Relaunching London's Tate Gallery—RePresenting Britain 1500-2000

Mona Hatoum at the Tate Britain, Millbank, London

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12 May 2000

The closure for refurbishment of the Tate Gallery on Millbank temporarily deprived London of one of its major collections, as well as one of its better gallery spaces. The Tate (web site: http://www.tate.org.uk/) has been one of the success stories of British galleries, expanding from its Millbank home to sites in Liverpool and St. Ives, Cornwall. Even with these additions the collection had still outgrown the spaces available. The decision was taken to seek out another location within London to run alongside the existing site in order to display more of the collection.

What has been established is not just an expansion of the display area, but a division of the Tate's holdings. International works will be displayed in the "Tate Modern", the converted Bankside power station overlooking the Thames, while the Millbank site is relaunched as "Tate Britain", focusing on works by British artists, contemporary and historical. The names of the two sites hint at some of the problems inherent in such a division of the collection.

Tate Britain's launch exhibition *RePresenting Britain 1500-2000* aims to "celebrate the depth and range of our British art collections". This posed a major concern immediately. There is the danger that Tate Britain could look very provincial in its concerns and its displays. There is also the question of whether it was trying to posit some British exceptionalism in art, trying to view British art outside of an international context with a view to some redefinition of national identity. There is more than a hint of this in the gallery plan, which talks of the "changes and continuities in British art and life over five centuries", as well as in the discussion of the Tate's "activities as an art collector for the nation".

The galleries of *RePresenting Britain* are arranged thematically, rather than chronologically. Under four broad headings— *Literature & Fantasy, Public & Private, Home & Abroad, and Artists & Models* — galleries are arranged by genre or subject matter (*Visionary Art, The Portrait, The Nude, War, The Land, Home Life*). There are also galleries devoted to specific artists (William Blake, Thomas Gainsborough, Ben Nicholson, JMW Turner, John Constable, and David Hockney) as well as one of works with a quite specific content—*Roast Beef and Liberty*. Ostensibly to show the "changes and continuities in British art and life," this arrangement serves to disrupt any idea of a unified collection. The themes are so disparate, and the treatment of the themes so diverse, that one does not get an idea of national identity pulling these pieces together, but rather of the artistic differences separating them.

The Tate was always seen as the natural home of modern art. The first cause for reflection therefore is the historical breadth of their collection. Four rooms of paintings by Turner (1775-1851) provide a valuable overview of his career, as well as drawing together works by his contemporaries. One room of Constable (1776-1837) is, I confess, more than enough for me, but the juxtaposition of his parochial landscapes with Turner's more challenging representations of light is an interesting one.

The collection of paintings by Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88) is seen in the context of other portraits—part of the *Public & Private* group of galleries—but they are separated from portraits of artists' models, which turn up in the *Painters in Focus* room, as well as from portraits by David Hockney (1937-), which are in his dedicated room on the other side of the exhibition. At such times the collection is unable to follow the continuities it is looking for. Rather than a supposed "Britishness", what binds Constable's English pastoral with Turner's very European treatment of light is not their origin but their subject matter. Similarly, Gainsborough is tied to the Californian resident Hockney not by some mythologised shared national background, but by their posing of portrait models.

The essentially false nature of the designation "British art" is emphasised by the display of work by Mona Hatoum in the centre of the gallery. At its best, Hatoum's work addresses exactly the question of the arbitrariness of national

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identity and the ease with which it can be suppressed. Here, a map of the world created in iron filings is swept from below by a magnetic arm. The effect is of watching countries ripple like cornfields. Her arresting image—that there is more to bind us internationally than there is to divide us nationally—is one that resonates through the other galleries here.

Displaying work according to themes has certain benefits. When you do find a familiar piece, it is often made surprising and fresh by the unfamiliar context in which it is viewed. But this also works against any understanding of the historical context in which different schools of paintings and sculpture emerged. Occasionally there is an almost accidental discovery of direct connections between artists (a striking portrait of a bull terrier *Belle of Bloomsbury* led me to the discovery that its creator, Cedric Morris, had taught both Lucian Freud and Maggi Hambling). It is to be hoped that out of a new juxtaposition of familiar elements may come the inspiration for something new, although it is depressing that the Tate seems so keen to fuel the notion of a "national" rather than a cosmopolitan art emerging out of this.

There is an interesting room of British art acquisitions made over the last 10 years, containing some important older pieces as well as some curios from well-known artists. (Early works for the theatre by David Hockney, for example, are among his more interesting). There are also some fascinating works by artists previously unknown to me, including pieces by Ithell Colquhoun (1906-), an occultist who had joined the British Surrealists just before the Second World War.

Unfortunately what will no doubt attract most attention from the press and wealthy art buyers is the work of younger artists who are closely identified with the notion of "Brit-Art" and are touted by major collectors like Charles Saatchi as the future of that national art identity. Not everything is as vacuous as the work displayed here by Tracey Emin, but much of it has little to say. Jake and Dino Chapman's childishly pedantic reconstruction (using toy soldiers) of Goya's horrific war images adds nothing to our understanding of war, of Goya, or of the nature of art. Chris Ofili's *No Woman No Cry*, his response to the murder of Stephen Lawrence, is a large work, and the much-vaunted elephant dung base works very well as part of the work. Only the tears, each containing a picture of the murdered teenager, seem mawkish and strike a false note, but there is a clear attempt to express something dignified and serious here. That is welcome at least.

The mostly rather dull treatments of Christian mythology in the *Visionary Art* gallery seem to have intended to compliment the room depicting the awkward genius and radical vision of William Blake (1757-1827). But Blake is difficult to put in such a context, representing as he does an older millenarianism in a period of intense industrial upsurge and international revolutionary activity. Equally a concentration on Stanley Spencer's domestic visions of the 1930s is precisely how not to understand his extremely diverse output.

The room *Roast Beef and Liberty* is the most direct exploration of British national identity and takes as its central image William Hogarth's "O The Roast Beef of Old England ('The Gate of Calais')". It highlights the symbol of beef in British and French propaganda/satire, mainly in the eighteenth century. This is an excellent display of propaganda prints, not just from Hogarth but also from the Swiss artist Brandon and the French Bontard. Here are caricatures of well-fed Britons versus the skinny French, in the British pictures, or positively obese Britons versus the healthily average French, in the French ones. There are political subtexts clearly on display in the hostility of the British ruling class to what was seen as the dangerously foreign republicanism of the French.

There is also an interesting demonstration of how artistic imagery can continue to be used in a subversion of its original context. The cartoonist Steve Bell parodied Hogarth in the context of the French ban on British beef following the outbreak of the BSE ("Mad Cow") crisis. Where Hogarth was using beef as a potent symbol of British power, Bell used an image of the then Tory Prime Minister John Major as a symbol of weakness and ineffectiveness.

I am pleased to see the Tate open again, and am impressed at the scale of their collection. But I was left wanting either a closer focus on historical context or a broader international understanding of the work on display. For the former it seems that we will get more dedicated exhibitions (e.g., the forthcoming display of William Blake, or the current exhibition of the Norwich School of landscapes). For the latter we must hopefully look to Tate Modern as a counterbalance and, despite the distance between them, see them as one gallery.

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