

David Cotterrell: guardian.co.uk : I have seen the Future and it Sucks

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Adrian Searle despairs of the mix of the cliché ridden, the bombastic and the second-hand in the Beck's Futures show

There is something wrong with the third Beck's Futures. To say that this year's show, which opens at London's Institute of Contemporary Art on Friday, is ill-judged would be a little premature. But it is difficult not to see it, 65,000 prize money and all, askew. With a selection and judging panel that includes Marianne Faithfull among its international art-world worthies, sponsorship from the Face magazine and Beck's, and a razzmatazz finale on May 7, when the winner will be announced by Björk, Beck's Futures is trying desperately to be cool. But it ends up feeling warmed over.

The real problem is one of language. Why is it that so much of the work depends on quotation and re-quotation, sampling, collage and cut-up? Art driven by the idea that there is a crisis of originality has become a dreary convention. The death of the author, with its attendant eschatological theorising, has been a blessing to people with no ideas to call their own. It is just a dumb conceit.

All three of the painters in the show - Dan Perfect, Neil Rummings and Kirsten Glass - make works in which borrowed graphics, images and stylistic licks are recombined and re-presented in various ways. Rummings uses the Ferrari rearing stallion marque as a major motif. Perhaps he wishes to echo George Stubbs's Whistlejacket, or to say something about the passing of the horse in favour of the internal combustion engine. Who knows? Maybe he just wanted a punchy, iconic image. He also borrows Roy Lichtenstein's drippy brush stroke, which appears in a work with flatly painted, cut-away sections of the human body - the eyeball, teeth, gums, heart. The title of this piece, Lichtenstein Not Frankenstein, is a clunking pointer to the idea of artist as reanimator, like Mary Shelley's protagonist. And like Lichtenstein, whose art was nothing but quotation.

Glass's paintings also recombine images - girlie shots, snatches of Edvard Munch, passages of other people's signature style. Her pictures look a lot like David Salle's, another image appropriator. Glass is pretty good at what she does, particularly at the transitions from one kind of painting to another. But this kind of stuff is less pop-tastic than bombastic.

It is as if the artists are trying to prove what good students of painting they are in the age of the postmodernism seminar. As much as they buy into a tedious, outdated notion of the postmodern, they are also keen consumers of the latest novelty-effect paints. Day-Glo orange and pink are big this year. Hung together, Glass and Rummings cancel each other out.

Dan Perfect has a much lighter touch, and a more original take on the unoriginal. Patches of cartoon graphics and graffiti float against softly smeared rainbow bands of color (a crap but popular silk-screen effect from the 1960s), or congeal into fragments of artificial landscape. Here is a Jonathan Lasker moment, there is Mariscal's Cobi, the little mascot from the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. Is this a bit of Adami I see before me?

Perfect is clearly enjoying himself, while the others try desperately to look as if they are. He doesn't push his seriousness or his quotes down your throat, and dares to be playful. His paintings wouldn't look amiss in a groovy Shoreditch retro bar, among the wood-effect Formica and 1950s lights, where everyone quaffs absinthe cocktails. But this chic world is turned into an animated nightmare.

Climbing the gallery walls are shiny metalised-paper suprematist motifs: Malevich redone as decor. A herd of deer stand on the overlaid rectangles, unconcerned that they are grazing the plane of the wall. Elsewhere, an extruded, otter-like creature swims out of the ICA's stairwell. The deer and otter are taxidermist's forms, which contender Paul Hosking has covered in pictures of skulls and the faces of movie monsters. This is nature denatured, and art undone. It is impossible to look at it without thinking of Bruce Nauman's use of much larger taxidermical forms in certain of his works.

Alluding to Nauman is dangerous. He plays a bigger game than just about anyone alive, and piffing questions about originality would be beneath him. What almost everyone here lacks is the kind of ambition and sense of freedom that makes Nauman a great artist. Wisely, Hosking isn't trying to say anything about Nauman, but he doesn't say much about anything else either. His work is just rhetorical, and irritatingly hybrid.

Toby Paterson's mural, running the length of the ICA concourse, is based on a relief that decorates a wall of Lubetkin's Hallfield housing estate in Paddington. He also quotes the public architecture of Denys Lasdun, and the woeful modernisms of local-authority architects who, having grown up on Le Corbusier and high ideals, turned the rationalist vision into cheap buildings. Paterson's work is about failed ideals rather than style quotation. His little agglomerations of MDF and plastic, made from discarded fragments of architectural model-making materials, are OK. But this is an art that struggles to get beyond the known.

The same is true of David Cotterrell's film installation, in which footage of an approaching steam train, replete with atmospheric soundtrack, is projected on to a cloud of dry ice, which fills the room as the train passes. This, too, is a nod to something else: namely the Lumiere brothers' pioneering 1895 film of the arrival of a train at Grand Central station. Cotterrell is attempting to reintroduce the wonder and fear audiences felt on seeing film for the first time. But it is not the first time we have seen film projected on clouds of carbon dioxide (Tony Ousler used the same trick a couple of years ago, and the technique goes back to much earlier theatrical special effects), and Cotterrell's installation is only entertainment.

The same could be said for Hideyuki Sawayanagi's video pieces. In one, a man repeatedly falls, with a ker-bloink sound effect, on to a black floor, and scuttles frenetically about. Sometimes he lands on his back, sometimes his front. He is making like a fly. He isn't Jeff Goldblum, but he is just as alarming to watch. It is a relief to turn to Sawayanagi's second little film, in which numbers countdown from 30 to zero, after which the word "Love" is flashed at you, very fast and very bright, leaving its image imprinted on your retina. Before the word fades, the feeling dies.

A death in Sarajevo is the theme of Rachel Lowe's installation. You enter a black room facing two film projectors. White light beams on to silhouetted figures, painted on the walls behind you. The images are taken from a newspaper photograph. There is a body on the ground. If anyone follows you into the room, they are silhouetted too, walking into the line of fire. When I saw this piece, Lowe was still tweaking it. It is an elegant enough idea. But it is one she has used before, and it could have been taken further.

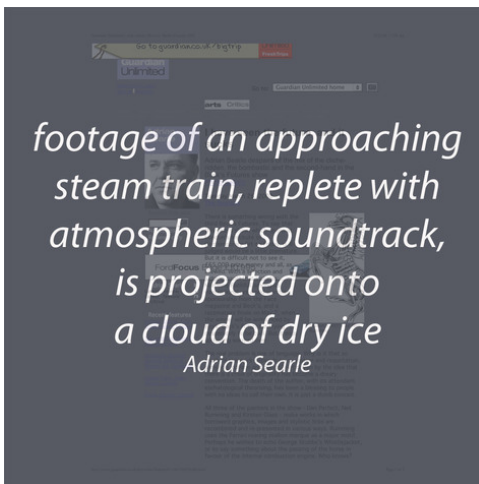
Nick Relph and Oliver Payne, a pair of self-manufactured bad boys who succeeded in getting chucked out of the fine art course at Kingston University, are showing a long, badly edited film called *Mixtape*, which is accompanied by a version of minimalist composer Terry Riley's *Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band*. Riley is a musical genius. I am uncertain whether Relph and Payne possess any talent at all, though they have probably watched lots of pop promos. For *Mixtape*, read *mistake*. The film is a mess, a waste of time. *Poppy Nogood* repeats the line *You're No Good* over and over, and this is Relph and Payne's mantra.

Tom Wood is the odd one out here. For years, Wood has been taking photographs in and around

Liverpool. The individual shots aren't up to much: when they are consciously composed, they are, once more, cliché-ridden. What matters is the cumulative effect. Couples snogging in pubs, people on buses and at bus shelters, a girl alone and miserable at a wedding reception, kids fighting. This is worthy stuff, but a footnote to the history of street photography. If he got a bit more pomo it wouldn't be any better. If he tried harder to be more hip it wouldn't change things.

Is this really "tomorrow's talent today", as the show's publicity consistently has it? It all feels refried, and horribly out of touch with anything approaching vitality. What is really missing is a sense of necessity, that any of this work needed to be made. It is either premature or it is too late. In the end, it is Marianne Faithfull and Bjork who have the talent here, and maybe Cobi, the unsung hero of the Perfect painting.

Adrian Searle



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