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British Art Show 7

ART

Subtitled **'In the Days of the Comet'**, the five-yearly touring survey opens in Nottingham



Frieze d/e

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The suggested route for those attending the press launch of British Art Show 7, subtitled 'In the Days of the Comet', prescribed an early encounter with one of the exhibition's - and this year's - showstopping works. Christian Marclay's The Clock (2010), which premiered the week before at White Cube in London, is a spectacularly seductive narrative tapestry composed of thousands of found film fragments, each of which features some form of time-piece indicating the precise hour of day at which we glimpse them. While the animating principle of this 24-hour-long extravaganza was anticipated as early as 1995 by the same artist's Telephones, the sophistication of the execution - not to mention the size of the production budget - is something else again. The Clock is installed along with works by Duncan Campbell, Elizabeth Price and Edgar Schmitz in the smallest and most effectively configured of Nottingham's three venues, the New Art Exchange. Campbell's exemplary 2008 film Bernadette weaves together documentary footage and fictive elaborations of a once emblematic public persona, the charismatic Northern Irish activist and MP Bernadette Devlin. That Price's video, User Group Disco (2010), packs a considerable punch is just as well, given the competition nearby. (This is intended figuratively, as the exhibition layout at the New Art Exchange admirably minimized visual and acoustic interference.) Shot in the darkened interior of a fictional museum, the work proffers a selection of artfully lit, rotating knick-knacks for the viewer's delectation, accompanied by an amped-up A-ha soundtrack and on-screen textual commentary that switchbacks disconcertingly between apocalyptic musings and corporate platitudes. Offering momentary respite from the rewarding demands of these three works is one of Schmitz' ambient interstitial spaces, featuring looped, low-keyed video abstractions, a number of which are



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dispersed through all three of the exhibition venues. That the other two, larger spaces, Nottingham Castle Museum & Art Gallery and Nottingham Contemporary, should provide a more mixed bag of works is unavoidable given the inherent nature of this long-standing, five-yearly exercise in stocktaking, which this time around includes contributions from 39 artists or artistgroups. Despite the customary disavowals in co-curators Lisa Le Feuvre's and Tom Morton's thoughtful catalogue introductions, as well as the recent advent of competing biennials and triennials, bas7 will be assessed to some degree, as were its predecessors, on the basis of the accuracy with which it takes the pulse of a current generation of British artists. (For instance, bas3 in 1990 mostly missed out on the emerging yBa generation, forcing the subsequent two installments to play catch-up.) Roughly threequarters of the artists chosen are between the ages of 35 and 45. The elder statesmen are the Scottish writer and artist, Alasdair Gray (a welcome figure, if slightly over-represented here), and the American Marclay (whose London residence evidently qualifies him for inclusion). Only two artists were born in the 1980s. Another two, Sarah Lucas and Roger Hiorns, previously made the cut in 2000 and 2005, but richly deserve their second bite of the cherry.

Also deserving of their individually dedicated rooms, in Nottingham Contemporary and the Castle Museum, are the very different films of Emily Wardill (Gamekeepers Without Game, 2010) and Luke Fowler (A Grammar for Listening [parts 1–3], 2009). The predominating medium in both these venues, however, is sculpture or installation. Highlights include Steven Claydon's cannily placed anachronistic hybrids (From under the periodic table [ARGON & GASSY MIXTURES], 2010), the allusive, solipsistic quietism of Ian Kiaer's Melnikov Project, silver (2010), the deceptively charged formlessness of Karla Black's There Can Be No Arguments (2010), the dysfunctional theatrics of Nathaniel Mellors' film installation Ourhouse (2010) and Brian Griffiths' giant teddybear head that lugubriously greets visitors to Nottingham Contemporary (The Body and Ground [Or Your Lovely Smile], 2010).

It is a fact of life that painting gets the roughest deal in shows like this, however judiciously conceived. This is due in equal parts to the exigencies of exhibition installation and to the unique, and arguably unfair burden of expectations the medium continues to bear. While time-strapped day-trippers may be excused seeing few of the longer video works in their entirety, they may also be reluctant to spend even the minimal time solicited by an individual painting, a danger highlighted here by the spectral, slow-burning canvases of Maaike Schoorel. A common problem in survey shows, particuarly those that favour very recent work, is that certain artists may not be shown to their best advantage and certain tendencies in art may not be exemplified by their most accomplished practitioners. Again, painters seem particularly susceptible. (Less so an artist like Michael Fullerton, whose investment in painting is both partial and particular.) For instance, Phoebe Unwin and Milena Dragicevic are both good painters. Yet Unwin has made better paintings than some of those by which she is represented, whereas Neal Tait, who is not included, has made better paintings than some of those included by Dragicevic, executed in a comparable vein. Despite the resurgent international interest in heterodox strains

of photography, including abstraction, it is notable that this is reflected solely in one work by the increasingly magisterial Wolfgang Tillmans (Freischwimmer 155, 2010). Tillmans seems exceptional here also in addressing the political by anything other than idiosyncractic indirection, through the inclusion of his Truth Study Center tables (2005–ongoing), though this aspect of his work is hardly his strongest suit. Despite the inclusion of George Shaw's recently scaled-up paintings of his native Coventry's enveloping gloom, bas7 registers almost no sense of current socioeconomic crisis.

Any assessment of bas7 based on its initial manifestation is necessarily provisional, as the exhibition will mutate considerably as it tours, over the next year, to London, Glasgow and Plymouth. This caveat is compounded by the fact that a number of artists' contributions took the form of one-off events scheduled for the weeks following the official opening. (Artists confined to such presentations include Olivia Plender, Gail Pickering, Sue Tompkins, Tris Vonna-Michell and The Otolith Group.) That said, 'In the Days of the Comet' is as good, if not better, than any British Art Show of the past 20 years.



Ned Beauman

A novelist who lives in London. His novel, Boxer, Beetle (Sceptre, 2010), was nominated for the Guardian first book award. His second novel, The Teleportation Accident, will be published in 2012.

In Matthew Darbyshire's An Exhibition for Modern Living (2010), taste is the bait and class is the snare. Installed in Nottingham Contemporary's large street-side window like a display of merchandise, the work brings together dozens of items of colourful mid-price interior design: lamps, bookends, hat-stands, telephones, curtains and so on. They are all repellent and depressing, and the effect of being surrounded by such a dense cage of them is unexpectedly powerful. As the narrator observes in Elizabeth Price's video User Group Disco (2010), which is shown at the New Art Exchange: 'We are aware that works of art can shock the unwary by their resemblance to accumulated domestic monstrosities.' But what makes An Exhibition for Modern Living so much more vicious is the text Darbyshire puts next to it. 'With thanks to the following lenders,' it reads, 'without whom the production of this work would not have been possible,' followed by a list of 19 brands. This is, of course, disingenuous -Darbyshire could just have bought all this stuff if he needed to. The brands participate unwittingly in their own humiliation. But if they aren't in on the joke, you start to think, who else isn't? British Art Show 7 starts off in Nottingham. Not everyone that sees it is going to realize that the installation is supposed to be grotesque; a lot of them probably love this kind of trash. They don't know any better. No, that's not an excusable thought to have, but if it goes through your head just for a second, then Darbyshire has you. And even the surrounding printed matter seems to be complicit in setting up a notional class divide around the interpretation of his work. The free exhibition booklet gives no hint of An Exhibition for Modern Living's satirical intentions, observing blandly that 'the work explores the mass availability of design classics and the pervasive idea of achieving "tasteful" living through their acquisition', and alluding to an eponymous 1949 exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts that well-meaningly 'set out to showcase "modern taste". It's only in the exhibition catalogue - priced at a distinctly unproletarian £14.99 - that we get any whispers of 'kitsch' and 'cliché' and 'doubt'.

Inaugurated in 1979, the British Art Show's original mission was to bring contemporary art to the provinces, and Darbyshire – like a more devilish Pierre Bourdieu – begins an interrogation of class, taste and the regional art-going public that seems to taint these good intentions almost indelibly. Apart from as a reference to H.G. Wells' 1906 novel, why is it, one wonders after seeing his work, that curators Lisa Le Feuvre and Tom Morton have titled their show 'In the Days of the Comet'? Is a comet like this five-yearly survey not only in the sense that it blazes across the

country at regular intervals, but also in the sense that it establishes a divide between the astronomers, who recognize it as a celestial phenomenon, and the yokels, who see it only as an omen, a prodigy, an enigma? In Nottingham, to obtain the 'art passport' that allows you to get into the Castle Museum & Art Gallery section of the exhibition free of charge, you first have to get the tram across town to the New Art Exchange, where Duncan Campbell, Christian Marclay and Elizabeth Price are showing. It is almost as if the curators, in a strategy that could have come straight out of David Cameron's patrician 'nudge unit', were bribing the masses $\pounds 5.50$ each to see the part of the show that makes the greatest demands on your curiosity and spare time. Such speculations might seem mean-spirited, but the alternative is to ascribe to the British Art Show a sort of a sincere democratic optimism about its missionary activities. Well, the products in An Exhibition for Modern Living are full of optimism - they're cheerful, affordable, patriotically inscribed with sparkly Union Jacks. They're also dismal. If this is democratic optimism, Darbyshire suggests, perhaps it would be a good thing if curators did have at least a measure of elitist pessimism about Nottingham, Glasgow and Plymouth. Or at least he seems to suggest that. The installation itself, again, is too deadpan to take any position of its own – it's just stuff on some shelves – and all the wrangling above is outsourced to the reluctant brains of its visitors. When bas7 moves to the metropolitan surroundings of London's Hayward Gallery in February, many of these themes will inevitably fade from view, and that's something to regret, because An Exhibition for Modern Living subjects the survey to the sort of ideological stress tests that you won't find anywhere in the catalogue.

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith and Ned Beauman

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