

Gail Pickering
*Tish (Flour Bomb
 Maker) 2001*
 detail



Consider, for instance, pieces of a white shirt torn to shreds with patches of red in areas such as the cuff. The red is surely blood. This is a disaster scene. And yet, it is not beyond the imagination of a fashion designer to incorporate a blood-red splash detail on a garment. So, is it blood or not? You can't say for sure. This is an undecidable in Burrows' art – which is full of undecidables established in exactly the same way – because the foam and rubber that he uses to depict a violent world are not capable of the sort of iconic repleteness required to represent the difference between a patterned shirt and a plain shirt stained with blood. His material is non-committal about the texture it represents because it has a texture of its own, which means that liquids and solids, for instance, are rendered identically. Snow and cotton are cut out of the same sheet of white foam, as would a splash of water or a similarly coloured flower. Such undecidability is the *ne plus ultra* of post-structuralist pictoriality. And, a loss of certainty of this order, in the face of so much evident human loss, is not just a relief; it is an ethic.

Violence is not funny. Even cartoon violence, which escapes the censor by being regarded as harmless, can shock us with its aggression. And yet, the ethical relationship with the other asks us to remain undecided rather than transform the other into an identifiable thing through knowledge. Maybe we can be even more undecided about the horrors of others, in the style of John Waters' little episode, by making a joke of them, identifying ourselves with violence and recruiting our friends into our wicked fantasies. ■

Dave Beech is Subject Leader in Fine Art as Social Practice at the University of Wolverhampton.

■ Penny Dreadfuls

VTO London November 17 to December 9

■ Modern Love in Düsseldorf and London

VTO London December 1 to 16

■ Group Show

Vilma Gold London December 13 to January 20

■ Twentieth Century

Nylon London November 24 to December 23

■ Ruby

Pearl London November 9 to December 16

■ George Shaw

Anthony Wilkinson Gallery London
 October 27 to December 2

It used to be when you visited these alternative spaces out East End way you'd ask, where do they find all these young new artists? Where's all this talent coming from? Now you check out the lighting and the floorboards, the address and the radiators and ask, how do they pay the rent? How are interesting new galleries still cropping up in who-can-afford-to-live-there-anymore Bethnal Green and Shoreditch? It's good news, anyway.

Over Christmas we all read, in every Sunday glossy, the New Year's predictions for 2002: a bohemian/hippy mood, fringe and all, is flooding back in a big way this year. And with a kind of depressing serendipity, one senses a similar 60s mood meekly seeping into the galleries too. Take 'Penny Dreadfuls' at VTO, which combines the otherwise

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5 February – 23 March 2002



Emily-Jo Sargent
A102M 2001

contradictory spirits of political anarchy and romantic Victoriana, two elements which stewed together so well in hippy days. The show takes its title from dangerously low-brow literature for 19th-century juveniles, and the overall mood of the exhibition is of street anarchy and adolescent mischief. The subversive anti-art feel came from such works as Gail Pickering's flour bomb factory (a kind of low-tech Gregory Green, the DIY atom bomb-builder) and Seb Patane's interesting collage of sound and junk, a kind of sculpture-as-white-noise. The anarchic mood of the whole is tempered, however, and hits a hippyish note with the inclusion of Rory Macbeth's *Statue (Flora)*, set by the entrance door. This is a life-like cast of what looks like the ghost of a London art student masquerading as a 19th-century version of the mythological goddess of flowers. It would look great in somebody's big hippy castle, set up in the entrance hall where the stuffed grizzly bear used to be.

Better still was 'Modern Love', which followed immediately afterward at VTO and which drew together artists from Düsseldorf and London who, in the words of curator Dan Howard-Birt, 'share a vision of the romantic ... without succumbing to the all-pervasive and eternally tiresome shackles of contemporary cynicism'. Can paisley and love beads be far behind? Matthew Sawyer's graffiti-painting-readymade collage actually quotes the Beatles;

'All Together Now' says the red scrawl, as if to replace with good cheer Charles Manson's previous Beatles bloody message on the wall, 'Helter Skelter', writ 30 years ago. Overall, however, *All Together Now*, like the rest of the show, with its comfortable mix of media and its soft politics doesn't really feel too retro, thankfully. 'Modern Love' had lots of other enjoyable, understated moments too, like Chris Owen's pencilled text drawing insistently calling for *Dave*; a few good landscapes like *A102M* and *The Smell of Wet Roads* with a softly Ruscha-ish feel by Emily-Jo Sargent, and giddy sculptures by Max Hymes, like *Sea Cucumber* and *A Life of Wonder IV*. The show had a silent soundtrack consisting of the handwritten lists on handmade compilation audio cassettes, greatly magnified and mounted on the wall, lovingly dedicated to Juliet or Simon or Sarah, and creating a kind of musical portrait of each. There were a few too many of these (collectively titled *Love Fucks You Up*, by Ian Forsyth & Jane Pollard) dotted about, but, as familiar artefacts, quite good the first time round. Also included is what has grown to become a pretty predictable staple in such shows: small, nothing paintings, straining harder and harder to be idiosyncratic and nothing enough (you know who you are).

Such colourful painted blanks decorated the windows in Vilma Gold Gallery, whose Christmas group

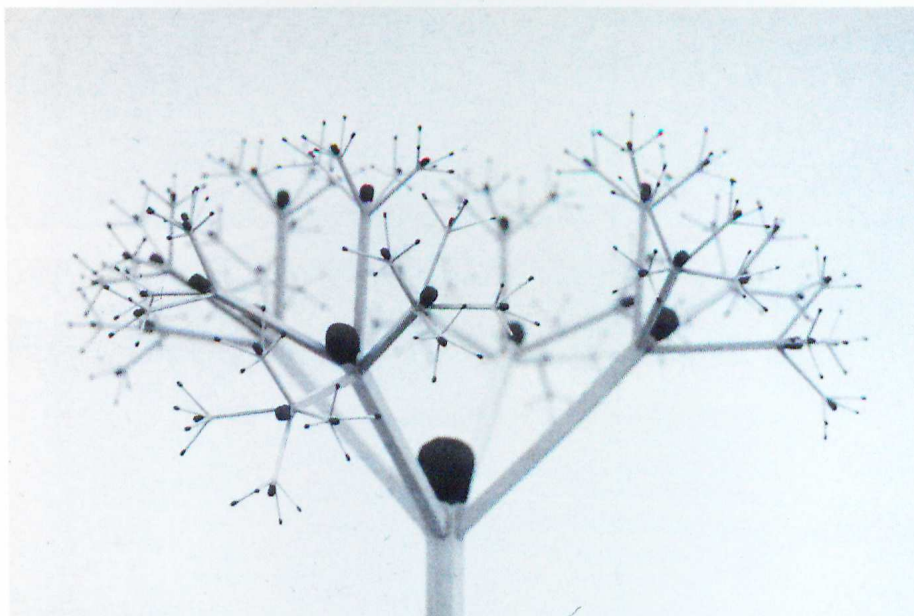


FURTHER up in the air

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Tommy Stockel
Tree 2000 detail



show was untitled (just call it something, guys!) but had some worthwhile surprises. There was not so much of the hippy spirit here; the work seemed slightly more geared toward good craftsmanship and such, like Tommy Stockel's meticulously pasted views of black holes and crowds, cut out from stock illustrations in the Yellow Pages. Or Henry Coleman's hanging wooden 'cloud' reminiscent of another, very different 60s mood; the hard abstraction coupled with its evocative, outdoorsy title, *Fog 41 Forming*, suggested a portable Anthony Caro – of all sculptors – and his classic *Early One Morning*.

Much more self-conscious than any of these was 'Twentieth Century' at Nylon, wherein a London-based collective of young artists photograph themselves in circumstances and events (skydiving, sleeping, playing sports) in a way that doesn't quite manage to out-cool their direct antecedent, Art Club 2000. They must hate any mention of New York's 90s AC2K *wunderkinder*, who are still kicking about, but sorry, leave it to the Ameri-

cans to do fakey, youth-centred, sitcom drama better than the Brits.

A generous idea came from artist Cornelia Parker, who lent her studio space for a temporary gallery called Pearl. That show, 'Ruby', presented a Brit, David Batchelor, American sculptor Hils Snyder and a Spanish artist Ana Prada, and was unlike any of the other group shows in the surrounds. The show elegantly brought together Batchelor's constructions, equally loaded with pop culture and art history, Snyder's delicate relief sculptures which mask all kind of esoteria, from poetry to rock 'n' roll to map-making and fairytales, to Prada's assisted readymades mounted directly to the wall and made from balloons and staples. The show felt less British, perhaps more American, in the sense that it was far more interested in such heavies as symbolism and history (art and otherwise) than we generally see locally.

The Brits, in contrast, tend to be more literal, less oblique in their references, happier to think about life



Twentieth Century
Untitled (pinheads)
2001



George Shaw
*Scenes from The
 Passion: Back of The
 Club and the bottom of
 The Steps 2001*

straight, as they see or remember it. A good example is George Shaw's solo outing, 'The New Life' at Anthony Wilkinson Gallery, with a recent group of his by-now familiar but still beautiful, enamel-on-board paintings of anonymous, forgettable/unforgettable landscapes drawn from the artist's Midlands youth. Parking lots, dreary church exteriors, damp Brutalist public buildings, muddy shortcuts, semi-rural lots behind shops or next to the pub are all emptied of people, cars, satellite dishes – whatever might detract from the idealisation of this disappointing landscape. The painting technique in Humbrol enamel (model-makers') paints produces a rich, pre-Raphaeliteish surface with an endearingly contradictory feel. While the model paint is perfect for the fine rendering of white window trims and thin branches of winter trees, the piles of fallen leaves have the improbable, over-detailed look of an earnest entry for a local art competition. Shaw manages to do in an unusual way what so many other contemporary Brits have done over

the past ten years, depicting 'real life as it really is', but he makes it gorgeous to look at and genuinely poignant, a real relief after so much bleak ugliness. These are potently atmospheric works, functioning like old-fashioned poetry to evoke the cold, long days of childhood and dull surrounds of our youth. This is still another view of the 60s, disturbingly familiar, exactly the way many of us really remember them. ■

Gilda Williams is a writer and Commissioning Editor for contemporary art at Phaidon.

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