

employs the logo of the John Lewis Partnership retail business. Farquhar's nostalgia stops short of sentimentality though, as a degree of irony and humour is mixed up with, one suspects, a sympathy for past utopian and collective ventures in equal measure. This was perhaps less true of Eric Bainbridge's inelegant constructivist works made from stained chipboard and dental floss. Bainbridge's constructions rely too heavily on referencing Modernism's attempt at a hygienic world revolution, something many artists got out of their system over a decade ago. And Farquhar avoids this modernist melancholia through the surprising heterogeneity of his sources.

If Modernism was being referenced in one part of the exhibition then, in another part, Simon Bill's oval paintings seemed like they came from another planet. And this was Bill's accomplishment, as his series of works seemed to recede from any referential framing or aesthetic criteria. In this way the spots, patterns and the well-known reversible icon that is both a rabbit's and a duck's head, achieved a level of abstraction through signification, or rather the lack of it, rather than just through formal or visual effect.

DJ Simpson's work, *Diamond Hubcap – Star Halo*, played a similarly elusive game, though the artist's means were more seductive. Simpson's all-over drawing is achieved by using a routing machine that cuts into a laminated surface to reveal layers of wood below. What could be mistaken for a scaled-up copy of a Pollock drawing is actually a drawing produced free-hand using a heavy industrial tool. What is more, the lines that appear as positive marks are actually negative furrows produced by the drawing process, creating an illusion that makes the drawing both a physical event and a virtual image. What prevents Simpson's work from being a quotation of a modernist drawing style is the unexpected process of his mark-making. This play on illusion and physicality, coupled with a title that knows it is full of promise and optimism, makes Simpson's work a teasing proposition, one that suggests that maybe, just maybe, something new might still be possible.

The new, of course, means something different these days. It was Adorno who fretted that it might be impossible to tell the difference between fashion and something historically significant. Nowadays, any artist wanting to take part in the British art scene often has to live with the fortunes of fashion. What is curious about 'Abstract Art', and what in the end makes the show an interesting piece of curation, is that it feels like an exhibition which is aware of fashion but which also recognises a desire for autonomy amongst the selected artists, most of whom will have developed their practices during the height of postmodern discourse. Within the exhibition, however, the term 'new' is still something being thought over. Will this concern for abstraction or plasticity grow into something significant or is it just a phase we are going through? It is difficult to say but the best work in the exhibition will be difficult to ignore. There is an Ad Reinhardt cartoon in which a woman, who represents art, is

helpless before an oncoming train. A man, who represents abstraction, looks like he will save the day and rescue art. Obviously he failed in his mission and the woman was very badly injured while the man was killed outright. Years later some artists have returned to the scene of the collision to see what can be made of what is left, without getting morbid or moral about it all. Most people know that abstraction cannot be resurrected to live its former life, or at least that it can't save the day. But some artists continue to value the negative and utopian impulses of abstract art as they might still prove important.

I would have liked to have finished the review here but there is one more thing I feel has to be said about the exhibition: it was an all-male show. After all, there are plenty of women artists who would not have looked out of place in the exhibition. It is true that this fact does not take anything away from the exhibited work, so does it matter? Is it an issue? Well it has been, at least since people started to see through the heroic male figure of abstraction that raced to the rescue in Reinhardt's cartoon. And look what happened to him. ■

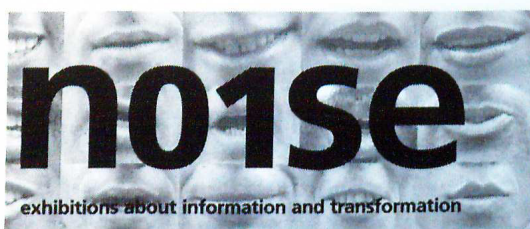
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■ These Epic Islands

Vilma Gold Gallery London January 15 to February 20

There's a craving out there for information says Martha Stewart, America's richest and most obsessive homemaker, as well as Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia. A publisher, talk-show host and eminent lifestyle engineer, mostly Stewart is a perfectionist, a know-it-all: in sum, she's a nerd. A very successful nerd who knows how to pull information together, like the recent IPO (Initial Public Offering) millionaire who came up with a website idea (which later sold for something like \$600m) that offers 'personal living advice'. What to wear, what to read, what to eat, all carefully itemised and priced so you, the shopper, can buy who you want to be. A website for information-hungry nerds, no doubt, created by a fellow nerd who obviously sat for many long lonely hours at his computer without a drop of style, wishing he could just log-on and be told what he needed to buy in order to escape his nerdism and, finally, fit in.

This may be a good moment in history for nerds, outsiders uniquely qualified to fulfil this niched craving for information – for example to tell us where some new art in Britain is heading. Curator and artist Brian Griffiths seems to have this very talent and his terrific 'These Epic Islands' exhibition – a motley collection of mostly small, junky, sculptural works barely out of the skip – felt weirdly prophetic. I started imagining 'These Epic Islands' as Griffiths' own personal living advice for the wannabe art nerd, with helpful suggestions regarding



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These Epic Islands
Installation view

how to make very contemporary art (spin lovely rejects out of junk, like dumpsite alchemists; listen faithfully to the guidance of your own obsessions); what subject matter to choose (ancient history, science fiction and political ephemera are nice); how to spend your time (gluing stuff, building machines, carving things); how to title artworks (personal names have the right feel, like Jeff Hobbs' video *Stephen and Felicity*, or Matt Franks sculpture fondly named *Romeo*) and what suitable role model to adopt (how about a monkey named Enos?). It felt like a quiet, confident harbinger of lots more unheroic and unintellectualising artworks to come.

Griffiths' account of how the exhibition came together, born from nerdy enthusiasm and a relaxed combination of studio visits, informal suggestions from kindred spirits and unexpected connections, is probably what made this show feel so unpretentious and good. The information feels genuine, and suddenly one senses a definite, unforced mood of many private worlds producing strangely cobbled together objects. These artists cross a variety of failed aesthetics (say, 1950s high Modernism, or wind-up toys) with pure garbage, creating alternatively witty or melancholic artworks heading straight for the garage by way of Reyner Banham or the hobby shop. One detects a reassuringly healthy streak of nerdism – distanced from the mainstream, obsessively specific, unglamorous – in 'These Epic

Islands', and it feels very current, very exciting.

Griffiths describes his exhibition as a place where 'art is pushed adrift upon the gallery floor to make its own islands, its own peculiar worlds'. Private, peculiar worlds? We are definitely in nerd country here, a land where everybody has finally given up trying to be cool and is just indulging in whatever oddity they inexplicably like best. Matt Franks makes Hiroshima-like mushroom clouds carved from polystyrene; Angus Miller's plasticine parrots called *Slapsticks* are assembled by the dozens on the wall (reportedly the artist can fashion about one such parrot an hour – not bad); Ulli Knall shapes ceramic portrait busts of *Shape Shifters* ...; sci-fi artistocrats with complicated hair; Fernando Rodriguez Palma's machine, *Coyote-Brother-Second-in-Charge*, is a sputtering heap of ethnic-looking stuff, perpetually on the verge of collapse; Colin Lowe and Roddy Thomson's miniature table-top constructions are labour-intensive labyrinthine sub-worlds, balsawood monuments with typewritten messages about forlorn love and stuff; Jeremy Deadman's *False Bottom* is cheap Minimalism made from a cardboard box; and Klega's beautiful line wall-drawings are spinning out of an old portable tape player.

What a dump! What a bunch of nerds! It was wonderful to witness. One suspects the artists here spend too much time alone, making art out of the rubbish in shared

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flats and bedsits which definitely have never benefited from any internet-inspired lifestyle makeovers. The interest here is low-tech, unsexy, personal but not confessional. There are no human bodies or sticky fluids in this show; all the works are dry, mostly colourless. Griffiths certainly likes his objects – as long as they're not too big. He likes to pile them together and watch them co-exist ungracefully together. 'These Epic Islands' covered unfamiliar territory without a hint of hesitation, nostalgia, or a hidden agenda, just coherent curating, very in tune with the place and the moment. It's pure information from an intelligent, independent mind in the undercurrents of the artworld, which still functions best in uninstitutionalised formats like this.

I suspect the artworld has always been a vast haven for nerds. Many of our most beloved, fellow low-tech loving artists, say Robert Smithson or Eva Hesse, may look cool to us now, but secretly we know they were probably perfect misfits who, in their chronic inability to belong, looked at the world from their own peculiar, out-of-it perspective. Art welcomed them, transformed their nerdy solitude into a vision, gave them immortality. I wonder if their earliest exhibitions might have looked something like this. ■

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■ Sleuth

Barbican Centre London January 29 to March 5

■ Liam Gillick

Hayward Gallery London January 10 to February 9

'When you're slapped, you'll take it and like it.' Humphrey Bogart's consummate portrayal of Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, 1941, established the alienated and morally ambiguous private eye as the central fixture of a new cinematic sub-genre: film noir. Defined visually through the use of claustrophobic urban locations and stylised expressionist compositions, its characteristic themes were as dark as the epithet suggests: duplicity, paranoia and the relationship between crime and desire. The reign of noir proper is generally held to have ended with the release of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* in 1957, but Hollywood directors have exploited its look and feel ever since. In 'Sleuth', Caryn Faure Walker begins to trace this legacy elsewhere: through the video, digital and photographic work of seven contemporary artists.

The Barbican's Concourse Gallery, now known as The Curve, is in general a miserable venue, more like an outside thoroughfare between theatres than a place in itself. 'Sleuth' at least represents an attempt to exploit its curving layout, making use of stark spotlighting to ensure



that the view ahead is swathed in mysterious shadow. The booths housing two of the larger video works add to the effect by introducing a series of doorways, each with the potential for framing visitors in an appropriately dramatic fashion. Unfortunately they do nothing to prevent sound leaking out, and at times the clash of music and speech is quite disorientating. Juggling a relatively small number of works, Walker makes the best of a bad job.

Of the two commissioned pieces, Julia Scher's *UK Under Surveillance*, 1999, is the most successful, although not without shortcomings. Entering the gallery we are confronted by a row of CCTV monitors mounted on a suspended shelf. These show black and white images of the gallery, shot from both inside and out, mixed with scenes from an episode of *The X Files* re-staged by the artist. What could be genuinely unsettling were it more closely integrated with the functional style of the building (why for instance is the shelf bright pink?) fails to suspend disbelief for quite long enough. The constructed footage, while intriguing, is too filmic, conflicting stylistically with the flat blandness of the live images and unbalancing the end result. *Spin*, 1999, by Hugo Glendinning/Tim Etchells with Forced Entertainment, is a digital video with which the viewer is invited to interact via a mouse and keyboard. Based on a murder mystery story in which 'the viewer starts as a detective and gradually realises that they are implicated in the violence portrayed', *Spin* sounds great. In practice it is beset by the all-too-familiar problems of point-and-click art. A convoluted, even incoherent narrative is taken for

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