

Some issues raised by the Brooklyn Museum exhibit

David Walsh reviews *Sensation*

18 October 1999

Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection
Royal Academy of Arts, London, 18 September-28 December 1997
Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 30 September 1998-21 February 1999
Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, 2 October 1999-9 January 2000

Sensation is the exhibit of British artists now on display at the Brooklyn Museum of Art that has come under attack from New York City's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, presidential hopeful George W. Bush and the US Senate and House of Representatives. Giuliani, who hasn't seen the painting, has made a special point of condemning Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), which uses elephant dung among other materials, asserting that the work constitutes an impermissible attack on religion. The city stopped the Brooklyn Museum's funding and the mayor has threatened to remove its board of directors.

The cultural and liberal or erstwhile liberal establishment in New York was reluctant to defend the show, and such defense as it has mounted has been remarkably muted and weak. Officials at 10 major institutions, including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the New York State Theater and the Museum of Jewish Heritage, refused to sign a statement that criticized Giuliani. The director of the Museum of the City of New York has openly supported the mayor, arguing that "The demeaning of a religious symbol outweighs the protection of free expression." Hillary Clinton called Giuliani's action "the wrong response," then proceeded to deplore the show and piously declared her intention to boycott it. Meanwhile a considerable section of the public has expressed opposition to Giuliani's attempt at state censorship, indicated both by poll results and the large number of visitors attending the exhibit.

In a Brooklyn federal court last week, where the museum has filed suit against Giuliani's arbitrary and undemocratic actions, a lawyer for the city compared *Sensation* to a Ku Klux Klan exhibit or one dedicated to glorifying the Holocaust. At one point Judge Nina Gershon asked the city's legal representative, Leonard Koerner, whether he thought the mayor had the right to walk into any public museum and order its directors to remove any painting that he didn't like. "Yes," came the reply.

This affair should set off alarm bells. It is incumbent on anyone with a concern for artistic freedom and democratic rights to defend with great vigor the exhibit and the artists involved.

As for the show itself, in one sense, the quality of the art under attack is almost immaterial. It clearly is to Giuliani and his fellow right-wingers. The mayor's attacks on Ofili and *Sensation* are demagogic and slanderous. He and his cohorts have constructed something of an imaginary exhibit, organized according to their conception of what will stir up the most backward and philistine layers of the population.

In the face of this assault, it would be satisfying to report that *Sensation* is fully deserving of Giuliani's hostility, that it represents an affront to religion, the family and other respectable institutions. Unhappily, this is not the case. It is necessary to provide a little background.

The "Young British Artists" whose work is currently on display are not merely a group of British painters and sculptors born between 1952 and 1971, they are *the* Young British Artists collected by multimillionaire Charles Saatchi. For the past decade or so, a number of artists in Britain have been promoted and promoted themselves into a position of some prominence in the art world. They trace their origins as a recognizable group to a show, *Freeze*, held in London in August and September 1988. A number of the artists represented in *Sensation* participated in the earlier exhibit, including Damien Hirst, Mat Collishaw, Abigail Lane, Richard Patterson, Gary Hume, Sarah Lucas and Fiona Rae. These individuals all attended Goldsmiths College of Art in southeast London.

As Richard Sloane notes in the exhibit catalogue, "In the two years that followed 'Freeze' the pace quickened, collectors sniffed the air and critics spread supportive words." One of those collectors was advertising executive Saatchi, whose London gallery had opened in 1985. The symbiotic relationship between Saatchi and the artists on display is one of the least pleasant aspects of their rise to fame.

Saatchi & Saatchi, the firm run by Charles and his brother Maurice, both born in Baghdad, became notorious as the architect of Margaret Thatcher's 1979 election campaign. According to one commentator, the Saatchis "continued to serve the Tory Party throughout the following decade, coming to symbolise the glitz, the greed and the get-rich-quick attitudes of the 1980s." By 1986 Saatchi & Saatchi was the world's largest advertising agency. (In 1994 the company's stockholders, charging financial mismanagement, forced Maurice Saatchi to resign as chairman of the company. The Saatchi brothers eventually severed all relations with the old firm and started a new one called the New Saatchi Agency.)

Charles Saatchi made a name for himself as an art collector and patron. The works on display at the Brooklyn Museum belong to his private collection. As one review of *Sensation* in its London incarnation (by Lynn MacRitchie in *Art in America*) noted, "Saatchi also took an active part in the installation, working long hours with the RA [Royal Academy] staff to carefully stage-manage the effect his collection would have on its audience. Unquestionably, what visitors to 'Sensation' saw was what the veteran advertising mogul Charles Saatchi wanted them to see." And further: "In essence, 'Sensation' offered a snapshot of Saatchi's taste of the '90s. Looking at the show, it was possible to see what made him reach for his checkbook as he made his Saturday morning rounds of West End galleries and East End artists' spaces."

Royal Academy secretary Norman Rosenthal, in a relatively brief essay in the exhibit catalogue, pays repeated and obsequious tributes to Saatchi, calling him the new art's "greatest single patron and supporter," later asserting that Saatchi "has a patience and enthusiasm for contemporary art that is second to none," and finally noting that the "greater part of this art has been actively encouraged and brought together by a single patron and collector, who himself recognises through art the fundamental absurdities

of existence and yet sees it as imperative that the creative life should continue."

One receives the impression from a distance that the British art scene may be as corrupt as the American. Rosenthal barely concerns himself with artistic matters, except in the most general and banal terms. His prose heats up when he writes about careers, reputations and related matters. "Can London," he asks, for example, "become the unchallenged centre for the practice and presentation of contemporary art?... If London could now claim such a position, that would be a first, and surely grounds for celebration." As for concerns about the self-promotion of figures like Hirst and others, Rosenthal writes blithely: "Art is not just about making a vision; it is also about imposing that vision on others." This is probably where Van Gogh slipped up.

Taking a page from Andy Warhol's book, Hirst and his colleagues have made a point of demonstratively *not* being anti-establishment. Artist and critic Matthew Collings, an adherent of the young British art, writes in his history of the trend: "the aim was not to buck the system but to get into it as soon as possible by showing how utterly system-friendly your art was." It might be pointed out in this regard that to my knowledge none of the artists on display have spoken out in defense of Ofili or the exhibit as a whole. Aside from the fact that a little scandal will probably not hurt the market value of their pieces, this is not a group that finds anger or protest particularly congenial.

None of this of course speaks directly to the work produced by this group of British artists, but one could hardly describe it as encouraging.

It should be stressed that the weaknesses of the art, and even the mercenary relations that exist in the art world, do nothing to lend credence to the attacks of Giuliani and the rest. The mayor's charge that the exhibit is merely a ploy to increase the value of Saatchi's personal art holdings is phony populism. Coming from a man in the pocket of New York's bankers, Wall Street speculators and real estate developers, this is pretty rich. Moreover, in Giuliani's attack on the "immoral," "cosmopolitan" New York art world, on Saatchi, on Arnold Lehman of the Brooklyn Museum, there are hints of anti-Semitism. There is a considerable history in the US of extreme right-wing and even fascistic Catholicism, identified with figures like Father Charles Edward Coughlin, Joseph McCarthy and Pat Buchanan.

Anyone who is not entirely blind to social reality will likewise recognize as hypocritical the right-wing claim that the work in *Sensation* is "sick and offensive." The truly "sick and offensive" facts of modern life are the social conditions—poverty, homelessness, misery of all kinds—presided over and continuously made worse by those making the claim. Nothing in art can come close to that. If anything, the irony is—and this is something I would like to return to—that the art in *Sensation* is an all too accurate reflection of some of the more retrograde tendencies in contemporary society.

My general attitude to the pieces in the current exhibit is a hostile one. I don't think, taken as a whole, they represent very serious or demanding work. A few of the efforts to shock and disturb are effective, and there are obviously some skilled painters and sculptors in the group, but by and large the pieces try too hard and say too little.

It's entirely proper of course that younger artists should attempt something new and disrespectful. The arguments of a Phillippe de Montebello (of the Metropolitan Museum of Art) and the ravings of a Hilton Kramer (in *The New Criterion*) amount to this: a defense of a certain "tradition of quality" against the invasion of alleged barbarians. Anything that strays outside the boundaries of a certain canon is intrinsically impermissible to these people. Their appeal for "Monet—only up-to-date!" (to paraphrase Bertolt Brecht) is an attack on genuine creativity and a defense of the status quo, and not only in art. The world has changed. It may prove impossible to encompass its reality in the old aesthetic language.

Sensation artists however what ofought the right freshness and originality too often emerges as posturing and mere gimmickry. And the fact that some of the artists go out of their way to emphasize their own superficiality and lack of sincerity, whatever it may say about their moral qualities, doesn't alter the character of the art on display. A body of art either goes deeply into things or it doesn't, and this, I believe, by and large doesn't. There are far too many artists here who have taken the line of least resistance.

Artists today labor in difficult ideological circumstances, both those that prevail in society at large and those that dominate the art world. I would not blame the *Sensation* artists for the Thatcher-Major-Blair years in Britain, nor for being at the mercy of Saatchi and the like, nor for the vast amounts of money thrown at salable art, nor for the confusion and lack of perspective that reigns generally, nor for any of the objective conditions in which they find themselves. I do think, however, that an artist or any individual for that matter can be held responsible for never once having the presence of mind or simple self-respect to say No.

Saatchi, judging by the work he purchases and chooses to have displayed, evidently favors cleverness and self-consciousness. Unfortunately, these are the qualities I value least in art. Darren Almond has constructed a large electric digital clock in *A Bigger Clock* (1997). Glenn Brown has painted in the style of Salvador Dali in *Dali-Christ* (1992) and Frank Auerbach in *The Day the World Turned Auerbach* (1992). The Chapman brothers arrange fiberglass mannequins in a variety of grotesque situations in their pieces. In *The God Look-Alike Contest* (1992-93), Adam Chodzko reproduces responses to ads he placed in various publications inviting those who think they resemble God to send him their photographs.

Mat Collishaw's blow-up of a photograph of a bullet-wound in someone's head, seen from a distance, resembles one or another bodily orifice (*Bullet Hole*, 1988-93). Tracey Emin has constructed an "appliquéd tent," adorned with the names of her lovers and friends in *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (1995). Sarah Lucas photographs lurid tabloid stories and arranges fruit and other objects to look like sexual organs. Gavin Turk has sculpted himself in fiberglass as a punk rock star (*Pop*, 1993).

I don't find any of this rich or suggestive. Mostly it seems childish. This is a recurring tendency in *Sensation*. Granted that some of the pieces were made five years ago or even earlier, one is still surprised to learn the ages of most of the artists. These are not teenagers. With one or two exceptions, these are individuals in their thirties and forties. But there is something distinctly *not grown up* about much of their work, and not in the healthiest sense. One gets the sense that some of these painters and sculptors—like many youthful "celebrities" today, whether in sports, popular music or films—have been picked up by the art industry and its operators, fed into its maw and never allowed to mature. They are obliged to remain artificially "young" for commercial reasons. This has to affect the work they do.

I suspect as well that beneath the bravado this is a deeply insecure group of artists. First, as faddish as the art scene has become, they must be perfectly well aware that they could fall from favor at any moment, like yesterday's pop group or dress style; second, these are not stupid people and the thinness of their own work must register somewhere in their collective consciousness.

In any event, Ofili seems one of the more serious painters and his *The Holy Virgin Mary* one of the more interesting pieces. The work, made controversial by Giuliani for purely opportunist and cynical reasons, is among the small number that strike one somewhere beneath the surface of the skin. Ofili has painted the religious icon as a black woman surrounded by angels made of cut-out buttocks from porno magazines. The infamous elephant dung, forming her breast, looks like any clump of dried earth or clay. At any rate, Ofili is one of the few in the exhibit to have transformed

his chosen materials in a personal manner and to have dared to place his subjectivity in the limelight. Their unevenness makes his paintings stand out in a group of largely sterile works too many of which appear to have been cut by machine tools.

Marcus Harvey has talent. I began to like his sexually provocative *Proud of His Wife* (1994) and *Dudley, Like What You See? Then Call Me* (1996), until I realized they were expressionist-like 'repaintings' of photos again from a porno magazine. As so often happens in this show, the joke or conceit at the heart of the work disappointingly serves to cancel out any feeling it might convey.

The paintings of Richard Patterson and Fiona Rae struck me as efficient, busy and cold. Jenny Saville works somewhat in the manner of Lucian Freud, except without his history, severity and compassion. Gary Hume's *Begging For It* (1994), in which "a pale blue figure is silhouetted against an avocado-green background, with jet-black arms and clasped hands reaching up, beseeching someone for something" (exhibit catalogue) is a moving and suggestive piece.

Rachel Whiteread, along with Hirst, is one of the best-known in the group. She "makes sculptures of the negative spaces of common domestic objects," for example, "an installation of 100 green, amber and yellow translucent sculptures of the spaces beneath chairs and stools" (catalogue). *Ghost* (1990) is a mausoleum-like structure cast from the inside of a Victorian room, complete with the impressions of a fireplace, doorways and so on. It is an evocative work. In a show strenuously devoted to the Here and Now, an artist working with problems of memory and absence is also likely to stand out. Ron Mueck's *Dead Dad* (1996-7), a half life-size silicone model of a naked man, a corpse, also disturbs.

For seven years Richard Billingham took photographs of his parents, brother and pets in their cramped flat in a housing estate in Sunderland. A selection is displayed in the current exhibit. His seriously alcoholic father looms large in the photos. The pictures, which reveal lives dominated by oppression, produce mixed feelings. Billingham has organized his color shots to place his family and their surroundings in the most garish and unflattering light. He has every right to do so, but whether compassion or disdain, or some combination of the two, animates his work is not entirely clear. In any event, the room with Billingham's photographs and Whiteread's *Ghost* is the most disquieting in the show.

Damien Hirst's work is prominent in the exhibit, with some eight of his pieces on display. One of the first and most striking is *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), which consists of a 14-foot tiger shark suspended in formaldehyde inside a glass and steel cage. Striking and impressive, but little more than that. The pretentious title does not make this anything more than a somewhat sinister natural history museum display. Hirst has also submerged fish (*Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding*, 1991), a lamb (*Away from the Flock*, 1994), a pig sliced lengthwise (*This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home*, 1996) and cattle sliced vertically (*Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything*, 1996) in a formaldehyde solution. In *A Thousand Years* (1990) the artist has placed a severed cow's head in a steel and glass case; maggots and flies abound. He also does "spin paintings," in which he drips paint on a revolving circular canvas.

Hirst, as indicated above, is a self-promoter, who refuses to say much of anything about his art. He is a media personality in Britain, a frequenter of London night spots and friend of pop stars and such. He obviously has flair and talent. But his work is not, in the end, either interesting or expressive. It is cold, mechanical and unreflective.

There is a sadistic element in Hirst's sliced animals. It's all very well to say that the slaughtering of cows, lambs and pigs goes on every day, and that one plays the hypocrite by refusing to bring the process out into the light of day. In the first place, the average person is not responsible for the manner in which animals are disposed of by large corporations whose

only concern is profit. In a humane society, such a process would be carried out in a radically different fashion. Beyond that, the slaughterhouse as a metaphor has had a particular history in literature and cinema. Artists have generally used it, for better or worse, as a way of suggesting suffering and persecuted humanity. The novelist or filmmaker encourages the reader or viewer to sympathize with the innocent, murdered animal. Hirst's innovation is to invite identification with the butcher.

Hirst's work—and this holds true for the work of a number of others in the exhibit—is "truthful" in the following limited sense: it provides an accurate measurement of the dehumanization undergone by British society during the past two decades. His sliced animals can be viewed as an authentic, if half-conscious, response to the cruelty of the Thatcher and post-Thatcher years, but they don't succeed as art because they represent a relatively unmediated response.

This, I think, is really the critical issue. One senses in the art of *Sensation* the shock produced by the changes that have taken place in Britain (above all, the impact of a global economy, the growth in social inequality and the decay of the traditional labor movement and its accompanying ideology), all the more shocking for having taken place in such a traditional society, but the artists have done little more than identify surface realities. They have not gotten on top of the situation, so to speak, in artistic terms. They have not brought to bear the history of art, the history of society and their own formidable skills to work deeply on the raw material of their experience. History has been brought to bear rather crudely and directly on them. This was not inevitable.

As an unhappy outcome of all this they have become the play-thing to a large extent of the wealthy and powerful, and their work takes the form of a cool and self-serving accommodation to the social transformation. There is no anger, no protest, relatively little compassion for society's victims. Entirely excluded is the possibility of altering external or internal reality. (Why should it be changed, anyway? Some of the artists have made a bundle and are not at all dissatisfied.) There is only the clever maneuvering among and within existing objects and relations, a universe of openings, galas, tabloids, rock stars, pornography and mass media. Utopian vision is absent, and so for that matter is the anti-utopian; the art is largely of the present moment, the moment least important for art.

One should add two points. The problems represented by this exhibit have not appeared out of the blue. They are the result of a protracted decay in the visual arts at least in the advanced countries, whose different stages over the past half-century can and need to be traced out. Nor is there anything specifically British about many of these issues. Work similar (in tone at least) to that produced by the *Sensation* group is made in considerable quantities in New York, Los Angeles, Berlin, Paris, Tokyo, Rome, Sydney, Toronto and elsewhere.

It is the failure of artistic nerve that is most troubling. The principal responsibility of the artist under any circumstances is to deepen his or her art; this is the advance that contributes most to changing the world. The members of the *Sensation* group have in large measure abdicated that responsibility. To the extent that they have allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by an historical process in an *artistically unfruitful* manner, they have abandoned, in the words of the late art critic Peter Fuller, "the imaginative, bodily and expressive potentialities of the artist as a creative, human subject."

See Also:

The view from the jaded top

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[8 October 1999]

City Hall versus the Brooklyn Museum:

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[1 October 1999]



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