

CRITICISM ► DISPATCHES

Saturday, May 5th, 2012

Still a Festival, Not an Art Fair: The Glasgow International

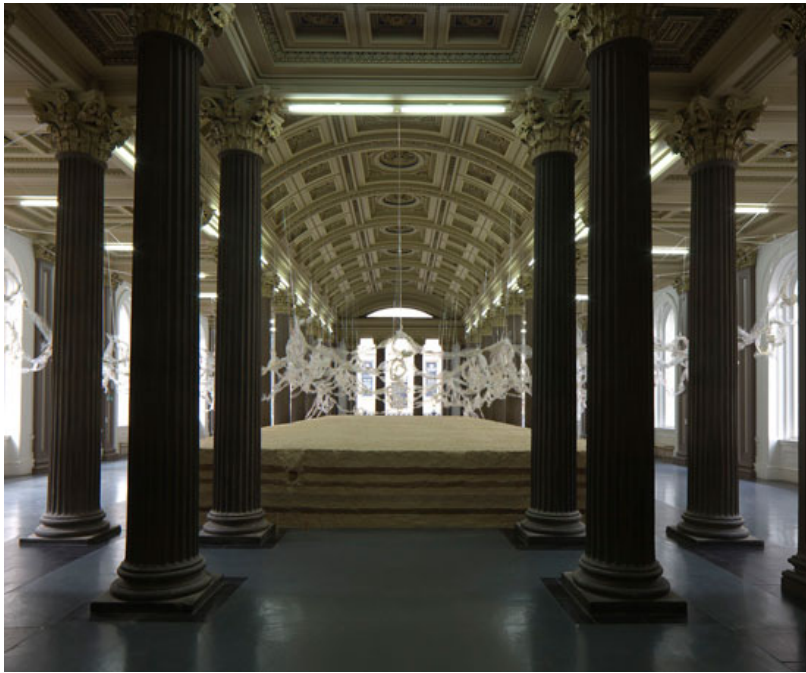
by William Corwin

Report from... Glasgow

The Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art

April 20 to May 7, 2012

Bookended by Charles Rennie Mackintosh's glorious Arts and Crafts Glasgow School of Art on the hill, (like Edinburgh Castle, protective and aloof) and the urban fabric of the once blighted and still slowly recovering industrial city beneath is a small, well-knit network of galleries and public spaces that help make Glasgow the second most vibrant art scene in the UK. Some of the more polished venues aspire to London-style blue chip glitziness, but other, more thoughtful, independent spaces, retain a gritty, vernacular quality, inhabiting empty warehouses and commercial quarters true to the heart of the city's Victorian architecture.



Karla Black, *Empty Now*, 2012. Installation, Library, Royal Exchange Square. Courtesy of Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow

Several exhibits in the Glasgow International seemed geared to impress an international art crowd. The Glasgow School of Art commissioned series of sculptures by Folkert De Jong, while local hero Karla Black filled the Gallery of Modern Art with an overwhelming installation, also a commission. The most heavily promoted attraction of the festival, however, was "Sacrilege" by Turner Prize winner Jeremy Deller. An inflatable "bouncy castle" life-size version of Stonehenge, the piece questioned both the British reverence of the neolithic stone circle on Salisbury plain and its importance in contemporary culture as a lightning-rod for kitschy celebrations of the vernal equinox and summer solstice, and low-budget sci-fi flicks about witches and druids. For all the seductive and viscerally engaging quality of this doppelganger in rubber, a lingering feeling that the British have already transformed Stonehenge into a conceptual bouncy castle made this elastic piece of satire a bit redundant. And sadly, rain made actual bouncing on the castle impossible; harsher critics than I, aged four to ten, deemed the piece completely useless.

The debut exhibition at the gallery at 42 Carlton Place, "Ever Since I put Your Picture in a Frame," is a refreshingly thoughtful and diverse selection of painting both contemporary and from the early 20th Century. The gallery is a project of the painters Carol Rhodes and Merlin James; curated by James, "Ever Since..." clearly shows the touch of a painter. Initially a bit bewildering in its breadth, it corrals portraits by artists such as Alex Katz, André Derain and Walter Richard Sickert alongside landscapes by the self-taught artists Alfred Wallis and James Castle. Despite all the recognizable faces, places and sundry animals, including Richard Walker's mesmerizing "Moth" and Stephen McKenna's delightful "Lesser Antilles Bullfinches," this is an exhibition of paint and materiality. Both framed and unframed, all the works in this show are consciously vehicles of their own creation. Clive Hodgson's "Untitled," a meditation on decoration and its often uneasy allegiance with deep symbolism, revels in its painterliness, while Joel Tomlin's "Elk," and Julie Roberts "Young Apprentice (Study)" investigate the lugubrious propensities of oil paint to define a painter's style.

It is the trifecta of Derain, Sickert and Wallis at the heart of this show, however, that lend sturdy historicity to James' curatorial endeavor. Sickert's delicate 1930s oil sketch of "Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies as Elizabeth Barrett Browning" on a brutal, textured canvas, conveys a spontaneity of creation that perhaps bespeaks his obsession with the pretty young actress, while Wallis' blunt but warm sketch of "Fishermen's Cottages" done in a fresh and unassuming hand captures the pure beauty and rustic simplicity of a working seaside village. With such a variety of subject and so many different viewpoints—including abstractions by James Hyde, Tony Swain and Joe Fyfe—the show insists upon the old adage, "the devil is in the details."



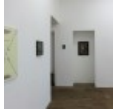
Walter Richard Sickert, Gwen Ffrangcon Davies as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1934. Oil on canvas, 16 x 11 inches. Private Collection

Karla Black's installation at GoMA was a more sincere rejoinder to Deller's "Sacrilege," located in the precious classical library that almost claustrophobically fills Royal Exchange Square, Black's sawdust and face makeup rectangular mound, "Empty Now," similarly dominated the interior of the gallery. The sheer magnitude of this layered, almost geologic concretion of earth tones, resembling a giant bar of halvah, oscillated between grabbing the viewer with its delicious consistency and coloring, and repulsing them through fear of its seemingly imminent collapse. Hanging over the piece was "Will Attach," a filigree of clear packing tape daubed with more face makeup in iridescent pinks and gold. Too junk-like to be visually pleasing (as is Black's aesthetic) it hung low enough to threaten the spectator's shoulders and hair.

The two galleries at 6 Dixon Street, Mary Mary and Kendall Koppe managed, despite being under the same roof, to locate their exhibitions about as far apart on the art spectrum as possible. Lorna Macintyre's "Midnight Scenes & Other Works" at Mary Mary featured two quiet and subtle totemic sculptural installations that played with themes derived from Brancusi, also pensively questioning the idea of perimeter and containment in sculpture. The raw outrage of the work of Emory Douglas, former Minister of Culture for The Black Panther Party, was very tastefully framed and commodified at Kendall Koppe: an attempt was made to revive some of the anger in the work by having a wall painting featuring violent protesters and dead pigs created by the artist himself around the doorway to the gallery. The Modern Institute presented a very personal series of notebooks and related artworks by Paul Thek (1933-88), "If you don't like this book you don't like me," and "Dresden," a Beuys-referential/reverential show by Michael Wilkinson at their new space on Aird's Lane.

This quick survey of the officially sanctioned GI would not be complete without mention of the alternative, "satellite" shows organized by emerging artists and students. The gritty, earnest assemblages in "Stay Vector, Stay!" organized by a group of graduate students at the Glasgow School of Art in an empty storefront on Albion Street had a willful, kinetic energy. Justin Stephens' punctured canvases resonated with the colorful drapery of G. Küng's ceiling hanging, while Dunja Herzog's rickety sculptures lurched threateningly over Scott Rogers floor pieces that resembled a awesomely cracked out Smurf village, while Sarah Rose's thoughtful video installation flickered on the chipped paint walls of this suitably grungy venue.

The Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art manages to keep a healthy distance from outright bald-faced capitalism with a predominance of commissioned works and archival museum-quality exhibitions: it still is a festival, not an art fair.



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