



AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Liverpool Biennial 2014

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There's much to enjoy at this year's arts events, says Matthew Reisz, even if its central theme is a bit tenuous

Liverpool Biennial
Various venues, until 26 October

Big art events need big themes, which often leads to a tension between cohesion and the curators' desire to feature the work they happen to like. This year's Liverpool Biennial is built round a five-part exhibition intriguingly titled *A Needle Walks into a Haystack*. It claims to be "about our habits, our habitats, and the objects, images, relationships and activities that constitute our immediate surroundings. It is about effecting larger questions facing contemporary life and art, from an intimate and tangible scale that's within everyday reach."

This somewhat grandiose statement is interpreted fairly straightforwardly in the two-part exhibition at Tate Liverpool. One brings together work from the permanent collection broadly concerned with domestic life but given a slightly strange or uncanny twist.

There are paintings of enigmatically empty rooms and etchings of garden ornaments. Patrick Caulfield's screen prints isolate a clock, a coat-rack, a loudspeaker and a bathroom mirror within empty space. Thomas Schütte's *Four Sisters in a Bath* (1989) creates a scene in a Jacuzzi from a wall of bricks filled with blue pebbles. Out of these emerge brown terracotta busts of the four women, their hair plastered on in roughly moulded wax like strange mossy growth. And a 1982 photograph by Nan Goldin shows two lovers slumped on a bed in a New York loft, with animal masks displayed behind them on a distressed brick wall.

Downstairs, meanwhile, another exhibition pays tribute to the radical French architect Claude Parent, born in 1923, a man who hates right angles and walls but loves ramps and slopes. For Tate, he has created a dizzyingly steep and curved environment, *La Colline de l'Art* (Art Hill), to display some of the work that has influenced him.

Tate's collection is so rich that a selection from it can encompass virtually any theme, but *A Needle Walks into a Haystack* also includes four other elements. These are a joint show at the Old Blind School; a selection of Jef Cornelis' films about art for Belgian television (St Andrews Gardens); an exhibition devoted to James McNeill Whistler (the Blue Coat); and another at FACT that focuses on the work of Sharon Lockhart.

Whistler (1834-1903) is obviously a major painter, but here much attention is given to the ways in which he was a precursor to contemporary artists, at war with critics and patrons, much mocked in the press (*Punch* suggested he should produce paintings titled *An Optical Illusion in Invisible Green*, *A Depravity in Scarlet* or *An Impertinence in Any Colour*) yet never afraid to fight back.

The Lockhart show includes a 2009 film of grim Polish courtyards colonised by children swinging from trees, kicking a football and making mud pies with ping-pong bats. It also includes three huge photographic portraits of a girl Lockhart has befriended, vividly capturing the discomfort, moroseness and insolence of early adolescence as she sits at a table with an embroidered cloth in a wood-panelled room, head slumped, a hand over one eye and then engaging us head-on.

Questions about how far these powerful exhibitions really share a common interest in "habits", "habitats" and "immediate surroundings" recur at the Old Blind School. Anyone irritated by the pretensions of the contemporary art scene will find their suspicions amply confirmed in the first room, where a solar-powered fridge spills water on to the floor. This is the work of someone called Norma Jeane who, the wall panel tells us, "was born in Los Angeles on the night Marilyn Monroe died. Taking over her birth name and using this persona to contain a wide range of different personalities, the artist has become an entity without a fixed body, gender or biography."

Fortunately, things soon get a lot more lively. One of Peter Wächtler's animations features a distinctly grumpy pair of crutches struggling to make progress across muddy terrain. The wittily feminist drawings and prints by Christina Ramberg (1946-95) explore fetishised female bodies and accessories through images of elaborate girdles, unruly hairstyles, rows of high heels and pieces of cloth being pulled through fingers with bright red nails. An installation by Michael Stevenson incorporates doors from the offices of the School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences at Liverpool John Moores University, while many artists offer us objects assembled in enigmatic combinations.

Earlier in his career, the Israeli artist Uri Aran produced blasted landscapes that make fairly obvious reference to the conflict in the Middle East. Here, however, he is represented by a variety of works, including tables whose tops are inverted to create tray-like displays. One includes grapes and beads, lenses, sentimental pictures of horses and dogs and a torn-apart white glove surrounded by what look like severed fingertips, although some are stood on end to resemble phallic megaliths.

While Aran's work is striking and emotional as well as highly mysterious, much of the group show is notable for a cool detachment that may allow the artists to ask big questions about "contemporary life and art" but seldom seem to operate on "an intimate and tangible scale that's within everyday reach". The Old Blind School later became a radical focus for the city as the Trades Union Centre, but there seems to be little engagement with the economic, racial and political issues that have long been central to Liverpool life.

The Biennial hosts the John Moores Painting Prize, first held in 1957, and the much newer John Moores Painting Prize China. Although the winner of the former will not be announced until 14 September, a major exhibition at the Walker Art Gallery showcases both the longlist and shortlist, dominated by work in a photographic, even hyper-realist style.

Two other exhibitions turn the spotlight back on Liverpool and on blockbuster Biennials more generally. *Not All Documents Are Reports: Photographing Exhibitions as an Art Form* (Open Eye Gallery) includes Ugo Mulas' photographs of the 1968 Venice Biennale, where the aftershocks of the student protests in Paris led to protests, police repression and artists withdrawing their work even amid the glitzy champagne receptions. More entertaining are Hans Haacke's images of spectators baffled and bored, rapt and repelled, at the second 1959 documenta art fair in Kassel. A woman holds out a toy kitten to a small child on a bench in front of a vast Jackson Pollock. Meanwhile, a nun seems to have become part of the exhibition, as she stands beside a windmill-like construction that echoes her angular costume.

Far less official kinds of culture are put under the spotlight in *Adrian Henri: Total Art* (John Lennon Art and Design Building at Liverpool John Moores University). This resurrects the work produced by the celebrated musician, "Mersey poet", painter and provocateur during the 1960s and 1970s, when Liverpool enjoyed a cultural prominence it never had before or since. There are some great posters for Henri's band, the Liverpool Scene, and documentation of the various "happenings", "love nights" and other performances in which he was involved. These included his own mock-funeral staged by his friends Rob Con and Lol Coxhill, and a ceremony to lay a wreath on the site of a former chip shop.

Henri was a professionally trained artist and produced a range of "pop" art, such as Batman collages, a parody of Andy Warhol substituting mulligatawny for tomato soup and the large-scale painting *The Entry of Christ into Liverpool* (1962-64), with his friends and heroes marching amid the posters for Guinness and Colman's mustard. Yet he also had a far more melancholy sense of Liverpool, reflected in different versions of *Death of a Bird in the City* and *Liverpool 8: Four Seasons* (1964). Amid the somewhat airless internationalism of much of the contemporary work at the Biennial, it is nice to celebrate an artist reflecting on his home turf with such energetic and heartfelt radicalism.