



Charles Saatchi's 'Newspeak'

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'It Happened In The Corner' (2007) by Glasgow-based duo littlewhitehead

Is Charles Saatchi having fun? On the plus side, he is the biggest private collector in Britain. His Chelsea gallery is among the most beautiful and well-appointed in the world. It is relaxed, impious, free, and full, which matters because, as Saatchi often admits, "I primarily buy art to show it off." He buys whatever he likes, often on a whim: "the key is to have very wobbly taste." Yet for all the flamboyance with which he presents his purchases, it is not clear that he is convinced by them. "By and large talent is in such short supply, mediocrity can be taken for brilliance rather more than genius can go undiscovered," he says, adding that when history edits the late 20th century, "every artist other than Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, Donald Judd and Damien Hirst will be a footnote."

These quotations come from a question-and-answer volume, *My Name is Charles Saatchi and I am an Artaholic*, published last autumn, and their tone of breezy disenchantment, combined with the insouciance with which his new show, *Newspeak*, is selected and curated, suggests that at 67 Saatchi is downgrading his game. After recent exhibitions concentrated on China, the Middle East, America and India, *Newspeak* returns to the territory with which he made his name as a collector in *Sensation* in 1997: young British artists. But whereas *Sensation*, tightly selected around curator Norman Rosenthal's theme of a "new and radical attitude to realism" by artists including Hirst, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Rachel Whiteread, Marc Quinn, had a precise, powerful theme, *Newspeak* has a scatter-gun, unfocused approach.

The random juxtapositions of some 30 artists mostly born in the 1970s feels like a condensed trawl through London's smaller commercial galleries, yielding some good, some mediocre, some ghastly pieces, with no claims for significance other than that this work is being made here, now.

"I certainly was more dynamic once," Saatchi reflects, "building my advertising business and my art collection with ferocious energy. Now that I have fizzled out, I still enjoy putting on shows of art that I like and introducing new artists, so I hope it makes it worthwhile to plod on."

With these modest ambitions, what's not to like? The opening room must be a Saatchi joke – glimpsing the flimsy hanging sugar paper of Karla Black's "Nothing is a Must", and heaps of collapsed cellophane that turned out to be a "holistic" sculpture called "Unpreventable Within", I assumed these were wrappings for works still to be installed. But things brighten in Gallery Two, where Daniel Silver – whose totemic carved heads stood out at last year's Frieze Art Fair – shares space, and playful exploration of a multi-cultural heritage, with Hurvin Anderson's muted, fluidly painted dystopian visions of Caribbean immigrant barber shops and dimly remembered beach scenes.

Anderson's flat planes, emphatic horizontal bands and formal device of a veil painted over the primary image – clipboards and papers floating over an office in "Afrosheen"; a geometric grid forming a security grille across the store front of "Untitled (Welcome Series)", velvet darkness obscuring suburbia in "Untitled (Black Street)" – owe a debt, like so many young British paintings, to the accomplished artifice of Peter Doig. Silver is more individual: his installation of heads on unlikely plinths clash high and low materials – onyx, plaster, black and gold Portoro marble, found wood, fabrics – in a vibrant riff on how classical models energise 21st-century sculpture.

The balance between quality of paintings and installation art chez Saatchi has always been vexed. His taste was honed on YBA conceptualism, and it has been inescapable in every Kings Road exhibition that his own eye is incomparably more astute for installations than for paintings. Among young painters, he goes at best for the derivative and often for the duds, as witnessed in his China and Middle eastern shows, where the canvases were negligible and the memorable works were installations: Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's wonderful parodies of world leaders in wheelchairs, "Old Person's Home", and Wafa Hourani's pertinent, miniature West Bank cardboard city, "Qalandia 2067".

Installations again steal the show. Few artists rise to the demands of the elegant double-height Gallery Ten: John Wynne's sound and sculptural assemblage of 300 recycled speakers, pianola and vacuum cleaner, a lyrical/ironic musing on obsolescence and nostalgia, does so; its melancholy fragments from the pianola based on Franz Lehar's "Gysey Love" reverberate discordantly across the exhibition. I liked too the deadpan plaster and wax sculptures of a gang of hoodies, "It Happened In The Corner", by Glasgow duo littlewhitehead, while Rupert Norfolk's airbrushed, lacquer and aluminium "Guillotine" enters into disquieting dialogue with the best paintings in the show, William Daniels' silvery, wrinkled vanitas still lifes, derived from tin foil collages of Old Masters reworked as semi-abstract paintings of light.

Subsequent juxtapositions are less happy. The other distinctive paintings here, Peter Peri's thoughtful interpretations of constructivism's legacy in luminous spraypaint black canvases – "Blood Sucker", "Infanta" – overdrawn with silverpoint grid lines, lose meditative impact dwarfed by Clunie Reid's inept photographic-graffiti "She Gets Even Happier".

Where, in all this, is *Newspeak*? The word, plus the names of every artist and work in the show, are bizarrely crossed out in the catalogue, as if in negation. A press release explains that the aim is to counter, through this display's variety, the idea in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that Newspeak "is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year". The title, though, is the most authentic thing here: that diminishing is exactly what is happening to Saatchi the collector mired in his past.

'*Newspeak: British Art Now Part 1*', Saatchi Gallery, London, to October 17 www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk

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