

London Art Scene Diary

MIRROR CITY AT THE HAYWARD, PART 2

NOVEMBER 23, 2014 | ROBPRINCE | LEAVE A COMMENT



Greetings, artsters!

So where was I? Ah, yes, penetrating ever further into Mirror City, an exhibition that was proving to be a lot more engaging and interesting than I had expected.

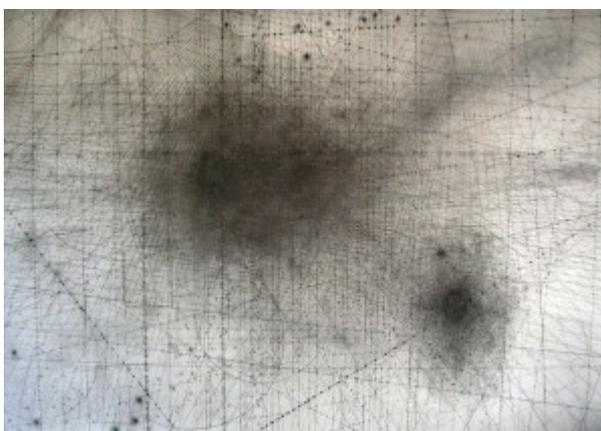
A few yards on from the Tai Shani installation (see previous blog) was a room lined on two walls with small-scale photo-montages of original black-and-white cinema lobby cards, courtesy of Slade graduate John Stezaker. This brilliantly simple concept, collectively titled *Tabula Rasa*, appealed to the former film student in me right away.

Stezaker has cut the images together in a fairly angular manner; there is no attempt to 'blend' one into the other (he invariably uses just two photographs, giving the montage an uncomplicated directness). The result has a curiously abstract dimension, while at the same time suggesting new and 'imagined' scenarios – to powerfully dreamlike effect, playing with the idea of a 'film within a film', and of finding new meaning through bizarre juxtapositions. Stezaker's choice of (wildly obscure) movies suggests he is a keen student of film noir and 1950s B-movie schlock, and likewise (I'm guessing) he is not be unfamiliar with the work of French New Wave directors Alain Resnais and Jacques Rivette, whose work also explores the notion of creating new 'fictions' within existing ones.

Perhaps the most effective of these intriguing and often witty montages, are two in which a trapezoid shape has been cut out and left blank to create the impression of a 'movie screen', at which the B-movie protagonists appear to be staring. This 'blank slate' (according to Stezaker's accompanying wall

text) offers a space for 'imaginary projections', the focus not just of the gaze of the actors, but also of our own. Who says surrealism is dead?

Next door to the Stezaker collection, Emma McNally's large-scale monochrome works in pencil and charcoal, Choral Fields 1-6, hover somewhere between architectural drawing and abstract expressionism. Placed together in a darkened room, these works have a strangely brooding effect, the crisp architectural lines blurring in and out of clouds of dark charcoal that threaten, and at times succeed, in overwhelming them. According to McNally, the images 'suggest both music and a field of activity or vision ... a peripheral space in which forms materialise.' She also cites the 'philosophical idea of the "chora"; about which I know nothing at all, but is apparently a reference to a term described by Plato as meaning 'a space ... the milieu in which forms materialise.' Quite.



Now, I could go off on a tangent here about the apparently statutory requirement of contemporary artists to accompany their work with an 'explanatory text', almost as some kind of validation that what they are doing is more than just pointless doodling. But I will leave that for some other occasion, other than to ask, quite rhetorically, why that was never a requirement for Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock or Jasper Johns or Andy Warhol or Alan Jones (more on him soon) or ...?

Do you get my point?

Actually, McNally's presence in the exhibition is unusual in that she is a philosophy graduate, as opposed to having gone the usual art college route (I can see no reference to formal art training in her CV). In fact, further research online reveals that she is a 'self-taught' artist – all the more surprising given the powerfully conceptual nature of her work, and the skill with which it is realised.

Anyway, by way of light relief (which in no way belittles McNally's fine achievement), Forced Entertainment artistic director Tim Etchell's hilarious 'poster' series have rightly been awarded an entire wall, running up beside the stairwell as you move from one floor to another. This is political satire-as-art, a collection of ascerbic commentaries on the absurd and 'propagandist' element that colours the

way the media presents everyday reality. Each poster is presented in classic agit-prop format, no images, just thick black type-face slogans 'telling it like it is'. Many of these really hit the mark, and many are frankly laugh-out loud hilarious. Even London's annual art-market frenzy, the Frieze Art fair, comes in for a serious kicking, 'Produced by the Coalition government, sponsored by Smirnoff (sic), Stolichnaya and Zubrzowka,' and including works such as Heironymus Bosch's 'Job Seekers in Hell' and 'Imaginary Concentration Camp Architecture'. After 'lengthy jury deliberations' we can expect the 'eventual announcement of predictable results.' Ouch! No sour grapes there, then.

That said, as someone who travels regularly around London almost exclusively by bus and tube, Etchell's poster for London Transport was probably my favourite. This 'best of London Transport CCTV,' will feature (we are told) a 'fat man shitting on an escalator,' 'two tarts pissing in a Harrod's bag,' and a 'back of the bus blow-job plus nose bleed.' Frighteningly close to reality, in other words.



Other Mirror City highlights include the Pil and Galia Kollektiv's *Concrete Gown for Immaterial Flows*, a 'brutalist landscape, echoing the architecture of the Hayward' that takes its title from a line in a Zionist song in which pioneers promise to 'clothe the landscape in a gown of concrete and cement.' Dominated by an angular, bright red concrete 'arrow', the resulting performance space – the guys are actually a group of artists, writers and curators whose practice is 'collaborative and interdisciplinary' – looks like the kind of sculpture Keith Haring might have made. Thematically, the piece is focused on the cruel absurdities of modern day capitalism, and aims to mirror the kind of flow charts that you might find in any Canary Wharf hedge fund office space. The performance itself was scheduled for another time, but a seriously punked-up version of the aforementioned Zionist hymn was available for appreciation on headphones, and made me sorry that I wasn't there for the full-on experience.

Finally, for those wanting to 'protest intelligently', Karen Mirza and Brad Butler's hand-drawn re-workings of instruction pamphlets handed out to demonstrators in Cairo at the outset of the 'Arab

spring' in January 2011, provided an ideal – if somewhat cryptic – road-map. The original pamphlets had outlined 'a series of ideas or tools for (those) attempting to resist the state.' Mirza and Butler's felt-pen add-ons wavered between apparently arbitrary scribbling and cartoon reminders of what police violence actually entails. But perhaps the best thing about it was the fact that you could remove any one (or more) of the reproduced images and take it/them home with you. Which I did, and rest assured my Mirza and Butler originals (unsigned, alas) will soon be gracing an appropriate wall space, *chez nous*.



Oh, and just to top what turned out to be an engrossing and highly enjoyable afternoon, who should be standing next to me as I'm pondering Pil and Galia Kollektiv's *Concrete Gown*, but Britain's favourite comedian, Harry Enfield. No sign of Smashie, alas. But then, you can't have everything.

