

## *The British Art Show 5*

Julian Stallabrass



**Figure 1** Chad McCail *Roads Are Dug Up* 2003

The British Art Show, which takes place every five years, has been an ambivalent vehicle for the display of the nation's contemporary art: is its remit to look backwards over the achievements of the last half decade or forwards to coming trends?; should it showcase the prominent or the neglected?; should the work of younger artists be favoured?; is the very idea behind such an exhibition, as the Union fractures internally into its constituent nations and agonises over integration in a supra-national structure, a pressing issue or an anachronism?

An odd explanatory panel entitled 'Welcome to the British Art Show 5' was shown in the Southampton City Art Gallery venue. This piece by Johnny Spencer extolled at length the delights of the building and its educational displays, but also contained a brief description of the exhibition: '... a selection of the latest fads in drips, blurs and splashes, and serious looking objects, many of which conform to the present government's myth of "Cool Britannia".' Fortunately, this is not an entirely accurate description.

In fact, while the *British Art Show 4* was an unashamed celebration of 'young British art', the selectors of the current show (Pippa Coles, Matthew Higgs and Jacqui Poncelet) are more cautious and eclectic. In his catalogue essay, Matthew Higgs argues that, despite the continuing media circus, the yBas have had their day and are now shunned in Europe, having sheltered too many mediocre talents and fostered a climate hostile to criticism. The aim here, say the selectors, is to provide another view of British art, celebrating both its variety and (sotto voce) its political engagement.

The result contains some fine works: there is Mike Nelson's strange, complex and funny installation *Lionheart*; there is Susan Hiller's affecting video projection and installation piece, *Wild Talents*, where a voice taken from Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*, assuring us that there is no magic or strangeness in the world, is laid over a collage of beautifully edited and choreographed movie clips of children with occult powers.

More explicitly political are Chad McCail's cutesy but threatening utopian gouaches, unlikely instructional pictures of a world in which *Roads are Dug Up* or *Money is Destroyed* or *Mercy is Shown*; also a strain of work that borders on anthropology with Graham Fagen's photographs of school kids' weaponry, seen alongside his video-installation juxtaposing the views of council officials and public-housing residents.

*The British Art Show 5* replies to the above questions with the answers: look backwards to see forwards; put prominent and obscure, and older and younger together; British culture is an urgent matter precisely because it is so contested. If these answers seem a little too 'Third Way', and the resulting show both varied and uneven, they are an accurate reflection of the unresolved situation in the wake of 'young British art'. Even so, the as yet muted rise of work that engages with social and political issues outside the normal run of mass media concerns is a genuine cause for optimism.

*The British Art Show 5* is at the Centre for Visual Arts, Chapter Arts Centre, Ffotogallery and the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff from 8 September to 5 November.

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