

problematic but Heron's covers the period from 1936 to 1955 which has meant leaving out a great deal, including the important but unresolved experiments that he made after seeing the 1952 Nicholas de Staël exhibition. Transitional phases are seldom acknowledged: garden paintings, stripe paintings and the startling whiteness of the second wave of gardens in the 1980s appear fully-fledged and apparently without prelude. We are shown a dramatic succession of *faits accomplis* which reiterate the message that this is the presentation of a master and, specifically, the one who famously announced 'Art is autonomous'.

The dominance of this concept has resulted in a singular lack of information other than the usual hand-out leaflet; there are no wall-boards within the exhibition and even the labels are positioned with extreme discretion at the ends of walls. On the one hand this is an elegant and independent approach to exhibition making; on the other it is a wilful put-off for the many people who are deeply disconcerted if denied a basic supply of facts. It is also entirely counter to Tate policy; the Curator of Interpretation may be curiously titled but his role is central within the gallery. The presentation of Heron's retrospective is an anomaly in terms of the Tate's educational remit and its hermetic closure does not serve to disseminate accurate information about his achievement (or that of his pioneering colleagues) in the postwar period.

There is no doubt that Heron has worked hard for the Tate. Nor can there be much doubt that the show has been hung and arranged according to his own prescription. However, if he has, with great integrity and the best of intentions sold himself short, this is not quite the end of the story. To coincide with the exhibition a selection of his critical writing has been published in an edition by Mel Gooding.<sup>1</sup> It runs from Heron's initiatory review of Ben Nicholson's 1945 exhibition at Alex Reid and Lefevre to his obituary of Sam Francis in 1994. In between are articles from *The New Statesman* (without, unfortunately, those that are effectively manifesto pieces for his British, and especially his St Ives, colleagues) and *Arts* (New York) where he continued the promotional good work. In the 1960s Heron began an intermittent campaign to prove that British artists led the world. Perhaps rightly, only two of these engagingly dotty articles make it into the anthology, while the heroic *Guardian* pieces of 1974 are tactfully dismissed as too long to reprint and too dense to abridge. As far as it goes this is a useful compilation. It is, however, unfortunate that the introduction is simply an 'Editor's note' and that the book is virtually free of annotation (why this rule was broken to explain the location of Wigan is mystifying). A critical edition of Heron's writing would have been extremely valuable; as it is, this book will be a lot less useful than it could have been.

None of this should detract from the exhibition itself, which is a delightful string of visual treats that reveal Heron's achievement as one of our most accomplished abstract painters. However, the exhibition is necessarily

transient and, while the catalogue contains a visual record in the form of plates, albeit of distinctly uneven quality, the texts are grotesquely inadequate to summarise such a distinguished career.<sup>2</sup> David Sylvester provides a tiny introductory essay. Antonia Byatt, who likes to write about art, has done so again. There is a long interview with Martin Gayford which reminds us of what we already knew. It is followed by the reproduction of a clutch of well-known texts on Heron. Inaccuracies are abundant. The Tate's failure to provide a critical and historical text is inexcusable, particularly given the amount of research that has been undertaken on this artist in recent years. No one who missed the exhibition and is unfamiliar with Heron's achievement would have the faintest idea, on reading this catalogue, why the exhibition took place. This is not the way to record the contribution of an important and distinguished artist. ■

1. Mel Gooding ed, *Painter as Critic. Patrick Heron: Selected Writings*, London, 1998, 236pp, 16 b/w illus, \$12.99, 1 85437 258 0.

2. David Sylvester ed, *Patrick Heron*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery, London, 1998, 192pp, b/w & col illus, \$22.50, 1 85437 250 5.

**Margaret Garlake's** *New Art, New World: British Art in Postwar Society* has recently been published by Yale University Press.

## ■ What Is a Photograph?

40 Underwood Street London July 3 to August 9

## ■ BANK

Gallerie Poo-Poo London June 20 to August 23

In Jeff Wall's 1984 essay 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet', he sees the 19th-century French painter as historically trapped. He was forced to fulfill the role of the artist-hinge between the ruined 'concept of a picture', whose depleted notions of harmony and unity had been central to Western art for centuries, and modernity with its accompanying notions of fragmentation, montage and abstraction. This 'mortified concept of the picture' (as Wall puts it) sees its extreme, late 20th-century dissolution in exhibitions like 'What Is a Photograph?'. In examining the current state of a single kind of mediated object (the show, tellingly, is not titled 'What Is Photography?', which would address process rather than the picture itself), the exhibition identifies and even encourages the photograph's extreme – yet happy – state of decay. Most viewers have already guessed the punchline: surprise! The photograph in these modern times is rarely an unmanipulated real or recognisable image imprinted onto light-sensitive paper. No, the photograph can be three-dimensional, a picture transferred onto a souvenir mug (Matt Mitchell, *Matt Mitchell's Tudor world*, 1998); manipulated so as to straddle photography

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Denise Webber  
*Clay* 1998

and painting (Monika Oechsler's *Goshka and Matt*, 1998, an arresting, religious-looking double portrait); generated – in words, rather than images – on a computer (co-curator Susan Morris' *Text*, 1997); an Op Art-like wavy black-and-white cibachrome printed on stainless steel (Helen Robertson's *Monochrome I*, 1996); or even dumb cute-cat snaps (Keith Arnatt, *Amy, Archie, Marmys, Boot, Jones and Daisy*, a 1998 series of 80 slides). Straight, image-hungry photography (say, a work by Richard Billingham) would have looked distinctly out of place in this show which, moreover, was noticeably almost colourless.

So a photograph isn't necessarily a Photograph anymore, but nobody's jaw is going to drop at this bit of postmodern 'news' – so much for theory, in a way. The success of an exhibition like this, as usual, lies in the strength of the work on show, and the Five Years curating team of Morris, David Bate and Marc Hulson have to be credited for bringing together this very fresh-looking gathering of new London-based artists, but above all for

bringing to the fore the one show-stopping piece on exhibition: a video animation called *Clay*, 1998, by Denise Webber.

*Clay* pretty much steals the show. Like the other works here, this piece is modest in scale, screened as it is on an average, medium-sized TV. Also like the other works, it is not meant to baffle the viewer into puzzling over how it was made. Webber has quite simply strung together consecutive series of stills from Eadweard Muybridge's all-too-famous studies of human locomotion, restoring time and space to these pre-cinematic sequences. This simple operation, which has seemingly been begging to be done for over century in some form more gratifying than a homemade flipbook, is the single, formidable idea behind *Clay*. Like Frankenstein, these dead fragments are pieced together into something weirdly alive, forced back into life from the annals of photographic history and transformed into breathing, smirking, moving beings. The results are extraordinary.

Webber has selected some lesser-known Muybridge photographs, which make this video all the more unexpected. Suddenly the figures turn from being mere 'case studies' into thinking, smiling, erotic beings. A man, dressed in his underwear, incongruously handling a bayonet, is seen to break into an amused smile, perhaps responding to the ludicrousness of the set-up. It's not that the scene turns comical; rather the armed seminaked soldier regains his dignity, demonstrates his understanding of his awkward position, his good-natured accusation of the photographer's demands upon him. In revealing this and so many other barely perceptible gestures, Webber collapses the alleged objectivity of Muybridge's project more effectively and pleasurably than a hundred cultural theorists just talking about it.

These naked stills have always looked erotic; in motion, they are borderline pornographic. You see Muybridge dwell on a bouncing buttock, a flapping tit, and the eroticism of this observing, probing man photographing a compliant naked woman in some isolated courtyard is overwhelming. Jeff Wall, in analysing the traditional painted picture, claimed that 'the painted body is the simultaneous trace of two bodies' (the painter and his model), and as such is inherently erotic. With Muybridge, and Webber's re-animation of his work in *Clay*, we see that this tactile eroticism was obviously still thriving at the dawn of modernity in these blatantly voyeuristic studies of the human (and nakedly animalesque) body.

Above all it is the women in these pictures who are allowed to shed their undignified anonymity and shine gloriously. Probably the most unforgettable sequence is one fabulously sexy Victorian woman, naked as usual, lounging brazenly under the overexposed sun, taking a deep, pleasurable puff of a cigarette and then stretching out her arm in triumphant, joyous abandon. The relaxed fluidity of her motion, her lack of embarrassment at being naked, her pre-suffragette feminism, are all delightful in a way that Muybridge's mummified women had never been in the stills. Webber's chosen soundtrack of ringing

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bells – a timeless sort of sound and, as the artist points out, a sound that is public, like the bodies on display – all enhance the sense of celebration in the belated resurrection of these ghosts who, until now, seemed only the victims of voyeurism, art history and mean 19th-century science. *Clay* is, in many ways, truly liberating.

'Stop short-changing us. Popular culture is for idiots. We believe in ART.' This the emphatic title of 'radical art group' BANK's recent show of self-portraiture in the surprisingly traditional forms of figurative sculpture (some even disguised as old-fashioned cast-bronze) and painting (as in oil on canvas). The unusually long title also tops the accompanying unusually long press release – more an essay, really, or group manifesto about the world of BANK.

There is plenty of reading material available from London's guerrilla-like curating/artmaking foursome (members: Simon Bedwell, John Russell, Milly Thompson and Andrew Williamson) about themselves and their work. Notoriously, they have their own artworld tabloid – at turns witty, then cruel – also called *BANK* and which, over the years, has produced no less than 36 poisonous issues. The artists' collective has organised a handful of well-publicised, well-attended group shows; like their writings, BANK's exhibitions combine the straight (as in quality curating – new talent, a theme, a good installation) with their signature post-punk, late-adolescent irreverence.

Despite the wealth of well-worded literature and publicity by and about the group, despite their being so consistently active and prominent in London and so bent on asserting themselves, BANK remains enigmatic. Their work is deeply contradictory: traditionalist in their materials and aspirations (BANK's intention is to produce High Art), they flirt with anti-establishment roguishness (say, the name *Galerie Poo-Poo*) and trash culture (the *National Enquirer*-like tabloid newspaper). They are shamelessly self-engrossed and yet desperately devoted to 'the scene' and preoccupied with the reception of their work. They are generous, even self-sacrificing, in their promotion of art in a sincere, life-consuming way, and then they're viciously sarcastic in their attacks on artist colleagues and the artworld in general. Maybe one reason they remain perennially apart is that most folks are just scared of them. Or perhaps BANK has genuinely succeeded in producing work that resists absorption into the art system. Indeed, they aim to fulfill a very peculiar collecting agenda: art that represents a 'solid gold investment opportunity' (their words) while at the same time administering a stiff whack in the collector's consumerist gut. I'm not sure how many works they've sold so far.

The exhibition itself is a giant self-portrait or better, an examination into the collective Self through self-portraiture. No one would describe their techniques as accomplished, but it would be wrong, nevertheless, to lump their sloppy pictures in with bad or dumb painting. This is a compulsively symmetrical exhibition, mirroring



the symmetry of a four-member group with a four-letter name. On view are two groups of paintings, one large format, the other small, made up of four canvases each, and four sculptural groupings of the four figures (except one, strangely, which depicts the three crucifixions at Calvary, don't ask me why). The smaller paintings, nos 3, 11, 27 and 42 in the series 'Recovering ourselves group empathy', all of 1998, are four out of many more paintings each visualising a significant personal memory, collectively painted. The four large canvases are plainly titled *Group portraits*; some are inexplicably set in unfamiliar, exotic surroundings, like Vietnam or some distant volcanic island. Yet even in these tropical settings, even when they're thousands of miles away from the London art world, even with Krakatoa erupting behind them or demon *Apocalypse Now* helicopters threatening overhead, BANK remains determined in its angry, local monomission. They continue to stare back at us accusingly, still bitching 'Stop short-changing us! Popular culture is for idiots!' and on and on.

Three of the sculptures, finally, represent them as naked (pink fleshy fabric stretched over a tiered wooden structure, like emaciated Michelin men), or wearing identical artists' blue-collar-type uniforms, or melting into each other like lumpen, fibreglass Burghers of Calais.

'BANK is a family', says the group. 'To its four members BANK represents the possibility of creative ways of living – caring for each other, co-existing, inter-relating, socialising, whilst simultaneously producing art'. So theirs is a surprisingly redemptive, utopian project, echoing the communal aspirations of Hermann Nitsch or

Installation at Galerie  
Poo-Poo 1998

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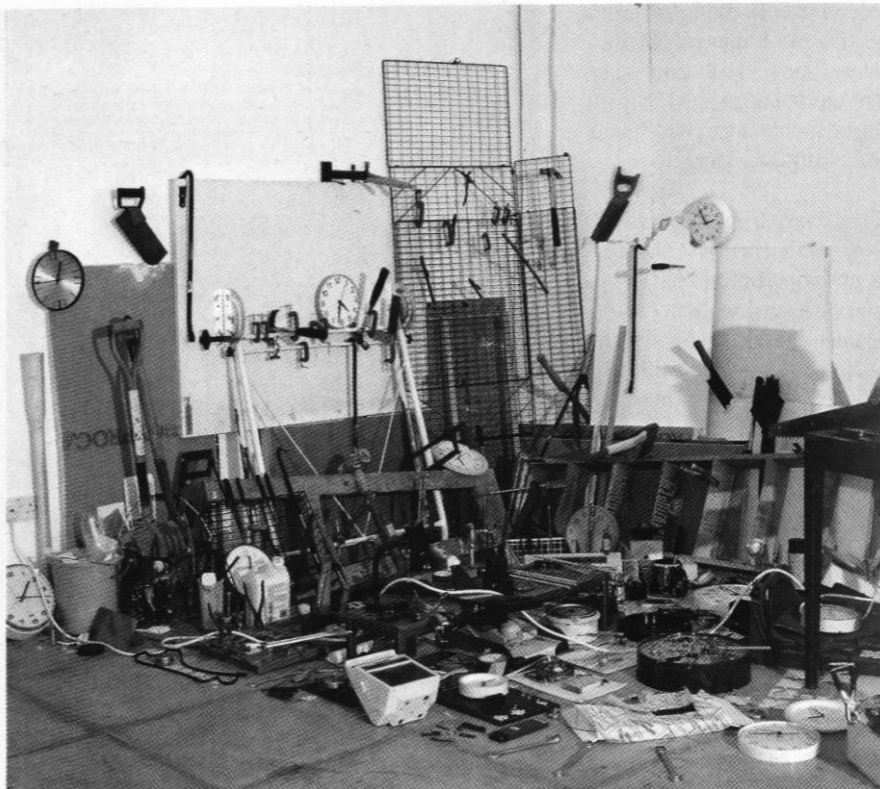
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**Tomoko Takahashi**  
*Clockwork 1998*

Otto Muehl, whose lives' work also paradoxically combined attempts at an Arcadian, socialist community with a pinch of personal violence. They refuse (and yet invite) being dismissed as pranksters. The temptation here would be to indulge in some facile psychoanalysis of group behaviour, the most recent manifestations of their pathology exemplified in the Artists' Uniforms they've taken to wearing whilst painting which, moreover, seem deliberately to negate the gender differences among them, the asymmetry of the three-male, one-female combination. And what do we make, for example, of their insistence on publicly confessing to the rather inbred nature of their lives?

Nevertheless, you can't help but admire their ceaseless interrogation of the heaviest issues they can think of, poring over the achievement of greatness. They seem as merciless with themselves, in their unflattering self-depictions, as they are with everybody else. But one hopes they don't implode altogether and turn completely myopic, growing all gnarled and twisted around themselves. They've contributed a lot, and have succeeded in maintaining their edginess intact without selling out, without going BANKrupt, so to speak. BANK is an oddly reassuring presence, and their exhibitions are always the fruit of serious thought and effort. The jokes, I think, are mostly a decoy to distract us from politically-charged work that bears no resemblance to the political art we're used to. ■

**Gilda Williams** is a writer and commissioning editor at Phaidon Press.

## ■ London Summer Round-up

### ■ Liam Gillick

**Robert Prime** London June 25 to July 31

### ■ Mark Williams

**97-99 Sclater Street** London July 1 to August 2

### ■ Tomoko Takahashi

**Hales Gallery** London June 13 to July 31

### ■ Peter Pommerer

**emily Tsingou gallery** London July 3 to August 29

### ■ Michelle Grabner

**Rocket Gallery** London June 5 to August 28

### ■ Gallery Artists

**Frith Street Gallery** London July 3 to August 8

As you entered Robert Prime there was a big glass filled with eight cans of Seven-Up. This is what we were told constitutes *The Continuing Sequence of Events Must Have Started and Then Spun Off From This Place. Seven-Up Coloured Curtains?*, 1998, but it was easy to find yourself wondering if the liquid really was Seven-Up

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