

about the art world. 'Pick up a brush', he screams, 'Hal-lelujah'. Bob's proposition is radical and echoes Joseph Beuys' slogan 'everyone is an artist', but is he serious? Yes, sort of.

'Dont Hate Sculpt' featured an assortment of personalities who, along with Bob & Roberta Smith, filled the Chisenhale with concrete casts of vegetables, things painted orange and absurd narratives. The immediacy of Punk is valued by Bob & Roberta Smith as is collectivity, which perhaps explains why one artist, Patrick Brill, has fictionalised a brother and sister partnership and a whole clan of Smiths (though it should be noted that Bob & Roberta gave thanks to a large network of friends and collaborators in the catalogue). The Smith clan appear throughout the exhibition in short video films that parody hippy culture. One elderly woman speaks of a family tradition of making painted concrete vegetables while another younger woman explains why she will no longer kill young lettuces. In another film a child of the 60s remembers coming home from school to find her mother painting her bicycle orange; an action undertaken to make the machine look more 'today' and less authoritarian. Now grown up, she states that the colour orange has come to symbolise the liberating culture of her childhood, which explains why a car painted bright orange has been parked in the Chisenhale Gallery.

Weaving their way through the monitors and objects are Bob & Roberta Smith's trademark text paintings. Multi-coloured typography with drop-shadows related stories about cultural and historical figures. In one text Joseph Beuys is mentioned as the lover of Yoko Ono. The lovers break up and Beuys tells John Lennon he can have her. Another text reads 'FLORENZ NIGHTIGALE USED TO VISIT JOHN WATERS IN GT. ORMAND ST. SINCE THE CHAIN SAW MASSACRE IN BEDALE HE VISITS HER ON THE ROCK. Other signs misspell place names and in one video film a member of the Smith clan recounts his life as painter of signs for a railway company. He laments that his inability to spell dogged his 30-year career for LNER but now that he has retired he paints signs for his own pleasure, though he no longer knows what is and is not correct. Mistakes are an important issue for the Smiths for whom there is no right or wrong way to do something. In his essay for the exhibition, Matthew Collings outlines Bob & Roberta's dislike of orthodoxy, particularly that of Goldsmiths Art School which was experienced at first hand. This aversion to conformity extends as far as disregarding accepted art historical facts and debates.

Of course 'Dont Hate Sculpt' with its chaotic structure, cringe-making jokes and bad art were all expertly orchestrated and the Smiths' low-tech world has become a signature style that threatens to become an orthodoxy of a kind. This orchestration is necessary though. The show was not just a fun house of creativity but an allegory about lost causes, lost innocence and a forgotten desire to produce 'culture', in the finest traditions of Punk, regardless of quality. Allegory has a long history and its appearance in artworks often indicates circumstances in which something desired or thought can not be articulated directly. Bob & Roberta Smith create much fun at the expense of mostly middle-class domestic craft activity, amateur art and ridiculous alternative life styles. Just as Mike Kelley loves his cuddly toys however, Bob & Roberta empathise with these activities and folk cultures as they contain a residue of a utopianism now lost to most art practices. When Bob Smith bellows 'DON'T HATE, DRAW. MAKE ART, NOT WAR', he really means it man, sort of. ■

David Burrows is an artist and lecturer at UCE in Birmingham.

■ Beat Streuli

Tate Gallery London August 27 to November 9

A crowded day on Oxford Street is a really unpleasant experience, not glamorous at all, and could almost make you give up on retail altogether. That the Swiss photographer Beat Streuli could make London's most depressing shopping street (with the exception of the Edgware Road) look so tantalizing, so replete with erotic promise, is quite a formidable achievement. Young girls with forgettable clothes and an off-putting demeanour look enticing, and not just in a *Clockwork Orange*, anonymous sex kind of way; they actually look as though they had just stepped out of *The Face* magazine – put-together and interesting. And Streuli is definitely clocking them, checking out the male and female talent, shamelessly taking a second and fourth look as they cross the street into Debenhams or down the steps into the Underground, disappearing forever. Chh-chrick, and one of the nine slide projectors switches to another, cinemascope, full-colour and dazzlingly sunlit portrait: an Asian girl with a thick, dark, tiny mouth, staring disarmingly back at us; a dark young man with a

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sulting, distracted look, dashing in his yellow jumper; a Renée Green look-alike with a supremely noble profile. Where were they when I was last on Oxford Street, pushing my way through abrasive, overweight teenagers and tripping over hideously patterned baby strollers with matching babies? This is a skewed, distorting form of photographic *verité*, at once documentary-like and completely fictitious.

Streuli, like Wolfgang Tillmans or even Nan Goldin, is one of a number of borderline fashion photographers who were scooped up and welcomed into contemporary art in the early 90s. As with his series of New York City street photographs in 1994, this is a portrait of the late 20th Century shot through a kind of tunnel vision that homes in on appealing urban youths. While Tillmans' subjects are bored with being so camera-ready and cool, and Nan Goldin's sitters have names and sex lives and continuity, Streuli's strangers are not complicit with this picture-taking. These are genuine candid shots of complete strangers, and this gives the work a kind of quiet shyness, as if Streuli is confessing that he just doesn't have the guts simply to go up and talk to the young woman. Streuli seems comfortable with his perpetually desirous gaze, even gifted at girl-(and boy-)watching – and whoever thought you could make a living out of that? He is polite, arty and discrete, relishing in the light falling on a highly photographable, smooth face without any morbid, stalker-like obsessiveness. They are blandly psychological; his subjects all seem to have perfect personalities, or are we just projecting, the way we fantasize about the marvellous qualities of any desirable, potential new lover?

Streuli's work is often connected with the writings of Benjamin and Poe, and indeed there is some of the 19th and early 20th Century's fascination with urban

physiologies – as in the photography of August Sander. 'Before the development of buses, railways and trains in the 19th Century', remarked urban theorist Georg Simmel, 'People had never been in a position of having to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without speaking to one another'. Streuli does not mind the silence or the watching. One of the best strategies in the installation was making the loop of overlapping, sometimes doubled, slides so long as to seem never to return to where it began. Like a real crowd, there is an endless supply of new faces.

Streuli's city is so people-led it seems completely without any buildings, just a flat expanse of people. In one particularly effective series, Streuli stopped focusing only on the most photogenic passers-by and indiscriminately shot streams of incoming passengers on the stairs of the Oxford Street tube entrance, like a fish swimming upstream, against the current. Despite being photographed out of the darkness of the station towards the bright light outdoors, all the faces are beautifully lit, belying the technical proficiency evident throughout his *faux*-snapshot work. Everyone's eyes are cast downwards, as they watch their step on the stairs, and so they all seem to be purposefully sleepwalking, acquiring a kind of innocence and sweetness which makes all his subjects so appealing. 'The life of our city is rich in poetic and marvellous subjects ... but we do not notice it', said Baudelaire. Streuli seems singularly dedicated to taking notice, indeed of making the rather ordinary look quite poetic and marvellous, as if that is what people really looked like. ■

Beat Streuli
Oxford Street 1997

Gilda Williams is an art critic and editor at Phaidon Press.

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