The significance of the Momart art fire

Paul Bond
7 June 2004

A fire in a warehouse complex in east London last week has destroyed hundreds of works of art by twentieth century British artists. The fire, which began in a neighbouring warehouse, ripped through 10,000 square feet of storage space used by Momart, one of Britain's leading art storage and removal companies. The warehouse in Leyton, one of three storage facilities used by the company, was used for long-term storage, and held between 5 and 10 percent of the company's holdings.

Momart has handled shows and storage for most of the major British galleries and collections, including the National Gallery, the Tate and the Royal Academy. It handled the transportation to New York and Berlin of the Royal Academy's 1997 show *Sensation*, which promoted BritArt as a phenomenon internationally.

The company also stores work for private collectors. Damien Hirst's collection is stored by the company, as are his own works. Momart is even known to have its own formaldehyde team to deal with Hirst's preserved animals.

It was the destruction of a number of works by the *Sensation* generation of Young British Artists that has attracted media attention to the fire. The collector Charles Saatchi had many pieces stored at the warehouse. More than 100 items from his collection were among the works destroyed, including pieces by Hirst, Tracey Emin, Chris Ofili and the Chapman brothers.

Initial reactions to the fire showed a degree of *schadenfreude* at the loss of these pieces. It was only when the extent of other holdings destroyed became known (including significant works by Patrick Heron, Adrian Heath, Paula Rego and Gillian Ayres) that the loss was taken more seriously. Sections of the popular media responded to the fire with a populist malicious glee that was wholly unedifiying. That such attacks, and such a climate of suspicion towards artistic endeavour, were able to well up so quickly and almost unchallenged is indicative of some of the problems of the artists lionised by Saatchi.

Charles Saatchi has been the single biggest collector of work by young British artists in the last 20 years. Baghdad-born, he made his name as an advertising executive. Saatchi and Saatchi, the company he ran with his brother Maurice, remains best known for the advertising campaign that backed Margaret Thatcher in the Conservative's successful general election campaign in 1979. The Saatchis continue to support the Tory party.

Saatchi makes regular trips to artists' studios and small galleries. He purchases extensively, often buying whole collections of an individual artist's work. Because of this bulk buying, there has been a tendency within the British art establishment to regard Saatchi as some kind of beneficial influence. The deeply conservative art critic Brian Sewell has described Saatchi as easily the most important figure in modern British art.

There is, though, another aspect to Saatchi's collecting. He became patron to a particular layer of young artists, those who had the least capacity or desire to resist him. What distinguished many of the Young British Artists was their reluctance to probe beyond the surface of appearance. Where they came up against the realities of the world around them, they were content not to explore deeper.

Tracey Emin, perhaps the most recognisable of this group of artists, exemplifies the tendency. Her work occasionally shows signs of attempting to construct some sort of narrative, but this is always left at an individual, autobiographical level. She seems unable to place her personal narrative within a wider social framework. She also seems unable to probe her own narrative for any deeper significance.

This is reflected in the techniques she uses. *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, one of the works destroyed in the fire, was a tent adorned with the names of friends and lovers and siblings. She talks quite intensely of the six months' work on the piece, with the tent occupying the sitting room of her flat, yet the piece itself conveyed little of that intensity.

Reviewing the *Sensation* show for the *WSWS*, David Walsh noted that some of these artists seemed "obliged to remain artificially 'young' for commercial reasons." Saatchi, with his open chequebook, offered a further incentive not to grow up. By making this moment of superficiality lucrative, he retarded further the development of a layer of artists already in a state of shock and pessimism

© World Socialist Web Site

at the social changes within Britain during the Thatcher period.

Many of these artists, though, entered willingly into this arrangement. Matthew Collings wrote that the aim was "not to buck the system but to get into it as soon as possible." To that end, the art was made "utterly system-friendly."

Artists struggling to find anything significant to say now found that they could make a living without pursuing meaning any further. Much of the media derision of these artists has been characterised by cheap shots at the deliberate sensationalism of the works destroyed; but in a distorted way, it reflects a dissatisfaction with this compromise, with this failure to engage. Some of their work feels dated, precisely because it attempted only to shock or reflect the immediate appearance of things.

The reactions of the artists themselves to the fire were decidedly mixed in character.

Emin spoke of her personal loss, but pointed out that nobody had died and that "ideas continue." She noted that the fire was in the news "between this war, with people being bombed at their wedding, and 500 people being washed away in flash floods in the Dominican Republic."

Chris Ofili sent a text message to critic Adrian Searle about the loss of some of his paintings. These included the first of his pieces featuring the parody superhero Captain Shit. "The Superhero Captain Shit has inbuilt protection against the flames of Babylon. HE WILL RETURN...the saga continues," he wrote.

In an impassioned and slightly incoherent article for *Scotland on Sunday*, critic Iain Gale wrote that "the cynic will say they can be remade." Actually, this was precisely the response of the Chapman brothers to the loss of their large piece *Hell*. "We will just make it again. It's only art," said Dinos Chapman, "There are worse things happening in the world."

Similarly, a spokesman for Damien Hirst talked of salvaging his sculpture *Charity*. The 22-foot-high bronze was found in the warehouse yard, leaning against an unstable wall. Based on an old collection box for the Spastics Society, the piece marks the lowest point to date of this derivative self-promoter.

Hirst and Saatchi have achieved success in the media by focusing attention on the monetary value of the artworks. The discussion has focused on the £500,000 Saatchi paid for *Hell*, on the structure of art insurance clauses, on the valuation of such pieces as *Charity*. Pieces have either monetary value (Hirst) or personal value (Emin)—artistic endeavour is a long way down the list.

This is not the case, though, with the older artists whose works have been lost. Collector Shirley Conran lost 10 pictures by Gillian Ayres. She described the financial aspect as "exasperating," but said it was not a question of money. Rather, the important point was that Ayres's painting was unique. Conran's collection was stored with eight pictures belonging to Ayres herself. The record of a decade of her career has been destroyed.

Conran is considering legal action against Momart. She is unhappy that the paintings were stored on an industrial estate alongside combustible gas canisters, and that there was no security guard employed. (The management of the estate has also expressed surprise that Momart was storing artworks on the site.) Conran also believed that her paintings were being stored at one of Momart's other warehouses in Hackney. Clio Heath also believed this of the 40 paintings by her father Adrian Heath, who died in 1992.

Ms. Heath was critical of storage conditions, but her main concern was the destruction of a significant part of the artist's work. There had been discussion of a retrospective, but the loss of many large pieces from the 1960s would "completely alter" such a show, she said. Heath was a painter of abstracts, a collagist and constructivist.

Similarly, some 50 works by the abstract painter Patrick Heron were lost. These, the collection of his daughters, covered many years of his career from the late 1950s right up to the last two pieces he made before his death in 1999. Katharine and Susanna Heron were also unaware that the paintings had been moved from Hackney. The artist had kept these works together with a view to showing them together. "These were the ones that we were keeping as being key works that would not be sold and that we would have no interest in selling," said Susanna Heron.

The destruction of so many pieces says something about the commodification of art. Even though some of the works were shallow and unlikely to have much lasting significance, they are indicative of the state of the artistic world over the last two decades. However, the significance of the losses at Momart lies in the destruction of works of art that were motivated by other considerations. The works of Heath and Heron, for example, and the reaction of their families to the losses, speaks of an openness and drive to explore that is at the heart of artistic endeavour. What is necessary now is the pursuit of such an artistic vision against all those tendencies that serve to retard and stunt art.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site