

Art

MONTHLY

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Border Crossings

Is multiculturalism the new Orientalism?

Art Abroad

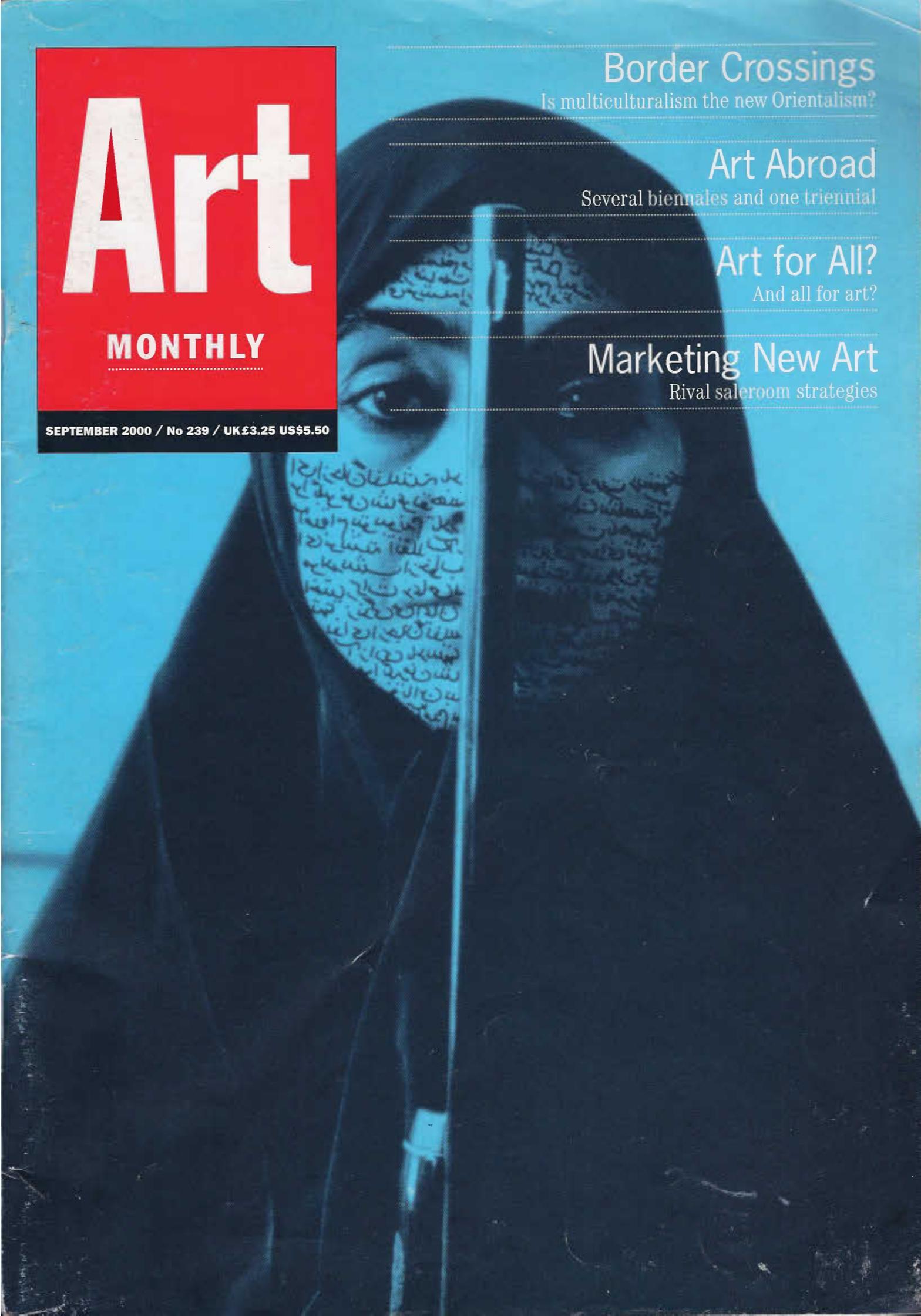
Several biennales and one triennial

Art for All?

And all for art?

Marketing New Art

Rival saleroom strategies



■ Robert Melee

White Cube London July 6 to September 2

For years Robert Melee, based in New York, has been making Super-8 home movies affectionately documenting the behaviour of his libidinal friends and his wildly eccentric mother, with whom nothing is too intimate to share. Silent, usually black and white and filmed with a static camera, often out of focus and pixelated, these vignettes seldom last longer than a minute. Transferred to video in this installation, there were 15 tapes playing simultaneously on old American televisions installed in cabinets made by Melee himself. Dominating the gallery were two of these nine-foot square hulks, boasting cheesy wood-grain finish selectively painted over in lurid green and orange stripes, topped off with kitsch vases and masses of framed film stills. These cabinets were a paean to boondocks baroque, the kind of furniture that makes suburban America more alien than anything we're likely to find on Mars.

Many of Melee's films depict polymorphously perverse desires maturing into everyday routine. He undresses and bathes his mother, or drags her, drunk and voluptuous, upstairs to bed. We see her comfortably *déshabillée*, vacuuming the living room, sashaying along a beach or collapsing in hilarity among party decorations. In other films, Melee inserts a bunch of carrots into a man's anus or sits at his desk studiously ignoring the couple having sex beside him. Alternative sequences show a woman indifferently reading a book or filing her fingernails while fucking. Elsewhere, a friend strenuously fucks an armchair, and then again, a watermelon.

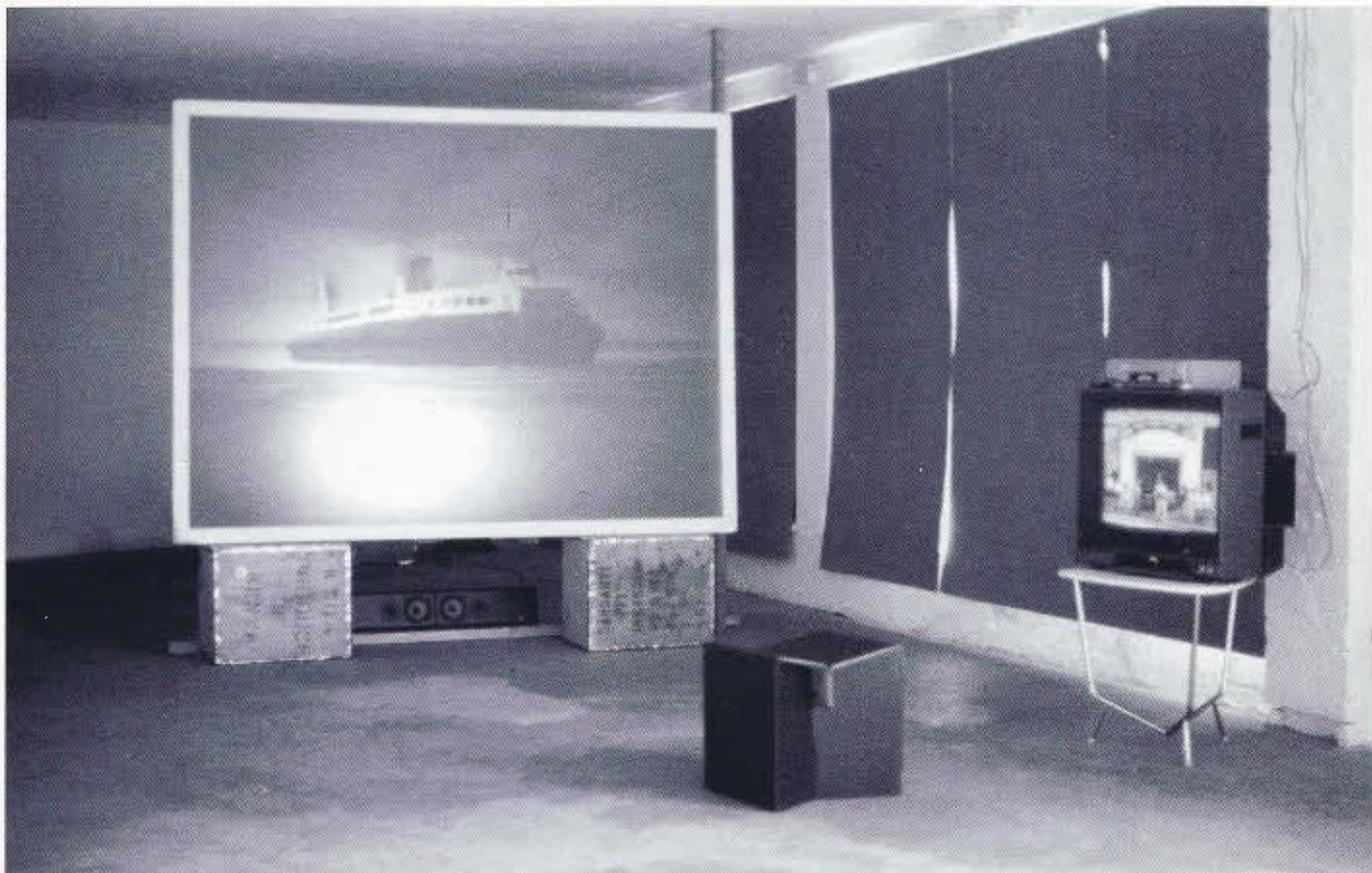
These sex scenes are made the more watchable for their blandness and their narrative inconsequentiality. Melee isn't interested in the conventions of depicting suburbia and gives wide berth to the David Lynch catalogue of psychoses, as well as ignoring the arousal mechanisms of that other suburban pastime, pornography. There is the sense of having wandered into a zone where rules of salaciousness or appropriateness don't apply. Besides their freewheeling inventiveness and lack of pretension, what makes these strange films engrossing is their claim to normalcy.

Interspersed with this group is a different set of films which take Keatonesque slapstick off the rails into contemporary performance pieces. A blurry figure wearing ill-fitting underwear stands in front of a backdrop and sets his wig on fire, shuffling anxiously until plunging his head into a bucket of water. A woman drags herself face down on a trolley along Soho streets. An extravagantly dressed couple, seemingly sprung from *Guys and Dolls*, exaggerate the newcomer's astonishment at New York by doing ludicrous cartwheel dances across Broadway. Here Melee's imagination is gloriously out of sync with the times. Even though such mania is not completely unfamiliar in New York (I am thinking for example of some early Wooster Group productions), Melee's Dionysian abandon feels like an intelligent alternative to current aesthetic strategies.

In the smaller office space were a handful of interesting photographic and painted works. Many identical self-portrait photos were carefully positioned inside an ornate frame, the whole thing then encased in a yellowing plastic zip cover, the kind used to protect furniture (yes, you guessed it) in suburban enclaves. The

Robert Melee
Robert Melee's Unit
2000





paintings are the kind of art that we imagine bored teenagers make in their bedrooms when they run out of drugs. Bottle tops are embedded in plaster panels and then individually painted in gloss colours, the results looking tantalisingly like inept Vasarelys.

Where do we place this work which seems about as interested in critical context as it is concerned about value? These presentational qualities and extreme content make Richard Billingham look genteel. Yet Melee's weirdness is not for shock value, nor is he pruriently documenting subcultures as did Larry Clark in Tucson.

By contrast, its interest is increased by the avoidance of critical contexts, in its dumb refusal to succumb to providing interpretative access or aesthetic positions. It qualifies for Paul Mann's category of 'stupid undergrounds', the plethora of alternative pursuits which are currently so low on the cultural horizon that they are hardly worth redeeming. Of these, the most successfully evasive is that underground which becomes invisible, which conceals even the fact that it is concealed. This kind of post-culture offers a way out for artists who must otherwise insist that their pummelling on art's closed exit door means something. That Melee doesn't bother with such recuperable symbols of resistance and instead ploughs on with his garage performances made this show one of the most vital in town. ■

Mark Harris is an artist.

■ The Ascent of Man

The Trade Apartment London July 13 to August 5

■ Geraint Evans

Anthony Wilkinson Gallery London June 14 to July 23

■ Sean Landers

greengrassi London June 17 to July 31

■ Raymond Pettibon

Sadie Coles HQ London June 17 to July 22

End-of-term silliness set in as summer arrived in London. 'Le Ecôle dé Bürrows ét Bøb Smith' at The Trade Apartment was advertising for a 0.8 Lecturer Fine Art. The application form posed some tricky questions: 'Joseph Beuys liked to eat sausages, but how did he teach Keifer to prepare them? And why did it involve straw? What did they do with the sausage grease?'. David Burrows and Bob & Roberta Smith's photos stuck all over a wall painting (in Smith's trademark lettering), document the Professors' well-lubricated day doing the end of year assessment in several hi-fat eateries. Jaki Sugar is 'from the north and too politicle', Fi Turtle was 'sick on me on coach trip to Tate - loser', whereas Tony Beef - or

l to r

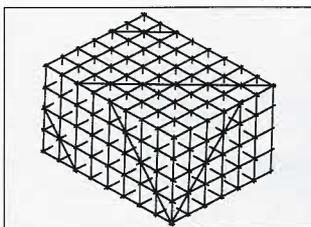
Jeroen Offerman

The Great Escape

1999/2000

Lisa Prior

Shorting Camper 2000



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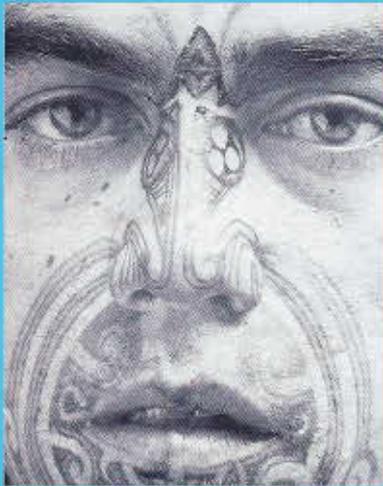
**FUTURE
FACTORY**



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