

## Young British Artists II



What are we to make of an exhibition which includes an oversized freezer, tabloid spreads blown up to the size of major paintings, boardroom style portraits of the homeless, and (notoriously) a self-portrait bust made from the artist's own blood? Is this just a celebration of diversity in new British art or is there a deeper coherence behind it?

Marc Quinn's frozen blood head, simply called *Self*, is contained in a perspex box, mounted on a louvred, stainless steel refrigeration unit. An LED indicates the temperature inside. The head is deteriorating, cracks showing a deeper, glossy red against the frosted surface. Its calm, banal expression contrasts with the violence apparently wrought on it - the crumbling ears, the deeply cracked chin and neck, as though its throat were cut. It gives the impression of tremendous age, as if it were some unearthed ancient artifact, displayed and maintained in its robotic casing. We might be tempted to read it less as a death mask and more as a preserved ancient corpse, but for the tell-tale flange of ice that encircles it, like a diminished halo, the result of seepage from the mould. If the head and fridge are seen as a whole (not as work of art and plinth) then they appear in their true guise, less as sculpture than high-tech Gothic horror evoking, along with a thousand movies, childhood memories of Doctor Who.



Sarah Lucas shows three enlargements of double-page spreads from the tabloid paper, *The Sport*, which have been made by pasting together photocopied sections of the paper. Aside from areas where words have been partially obscured by overlapping, these 'found objects' are left unaltered, so viewers can look at these works much as they would at the newspaper itself. The works take their titles from the headlines: *Seven Up*, *Sod You Gits* and *40, Fat and Fabulous*. All are about the overt exploitation of the female body: one is a display of conventional topless 'beauty', one about a kissogram midget, another about an obese wife put up for sale by her husband. These features are surrounded by their customary satellites; pieces of trivia, adverts for telephone pornography and escort agencies. So what difference is made by bringing these smutty scribblings to the gallery wall? Most obviously, they are held up for public examination in a space where a middle-class, liberal consensus reigns, where unreconstructed lumpen attitudes may be collectively sneered at. The use of *The Sport*, a paper on the margins of the press with no pretensions to seriousness, is questionable. Lucas presents this material and assumes her viewers will find it repugnant, but the paper does this better itself, glorying in its own bad taste and stupidity, amusing its readers with its crude and Philistine attitudes.

Another work by Lucas inhabits the floor space between these tabloid pages. *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* has just these items laid out on a table so as to suggest a crude and fetishistic analogy with the female body. The pitta bread is tucked into a hole in one end of the table (just in case we miss the point) while at the other, a photograph of the table and its contents is propped up, suggesting a face, and referring to Magritte's well known equation of face and female torso in *The Rape* (1934). The food on the table is real and none too fresh. In its way this work is quite as repellent as Quinn's *Self*, and if it had been made by a male artist, it would surely be read as the grossest misogyny. As seen here, however, perhaps an argument about contemporary misogyny is established by the juxtaposition of this work and the tabloid pages, asking us to look through the self-conscious bluff of *The Sport* to a raw and vicious attitude beneath. Further, in displaying tabloid spreads, there is a pointed play on high and low culture, on the elevation of the transient to the permanent, and the prurient to the monumental. This, alongside *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab*, suggests that a seamless web of misogyny runs between high and low, between self-conscious wallowing in matey sexism and more violent fetishistic attitudes, a web in which the liberal, gallery-going viewer is implicated.

Mark Wallinger produces quite different work, showing grand, conventionally painted pictures of race horses and the homeless. *Capital* is a series of seven full-length portraits of homeless people standing in front of imposing city doorways, the doors of course being closed. These figures stand blankly before us, holding the attributes of their 'profession', bottles, cans and carrier bags. The contrast between subject and background and the double

meaning of the title make obvious social comments. His style is detailed but bland, using subdued lighting and colours, deliberately reminiscent of boardroom portraiture. It allows careful attention to detail, both to clothing (soiled coats, odd shoes, string for belts - a social history in garments) and expressions which vary from idiotic grins through resignation to resentment. These Dickensian figures comment poignantly enough on 'Victorian values', but there is also a level of ambiguity and disturbance here. The boardroom portrait conveys prestige on its subject through the manifest labour involved in its production and the cultural status of easel painting, so portraying the homeless in this fashion is an act of homage. Yet in the context of the contemporary art gallery, such portraiture is derided as kitsch, and we cannot be sure that Wallinger's irony in deploying it does not rebound on his subjects. Despite his laudable intentions, there is something knowing and cold, almost mocking, about these works, which use a neutral style to convey highly emotive subjects, and which confer on their subjects a status in representation which eludes them in real life.

Another temperature indicating LED is on display, attached to another steel container, this one a freezer called *The Royal Box*. Rose Finn-Kelcey's idea is that the spectator is shut inside the freezer and wanders into a three-sided space surrounded by ice walls where warmth is rapidly drawn from the body. The experience at the Saatchi gallery (certainly on a weekend) is a little different: there is a long queue to get into the box, people are generally admitted in couples and only for a few moments. Every so often the box must be closed because it warms up too much. For many viewers, then, the box was not much colder than a chilly winter's day - and anyway they had someone to cuddle up to. In a darkened room *Steam Installation*, a large metal device, cycles steam between floor and ceiling, creating a vaporous atmosphere through which the ghostly figures of other viewers may be seen, and on which spotlights play, creating pretty rainbow effects at the fringes. The air is thick with humidity of course, and the machinery makes noises which contribute to a vaguely menacing atmosphere. Both works are supposed to make viewers aware of their bodies by acting directly on them.

If we are meant to shrink with cold or expand vaporously in response to Finn-Kelcey, then other works by Quinn also represent such witherings and swellings. Various luridly coloured busts are mounted on plinths draped in cloth. Like *Self*, they appear to be of great age, and on the point of disintegration. They bear some resemblance to Baroque statuary, but one in which the forms have taken on an organic life of their own, swelling and distorted. This is achieved by using dough to create the basic image and then casting the baked product in lead or bronze. Aside from chaotic distortion, this yields a crumbling, breadly surface, often reminiscent of thick animal hide. The busts are plainly hollow facades and their swelling components are bound together only by a visible metal armature. The busts are both male and female and generally take the form of historical or literary characters - *Louis XVI*, *Marie Antoinette* and *Dr. Panglos*. The latter is Voltaire's character from *Candide* who believes that all events in the world, when taken together, are always for the best. Quinn's use of chance to produce decaying forms probably refers to entropy and is a comment on this view. In *You Take My Breath Away*, another mould has been taken of the artist's body, this time in ghostly yellow rubber. This full length figure hangs limply from the ceiling, torn in places, encrusted in others - and smelling faintly. It is a ghostly prophylactic, translucent and insubstantial, a sacrificial figure, all too obviously a metaphor for deflated masculinity. The body's boundaries once mapped and clung to by this filmy material, are now torn, a blow-up artist ruined by some excess.

Quinn and Lucas make an interesting pair, commenting respectively on the fragile and overblown image of conventional masculinity, and the fetishised ruin of the female body. Lucas's other works displayed, a defiantly and obscenely raised wax finger, casts of the artist's armpits complete with hair, and a pair of old boots with razor blades stuck into the toes, are violent pieces which flagrantly adopt traditional male values in a gesture of opposition. Both artists examine opposing aspects of a political, economic and sexual conflict which is as much to do with changing roles

in the workplace (one reading of Lucas's food piece) as with issues of representation and sexual identity. This is a link between Wallinger's *Capital* and the work of Lucas and Quinn, for the framework of their art is set by an economic transformation which has been felt particularly harshly in Britain. Changing social roles have led to a post-modern questioning of the physical and conceptual coherence of the body, which both Quinn and Finn-Kelcey exploit. All the works shown are visceral and sensationalist in different ways: Finn Kelcey provides middle-class viewers with the unaccustomed experiences of damp and extreme cold; Lucas a vision of lumpen misogyny; Quinn an experience of bodily inflation and evacuation; Wallinger a good-hearted but clumsy comment on pressing social issues and, with his full-size paintings of racehorses, an alluring reflection of class and breeding. What these artists do not provide is much space for critical distance from their work or a sense of their own implication in what they ostensibly criticise. Lacking this, the feeling is often of an icy, self-serving sensationalism.