



Jonathan Jones on art

An Imagined Museum review - unforgettable art from the year 2052

★★★★☆



Jonathan Jones

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A boy sees a beautiful woman on a concrete jetty at Orly Airport a moment before a shot rings out and a man falls dead, throwing the airport into terror and chaos. The memory of her face will stay with him all his life, as he survives the destruction of Paris and then is sent back in time to find this woman he saw for just a moment many years ago.

That is the premise of Chris Marker's great 1962 film *La Jetée*, now showing as part of Tate Liverpool's haunting new exhibition *An Imagined Museum*. The exhibition has a science-fiction premise worthy of Marker, or other such apocalyptic films of the French new wave.

It is the year 2052: museums are becoming obsolete and art is slipping out of human consciousness. A team of curators have retrieved some treasures from the stores of the Centre Pompidou, Paris, the Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) in Frankfurt and Tate. Their ideal museum is offered up as a magic cabinet of memories. Visitors must hold those memories in their hearts and minds to preserve whatever it is that makes art important to civilisation.



▲ 'Squats in the memory' ... Handyman by August Sander. Photograph: Guy Carrard/A Sander Archiv/Centre Pompidou

That's the fictional conceit of *An Imagined Museum* - but it opens at a historical moment that itself has an unreal quality of nightmare. As I sit watching Marker's images of the destruction of Paris, the French capital is, in real life, "at war". Paris burns on screen; civilisation ends. What is left? Only memory. Everything we are is

memory, Marker shows in searing fragments of illumination. *La Jetée* is unforgettable. Marker made it as a sequence of stills, a photo-roman. Every single one burns into your brain.

An Imagined Museum has noticed something true and basic about art: that it is all about memory. The time we spend looking at a work of art - 30 seconds? The 26 minutes and 37 seconds it takes to watch *La Jetée*? - is nothing compared to its afterlife. The true test of art is how memorable it is - does it live in your imagination to your dying moment, or fade on the walk home?

The reason An Imagined Museum is such a delightful and thought-provoking show is that it is full of works that catch in memory like a fishbone, in the words of Robert Lowell. It challenges you to remember these works - then recreate them by “performing” them at the end of the show, or curating a memory album online.

I challenge you to try and forget Rachel Whiteread’s black resin cast of a bathtub, as macabre as the sarcophagus of some alien queen, or Louise Bourgeois’ organic egg-like entities, and Dorothea Tanning’s installation of a seedy Paris hotel room with body parts erupting out of the walls.

Paris again. Tanning’s Chambre 202, Hotel du Pavot, comes like so many of the best works here from the outstanding collections of the Centre Pompidou. Our memories of art entwine with our memories of places. The first place I ever saw contemporary art was the Pompidou. I had a picture of its felt-covered piano by Joseph Beuys on my bedroom wall. I couldn’t understand this image. But I could not forget it.

Meanwhile, I would quite like to forget Alina Szapocznikow’s 1969 object *Tumour*, but fear I never will. This formless mass of paper and gauze sealed with discoloured resin is one of a series of sculptures she made as a response to her own diagnosis with breast cancer. It squats in memory as insistently as meaty German faces photographed in the 1920s by August Sander, or pathetic astronaut mannequins in Isa Genzken’s installation *Oil XV and XVI*. This is a well-chosen, arresting array of curiosities and marvels - a true imaginary museum.

▲ Poppy Hotel, Room 202 1970-3 by Dorothea Tanning. Photograph: © Tate Liverpool, Roger Sinek

Paris haunts it because Paris is one of art's eternal cities. If Paris vanished, it would be remembered in art. As if to prove that, An Imagined Museum is complemented by a display of almost every work by Matisse in the Tate collection. [The Snail](#) comes to Merseyside. A storm wind was howling off the Mersey as I drank in the mediterranean light.

In 1905 Matisse portrayed his fellow painter André Derain in the fizzing colours of the free “fauve” style they had just invented. Looking like a sailor or a fisherman, Derain floats forever in a champagne cork pop of colour. [Art](#) is frozen time. That moment when Matisse looked at Derain will never vanish. It may be the last thing you see when the bullets fly, if Chris Marker was any kind of prophet.

[An Imagined Museum is at Tate Liverpool](#) from 20 November to 14 February 2016.

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