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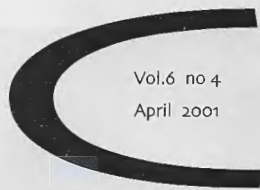
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London pats itself on the back

Mark Harris



The depressing idea of jump-starting the millennium with survey shows of the previous decade's art has not deterred some London public galleries which are currently filled with the sound of artists slapping each other on the back for having survived the previous ten years. Most prominently Tate Modern's *Century City* pairs London with Bombay as dynamic capitals of the '90s. You have to wonder whether visiting Bombay artists share the same incredulity towards their image as most Londoners feel about this official version of their lives. Nothing here evokes the contradictory and dynamic local art environment. The stingy assortment of works allowed by the Tate has Sarah Lucas and Janette Parris sculptures isolated in plexi boxes or in sterile booths. What once looked urgent and extemporized is bestowed the weariness of Surrealist knickknacks. Across the river the Institute of Contemporary Arts has just ended a show celebrating ten years of the now defunct south London gallery, City Racing. At least this reappraisal was busy with disparities evoking the uninhibited conceptual improvisation that marked '90s London. It was good to see Giorgio Sadotti's *50 Truths* posters conflating Duchamp's star-shaped haircut with Nauman's neon truism. In 1993 Sadotti had shown all fifty versions of his spiral-shaped haircut, each with a different slogan written along its trail. Instead of revealing mystic truths we learn that *The True Artist Wears Denim, or Likes Shelves But Won't Use Them*. Also in the show was one of Jemima Stehli's memorable displacements from 1997 where she stands in for the mannequins in Pop artist Allen Jones' 60's quaintly offensive furniture pieces. That the show felt alive with compelling (if old) ideas may point as much to their scarcity in London today as to City Racing's discernment.

There's a fair bit of this gallery-within-a-gallery thing going on at the Tate as well, where City Racing appear for an encore, covering an entire wall with an obsessively detailed flow chart of their history. This feels analogous to counting hairs in your armpit. Alongside them other artist ventures like BANK, Matthew Higg's *Imprint*, and Peter Lewis's *Big Blue* are given generous representation. You feel these

major venues are doing penance for ignoring the cowboy curating which powered the local scene for so long. For their part the excluded artists are delighted to be brought back into the fold. Perhaps it's a bit easy to sneer at the ease of the prodigal son's return to the institution, given that each craves the other's validation. They're certainly getting it on now but the results are mixed. Worst of these self-congratulatory reappraisals is Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin's video in which, over a bottle of wine, they chat about the art shop they ran in the early '90s. It's a sad sight to see two sometimes terrific artists sinking into premature wistfulness like rocking-chair primadonnas. Could this be the true proof that London is dead, the sign we have long anticipated indicating that rigor mortis has set in?



AK Dolven, *Still Life*, video still. Courtesy the artist.

Not quite. There have been a few interesting new shows amidst the nostalgia. Take Emma Kay's single video exhibit *The Future From Memory* at Chisenhale. In a 12 by 15 foot projection, batches of black text continuously scroll upwards from the floor, receding to illegibility at a vanishing point two-thirds the way up the wall. These terse paragraphs are Kay's attempt to imagine what's going to happen to us decades, centuries, millennia from now. A colorful photorealistic sci-fi illustration on the invitation card shows her disembodied head racking its brains for insights into the future. Eyes clenched tight, fist to forehead, illumination clearly comes at a price. Intentionally, the extravagance of her science fiction is antithetical to the reductive monochrome projection. In 2081 there is global nuclear meltdown. New maps are required as rises in sea levels change island and coastal structures. Alaska becomes independent once galassium, the intergalactic transport fuel, is discovered there. Rainforest deforestation only halts in 2113 with reforestation picking up speed in 2170. This dystopian litany slyly twisted the knife in that modernist assumption that the artist must provide a surrogate visual utopia for the elusive real one. This stuff was grim, and you left grateful that your own barometer of bleakness was usually set to "tolerable."

At Matis Gallery, Robin Klassnik's long-established venue for demanding installation projects, Nathaniel Mellors has a very amusing set of videos shown in various formats within a labyrinth of sound-proofed fixtures. Mellors is still a graduate student (which is pretty unusual for this space) but he is sorting out some interesting ideas. All walls and partitions of this airless environment are covered in felt, as we are immersed in an evening of alternative TV programmes. Set in a transport cafe and featuring a lot of animals, there is a soap opera for senior citizens. A quiz show is played by unseen competitors heard as computerized voices. A fishmonger wastes his access TV time with a long-winded story about a delayed bus. As spectators we sit on improvised furniture in this blacked-out sensorily-deprived space to watch these deadending programs. It seems we're in yet another artist's dystopia, a bit too close to home for comfort. Hasn't anyone out there got a redeeming vision?

Perhaps AK Dolven who has set up video works at Sadler's Wells whose foyer and bars have lately become a venue for multimedia art. Equipment is only switched on during performances which makes viewing almost impossible as you are jostled for standing space by ballet aficionados. Dolven recently had a fine video piece at Anthony Wilkinson Gallery where, in homage to Munch's *Kiss*, a couple interminably embraced to a techno beat, their faces digitally fused into amorphousness. The best work at Sadler's Wells was *Still Life*, a video of a red tulip being painted white, the flower filling the monitor screen. This was played back in reverse so that the flower started white and progressively revealed its incandescent red. Surprisingly gripping, this video touched on the potential of painting. Considering her Munch piece and *Still Life*, Dolven seems to be wondering where the enthusiasm imbuing some historical work can be found in the present. There was something enjoyably awkward and unfashionable about these videos. It takes a corny magic show of a film played in reverse to acknowledge that painting still reveals things by way of revealing itself.

And in case it seems from this that the only thing going on in London now is video, at Five Years, the artist-run space in the East End, *Self-Service/Painting* is a great audience participation opportunity. At any one time there are only three paintings on the wall but visitors can ask the gallery staff to change them for any others in the inventory which itself changes daily as artists bring in new work. Anyone can submit a painting and add it to the stack. No work will be refused. The show has just opened and there's already fifty paintings on hand. You have to wonder if they're prepared for the onslaught just waiting to put their generosity to the test. □