

Museum Show Part 1 & Part 2

Arnolfini Bristol

24 September to 19 November & 9 December to 19 February

A phantasmagoria of 40 micro to macro artist museums is presented inside and outside of the Arnolfini, itself acting as a mother museum, housing and linking together the overarching exhibition and events. 'Museum Show' is about resisting values of taste that have become disconnected from art as human experience and the inherent problems of giving this idea form.

Two strategies are evident in the show: the politicisation of the production of art and collecting as the expression of a sensibility. This sensibility is encountered on various levels, from mimicry of existing power structures and taste through to parody, satire, pantomime and, finally, it is presented as a metaphor for a culture. Although literary and theatrical terms best describe this approach there are points in the show where, as Walter Benjamin has suggested, the concept of disinterest from Kant's analysis of the beautiful overlaps with the pleasure and compulsion of collecting.

One inherent problem with this grand overthrow of canonical bourgeois taste is that, as a new power structure evolves, what may well emerge is a new connoisseurship of an anti-aesthetic become banal. Included in the exhibition is the Art and Religion Room from Meshac Gaba's extensive Museum of Contemporary African Art, which Gaba has described as a museum without walls that re-evaluates material culture. Objects here are neither ethnographical, authentic, nor from a 'Dark Continent', they are objects encountered today: a spoon, cards, a rear-view mirror, kitsch icons, warrior eau de toilette, fortune cookies and a reproduction of Brancusi's *The Kiss*.

The display forms a cross, reminiscent of subterranean Ethiopian churches. Here the cross is formed from open-plan DIY shelving that allows all other surrounding objects to confuse and visually interfere with the collection. Where no interference occurs, the objects form surprisingly intense formal connections, where a casual free-flow of associations – as the eye flickers from one object to another – is communicated and received by the viewer. Other criteria operate here, though, and the fluid nature of the objects must be also be performative.

After the Freud Museum, 1994, a collection of objects in a series of modular boxes, was originally a response by Susan Hiller to Freud's collection of antiquities in his study. Largely classical sculptures, Freud used his collection as an archaeology of the mind, where strata represent layers of thoughts and 'prehistory' corresponds to infantile drives. Hiller has said of her work that she wishes it to maintain a sense of doubt and possibility, remaining open to multiple readings. The free-play of associations, through shape, pattern and emotional catharsis, can be felt when glancing at and musing over the collection. For example, vials of mythic water from the rivers Lethe and Mnemosyne in antique bottles, corked sealed and labeled might be interpreted, through TS Eliot's objective correlatives, as objects that embody 'death's dream kingdom'. However, Hiller says her objects work more as 'misunderstandings, crises and ambivalences' that resist or complicate the acceptance of Freud's ideas. I am reminded of Freud's analysis of Dora, who effectively rejected the intellectual weight of his interpretation of her illness. It is this resistance to the accepted canons of taste and interpretation that is of importance to the Arnolfini show.

Portable museums figured prominently throughout part 1 of the show. Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte-en-Valise* 1935-1940, is a point of

departure for artist museums that produce responses ranging from cute parody to satirical understatement. Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group (1989-2004)*, 2008, consists, he says, of artworks 'made possible by the Lebanese wars of the past few decades'. He casually describes, in the manner of Gulliver, that when the work was exhibited in Beirut he was 'surprised that the artworks had shrunk to 1/100th of their size'. The viewer experiences them as barely visible works displayed in a mini gallery where their cultural significance is diminished and the political context is thereby exaggerated.

The Davis Museum, nearby, is a rehabbed ballot-box, and therefore appears at first glance like a little corporate exhibition stand. It has an online collection and exhibition programme of solo shows that is dynamic and imaginative. The current Davis Museum display at the Arnolfini has a slot for donations, a tiny door and labels, a scoop alongside what appears to be a relatively large earth or dust ball which takes up space in the little museum. The scoop reminds me of a similar item used to clear up miniature animal dung in Calder's *Circus*. The earth ball contradicts the corporate taste and surfaces of the museum. This is echoed and expressed formidably elsewhere in the show in Stuart Brisley's tastefully filthy and subversive *Museum of Ordure*.

The aura of work made by an eccentric hobbyist pervades Bill Burns' Museum of Safety Gear for Small Animals. Tiny goggles, boots, masks, safety hats, gear for vulnerable doll-like creatures etc, are collected in a museum of good deeds, a facade of niceties. The slightly nerdy role of a keeper, producer and institution safety officer is played out with obsession and persistence. Some animals are assigned garments depending on need: northern cod are in need of oxygen stations; prairie dogs require work gloves. A good family exhibit – Bouvard and Pecuchet would approve.

The nostalgic souvenir of a model lunar module, called Moon Museum, houses a collection of famous artworks in miniature. It is a monument to the optimism associated with the Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT). A micro version of this museum actually went to the moon in 1969 printed on a chip and it remains in the Ocean of Storms site. At the Arnolfini the Moon Museum has small images of the artworks planted around the lunar module, including one referring to Claes Oldenburg's Mouse Museum, which presented a collection of ray gun forms, and adds to the complexity and micro layering.

The Museum of Non-Participation produces work that is directly polemical and yet it was the most poetic instance in the

work that had the most political impact. A large collaborative group of artists aims to ‘challenge ideas of authorship in art production’. A three-screen video installation showed acts of speaking and representations of the body. Choreographed to draw comparisons between images from western action dramas located in the middle-east and, on a third monitor, the image of a non-western man who at first appears to be a news reader but who is at times rendered mute by blackouts across eyes and mouth. His consciousness of his body when chanting and carefully enunciating his historically banned mother tongue projects a profound sense of self which effectively counters the media projection of the ‘hero’s body / unquestioned body’ of action movie tough guys.

Inspired by listening to two artists trying to describe their work to one another, Hu Xiangqian has created a museum under his own name in which he pantomimes fictional artists’ work. His performance and narrative are by turns hilarious and tragi-comic. In a form similar to a limerick, Hu lists and describes each of the artists in his museum beginning, each story like this: ‘There was an artist who hung from the trees ...’ ‘Then there was an artist who put fish bowls on the table and filled them with ink ...’ At one point the story develops possible political overtones when a party

becomes the scene of trauma with attendant police, ‘a man quivers on the ground, like this’, says Hu in a nervy, joking voice that has a rhythmic pace aligned with the momentum of his body. His museum makes light of the gimmickry of artists, but Hu’s jittery free-association and open-ended serialism epitomise the sensibility of a collector.

Stephen Lee is a sculptor.