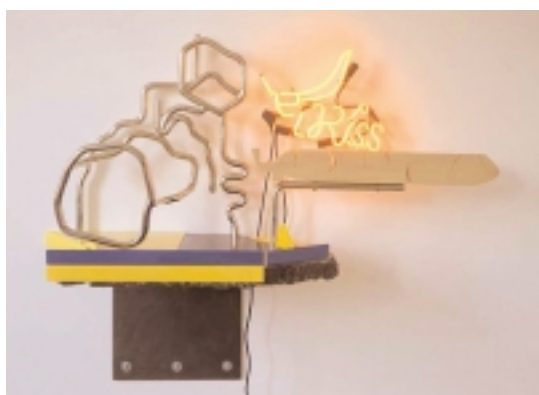
Once we have noted Webb's and Lambie's fondness for plays on temporal tastes we begin to question this generation's vaunted New-ness. The well-rehearsed PoMo notion that the 'New' is all behind us is in fact only confirmed here along with the sense that these artists are no angels or heroes but share the same untimely no-go zone as their audience where costly modern promises have twisted into a vertiginous (*chim*)era afraid even to name itself for fear of coming true.

To justify the zeitgeisty notion of 'generation' promoted by the accompanying literature the show reveals a few noticeable refrains. For example there is a similar tendency to assemblage and appropriation shared by Webb and Shahin Afrassiabi, and Afrassiabi echoes Claire Barclay's 'Ikea' – 'Muji' or 'Habitat' – inspired, clean, machined timber. The shaky structures of Barclay's spindly Eco-Asian aesthetic reach optimistically high but the unredeemed familiarity of her material choices reminds us

of a common myopia oblivious to the diverse world encountered on shuffles back and forth from home to store. Consequently, any hope of sustained belief suffocates here within the confines of a proudly toted no-brand carrier bag.

Tendencies to backslide – either into a crafty, anti-technological lo-fi or a clumsy neo-modernism – may here and there promise ways to nudge the dormant term 'sculpture' back into currency, but ultimately it is Shahin Afrassiabi – despite being one of the *least* abstract artists – who offers real evidence of furthering the discipline in terms of autonomy or transcendence. His pristine objects are transported beyond 'use', 'exchange' and 'symbolic' values by artful self-framing devices which keep eye and mind beguiled and repeatedly bring a renewed sense of our own presence in and out of the work's shifting space.

It is in Afrassiabi's work that belief really takes wing, primarily because he cuts the cleanest edge against precedent, asserting his own agenda without sinking in history or drowning in fashion. In his meticulous arrangements of functional readymades – though indebted to Duchamp, Schwitters et al. – it is not the readymades but the very *meticulousness* that speaks. Thus, his work is more comparable with Tomoko Takahashi's innovative installations



Gary Webb, *Mirage of Loose Change*, 2001, mixed media, Arts Council collection, courtesy The Approach, London

and similarly prefers to address the mesmeric *gestalt* effects of *order* in deference to jaded appraisals of taste or exhausted eclecticism.

Where Webb leads us through a bachelor's pad studded with ostentatious conversation pieces, Afrassiabi pulls off a crisp coup on behalf of the base and banal, elevating dull suburban commodities with a precise touch of respectful finesse to set out small altars to the trade stand and shop window while offering all up to the hallowed realm of 'High Art'.

His work thus encourages any rumour that a redemptive outside to Capitalism's exhausted festival of use-wrapped-as-fantasy can yet be glimpsed via the questioning, training and transformation of the ways that we think we see. And perhaps *this* is the perennial success that we admire in not only postwar *abstract* artists but also in revered minimalists like Judd, Morris or Flavin, or in the New York simulationists referred to above.

Afrassiabi calls us to wonder at everyday experience by lifting our perspective beyond a doomed dialectical confrontation with a world 'run' as a 'thing' to be managed for profit (like a DIY store?). His contributions lead us through a negotiation of sculptural relations along an axis concerning

'point-of-view' while we are never tempted to *consume* the goods on offer – either with eyes or intellect – but are awakened to an esoteric air of transformation via which aura becomes re-energised as *event* and where intensity begins to replace identity.

Abstract art, and nostalgia for its heyday, may not provide an ark to rescue us from our bewildering and volatile moment, but satori-like perceptions of a charmed quotidian can at least relieve us by offering glimpses of an immanent faith – or a faith in immanence. Most of the artists here, despite their influential opportunity, prove ineffectual in challenging, reassuring or providing insight into our present fears or hopes and only stumble when attempting to further pathways forged by more self-assured generations of 'sculptors'. Shahin Afrassiabi, however, proves capable of wielding some profound perceptual magic to keep us looking forwards, and even upwards, in faith, thus helping to keep our present dismay at bay.

Early One Morning was at the Whitechapel Art Gallery London, from 6 July to 8 September 2002
