

London Open: a snapshot of the artistic zeitgeist

The latest edition of Whitechapel Art Gallery's triennial show packs a real political punch

"The field next to Tesco that is soon to be built on, 1" (2016-17) by Hannah Brown © Anna Arca
Rachel Spence AUGUST 9, 2018

“We need history,” wrote Nietzsche in his essay “On The Use and Abuse of History for Life”, “but not the way a spoiled loafer in the garden of knowledge needs it.” Substitute “art” for “history” and you have an epigram for the forces animating this year’s London Open at the Whitechapel Art Gallery.

Now in its ninth decade — it opened in 1932 — the triennial exhibition aims to offer a snapshot of the capital’s contemporary art scene. This year it brings together 22 artists based in the capital, culled from 2,600 applications by a panel that included the contemporary artist Ryan Gander, writer and curator Amy Sherlock, gallerist Paul Hedge and collector Robert Suss alongside Whitechapel curators Cameron Foote and Emily Butler. The oldest artist, Rachel Ara, was born in 1965. The youngest, Elizabeth Tomlinson, is 27.

'William Series' (2017-18) by Elisabeth Tomlinson

Though none are household names, all have solid international bodies of work behind them. As a result, the exhibition is a guide to the artistic zeitgeist in the age of Brexit, Trump and growing environmental crisis. And it turns out that those issues matter. The artists that showed here during London’s Young British Artist heyday — so often oblique, decorative and narcissistic — surely never packed the political and ecological punch of this cohort.

Dominating the first gallery is a sprawl of rubble from which both real weeds and sculptural fragments sprout. Entitled “Blackwall Reach 2018”, the work, from New York-born Rachael Champion, highlights the intensifying peril, both social and environmental, of London’s housing situation. With [Grenfell](#) casting its tragic shadow, Champion’s dusty rocks, gathered from London building sites, and angular geometries which map elements of Robin Hood Gardens, the east London social housing project that is now being demolished for redevelopment, declare

that art is on the side of the angels.

But there is ambiguity too. The [Victoria and Albert Museum](#), for example, has been widely criticised for “art-washing”: papering over the human miseries inherent in the demise of Robin Hood Gardens by its decision to rescue and display a three-storey section of the estate (whose utopian authenticity was in any case contested during its lifetime).

Is Champion art-washing too? No. Her decision to make her own sculptures rather than simply dish up old stones transports her work into the realm of the imagination, rendering it expressive rather than exploitative.

'The Fairest Heritage' (2016-17) by Uriel Orlow

Indeed, one of the pleasures of the London Open is how many of the artists are grafting at the imaginative coalface rather than, as with so much recent conceptual practice, simply serving up uncooked ideas.

A great example is Harare-born Rachel Pimm, whose compact yet ambitious installation tracks the journey from quarry-fresh mineral to perfect ceramic of high-end British commercial tiles. Pimm tells her story through film, music, photography and sculpture but it is the tiles themselves — some no more than rejected, bubble-encrusted fragments, others retail-ready with pristine, computerised curves — that leave us, like Pimm, fascinated with the “stuff of the world”.

Whether quarry, building site, garden or field, the landscapes of our weary, battered planet turn much of the London Open into a homage to the anti-sublime. As so often with this topic, one painting speaks louder than a thousand photographs or videos.

Working in oil on marine plywood, oak and linen, Hannah Brown from Salisbury shows a trio of rural scenes whose vulnerable loveliness is evoked with astonishing, near-digital accuracy through a medley of liquid greens. (Brown’s bittersweet attitude is encapsulated by one painting’s sardonic title: “The Field next to Tesco soon to be built on”, 2016-17.)

Meanwhile, Exeter-born Gary Colclough proffers mixed-media hybrids in the form

of small, intricate oil paintings of countryside that he originally photographed through his commuter train window. Having painted them in monochrome and glazed them in soft colours, he then mounts them in leggy wooden structures that resemble minimalist sculptures more than conventional frames.

The results are mesmerising, not least because Colclough's final images resemble vintage photographs whose faded allure heightens our anxiety for the frail Arcadias that are their subject.

The politics of landscape runs through a display from Swiss practitioner Uriel Orlow. Showing elements from his series "Theatrum Botanicum" (2015-18), which considers "plants as actors in and witnesses of history", its most eloquent chapter is "Grey, Green, Gold" (2015-17), which yokes together a slide projector, voiceover, photography and print to tell the story of how the garden created by Nelson Mandela and his fellow prisoners on Robben Island served both to win over his guards and hide his writings.

That political spirit finds a distant but worthy cousin in the work of the German Andrea Luka Zimmerman, whose installation of films, quilting and posters, by herself and other artists and activists, takes over a whole gallery to conjure the flame of political resistance that has always burned in northern England and other pockets of the UK.

'Rythme sans fin, Domaine Public' (2014-16) by Céline Manz © Nici Jost

Yet the London Open finds room for whimsy too. The centrepiece of a constellation of works from Londoner George Eksts is a film of an animated, headless dancer whose colourful pipe-cleaner limbs echo the artworks in the gallery that is his stage. Yet most arresting are Eksts' two-dimensional works: a mix of drawing and collage, including one piece that takes an old circuit board for its surface, they choreograph curves and planes into a fluid, impermanent ballet of shape and colour.

Interestingly, two artists — Alexis Teplin and Céline Manz — take inspiration from the weightless arabesques of the early 20th-century abstractionist and costume designer Sonia Delaunay. Teplin, who is originally from California, paints textiles in bold, broken spheres to create both clothes and a radiant, fractured wall

hanging. Swiss-born Manz, meanwhile, produces works that evoke the motif of interlocking spheres in “Rythmes sans fin”, a series of studies made over several years in different iterations by both Delaunay and her husband Robert. Manz continues the process of reproduction while risking copyright transgression, even though the motif’s original author — Robert or Sonia? — has never been established.

Such antic experiments provide a perfect counterpoint to the heavyweight mood of the more socially engaged practitioners here.

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