

## **New Order II: British Art Today, Saatchi Gallery - exhibition review**

On seeing this exhibition, Brian Sewell wants to overturn the New Order and suggests art critics should mount their own exhibition of contemporary British artists



Energetic swirls: Sarah Dwyer's *Turning Vacancies*, 2012 © Sarah Dwyer, 2012

Late last autumn Tate Britain mounted an exhibition called *Painting Now: Five Contemporary Artists*. The grounds for this choice were not revealed but it was made by four curators all with more or less the same title declaring their expertise to lie in the field of Contemporary British Art. We must thus assume that the selection was made without external advice or influence and that the curators perceived merit enough in every exhibited work to justify supporting it with the prestige that accompanies such exposure in one of the nation's greatest galleries, as well as the consequent commercial benefit.

The naïve visitor must inevitably suppose that these five painters (four women and one man) are not a random or whimsical choice but one based on deep experience and refined judgement, and that they represent the very best in Britain and are, indeed, the Constables and Turners of our day. Even the wily art dealer (often a man not of judgment but cunning) may assume imprimatur of the Tate to be a guarantee of quality and promise, and to him the credulous collector will turn in hope of profitable long-term investment — buy when the artist is young and new to the market, for then the ultimate yield will be phenomenal. The work of an unknown painter suddenly promoted by the Tate, so goes the legend, will be taken up by the British Council and exhibited at the Venice Biennale and a hundred other international shindigs from Cathay to Babylon, be shortlisted for the Turner Prize, within a decade be the subject of a retrospective subsidised by the Arts Council, and then break an auction record in an evening sale at Christie's.

Be warned — such dreams of avarice are rarely realised. The young painter is too often a flash in the pan or a one-trip pony, brilliant at 25 and bust a decade later — John Bellany a prize example — and even Sickert and Augustus John fell away dreadfully in their early dotage (dare I say Picasso too?); I am, moreover, far from convinced that young curators are in any way fitted to advise the betting shops of the art market. There may have been a time — perhaps when old John Rothenstein was director and Robin Ironside his minion — when those in charge of the Tate had something of an eye for quality but not now. These five painters are remarkable only for being unremarkable; together they present the dullest exhibition I have ever seen, so wretched that I was glad not to be compelled to review it — yet I returned to it after seeing Charles Saatchi's latest exhibition, for that is surely a challenger for the wooden spoon.

Even on a Saturday afternoon the sparsely hung Tate rooms were empty of visitors — perhaps they were deterred by the admission charge, an absurd imposition for such a nothing of a show (it closes on Sunday). Tomma Abts occupies the first room; she won the Turner Prize some years ago with a set of pretty little canvases, then abstract, feminine, fey and undemanding, far too slight ever to be a burden in the history of art, and they are so, still, shades of pink seeming predominant. Simon Ling's wonky streetscapes are so sub-Sickert, sub-John Cole (an inveterate painter of shop fronts who died in 1975), and so sub- the later-20th century obsession for painting the bleak repetitive façades of contemporary buildings, that they could have been painted at any time in the past 100 years. Lucy McKenzie is still unformed as a painter, Catherine Story's material is too derivative even to be justified as a postmodern irony, and Gillian Carnegie's cats, staircases and still lives in 50 shades of grey are pointlessly bleak and flat. Far from being the foundation of a new generation of YBAs (Young British Artists), this exhibition was a charmless cul-de-sac.

Charles Saatchi has repeatedly done much better with this kind of show but even he seemed to falter in last year's survey exhibition *New Order: British Art Today*. Of that I wrote: "I am compelled to question his judgment, to ask what has happened to his once clear

eye. If Saatchi is as shrewd a judge as ever and this is indeed the best he could discover to represent British Art Today, then this is no New Order but the Old in terminal decline.”

Now we have its sequel, *New Order II: British Art Today*, and it is clear that the decline in quality and invention has accelerated at so rattling a pace that, looking back at *New Order I*, that seems to have been an event of powerful promise. Some playful little things (they are things even though they hang on a wall) by Dominic Beattie, about the same size as the paintings of Tomma Abts but more robust and frivolous, may amuse in the nursery or kitchen but for a man of 33 they verge on the infantile and shoddy; and Sarah Dwyer’s paintings, their motifs fragmented in energetic swirls, are essentially decorations without meaning or implication, yet a shade too intestinal and alimentary to hang in restaurants. In this company Beattie and Dwyer are the heavyweights but where, if anywhere, will work of this sort lead them? Dwyer, at 40, must be in particular danger with paintings so unplanned and unresolved — intriguing at 25 but not in middle age.

Nothing else from these 13 artists (six women, seven men) is worth a second glance. Finbar Ward’s wooden boxes (hardly paintings, hardly art) have in some shape or form been part of the vocabulary of contemporary art for 30 years and more; he is, at 24, presumably too young to realise that we have seen its ilk before. Mary Ramsden’s silhouette landscapes in two or three colours are the resort of the failed beginner, and so too are the painted backgrounds to which Oliver Osborne pastes a photograph or cutting. The most short-lived of work will be the abstractions of Dan Rees, thumbed in pretty Plasticine onto wooden panels, echoing the patterns printed on cheap cotton for cheap frocks; when dirty and dusty, the Plasticine will prove impossible to clean; even if put behind glass, it is not a material that ages well, and the final resting place of such work will be the rubbish dump. The rest is witless first-year art-school stuff, not the work of early maturity.

If neither Saatchi nor Tate Britain can find anything worthwhile in British Art today, perhaps they should retire from the field and let others try their hand at it. I therefore make the (no doubt outrageous) suggestion that art critics should be invited to mount an exhibition of contemporary British artists. By this I do not mean those who write for the bilge-filled little magazines funded by the Arts Council, or for magazines that must scratch the backs of institutions, or play lackey to bodies that may occasionally employ them; I mean the critics who write on the visual arts for major newspapers and who, for the most part, tell the truth and shame the Devil (and much good it does them).

I dare say that they too will find nothing worth the finding — for that is the implication of both Saatchi’s *New Order* exhibitions; I dare say they may decide that painting is dead and that the art schools have killed it. Long ago in 1972, when I first began trawling the nation’s arts schools, talent seemed abundant and widespread, but by the late Eighties it, and skill and originality too, were rare, with painting, both as art and craft, stuck fast in the doldrums and neglected by both tutors and students. Recent conversations with students in major art schools have left me with the conviction that painting and drawing are no longer taught in terms of instruction. Drawing has certainly been debased to “work on paper” rather than the instrument of observation, analysis and preparation in a wide range of techniques, each of them capable of producing a masterpiece in itself as well as in the finished painting. And for years now I have heard from students that they are taught nothing about the materials of paint or even of the point and purpose of the different shapes and bristles of their brushes. No student of the violin could survive a day in the Royal College or Academy of Music unable to read music, tune the strings or tauten his bow, but a painter need not even know which end of the brush applies the paint.

Saatchi and the Tate curators make one fundamental error — they search only among the young. I would look among the generations of artists who, not of their small number and of a very different caste, have been obliterated by the YBAs, their familiars, buddy-boys and cronies, by the overwhelming publicity accorded them and by the public funding poured into their pockets by the Tates, the Arts and British Councils, and by Saatchi. Do we really want another Hirst or Emin? Would we not rather have another Freud or Bacon? Bacon was 40 when given his first solo show with a London dealer, and Freud was into his fifties before there was any general recognition of his talent.