

# USA Today: A political outlook emerging amongst artists

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*USA Today*, Royal Academy of Arts, London (6 October to 4 November 2006)

The recent *USA Today* exhibition at Britain's Royal Academy in London was a welcome sign that a political outlook is emerging amongst artists.

Much of the art on display reflected the growing revulsion with the war in Iraq, the Bush administration and deepening social inequality felt by artists and broad layers of the public. It reflects an objective process that lays the basis for a new perspective amongst artists and viewers.

The exhibition, displaying 100 new works from the Saatchi gallery, was the first chance most people in Britain would have had to see firsthand the output from some 38 artists born in the US or now working there.

Perhaps the most directly political art was that by French-born Jules De Balincourt, now living in New York, who makes use of a naïve style to draw attention to questions of imperialist power and class politics.

*US World Studies II* (2005) is an upside down map of the US with brightly-coloured states in all the wrong places, which bears down oppressively on a stunted world—grey and indistinct—squashed into the bottom of the picture. *US World Studies III* (2005) is a similar map of the US but shows the amount of money donated to the Republican party in each state by corporate benefactors such as Walmart and Tricon (KFC, Pizza Hut).

In *United We Stood* (2005) the words United We Stood loom out of the picture in spotlight-like lines of red, white and blue resembling the opening titles of a film, harking back to a mythical golden era when America was not so divided. In the brooding *People who play and people who pay* (2004) the rich and beautiful lounge idle by the poolside, oblivious to the predominantly black hotel staff working away in the glass-fronted rooms that overlook them.

Josephine Meckseper also addresses class issues in

CDU-CSU (2001). In a scene reminiscent of countless fashion magazines, two wealthy Aryan looking blondes sprawl on a sofa sporting chunky gold necklaces bearing the words CDU and CSU—abbreviations for the Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union, Germany's two main right wing parties. Counterposed to this ostentation, in the background, just in view, lurks a maid.

Meckseper has made a name for herself with installations addressing several aspects of fashion and consumerism including the role of art as a commodity. The RA exhibition showed her *The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art* (2005), a series of objects arranged in a glass cabinet like a shop window display. Fashion photos and perfume bottles sit alongside a toilet brush and sink plunger. A white rabbit, like an insatiable consumer, rotates with a sign saying "Non" on one side and "Qui" on the other unable to make its mind up. In the centre of the display is a small card bearing a "%" sign for a cut price sale item.

Meckseper often uses objects like the Palestinian scarf, an Angry Brigade book or a marijuana hemp leaf necklace (*Untitled*, 2005) in installations attacking middle-class radicalism, which she sees as another sort of fashion statement.

Jon Pylypchuk has one room at the RA devoted to his anti-heroic battle scene entitled *Hopefully I will live through this with a little bit of dignity* (2005). Small black-cotton helmeted furry animals stagger and stumble around a central mud bomb shelter, as if drunk or drugged. Many of them are bending over vomiting out a column of sick.

The Pakistan-born sculptor Huma Bhabha also describes her *Untitled* (2006) as a "monument to war." Two clay hands extend forward from a prostrate praying shape which is completely hidden by a cloak of black plastic. At its rear a broken clay tail protrudes out giving the impression of a figure turned rat-like by its submission to

war, religion or the other forces which appear to dominate man.

Barnaby Furnas's *Duel* (2004) is a mass of fireworks exploding in the sky with bright red and yellow bursts that slowly drift to the ground. As you look closer two stick-like figures gradually become visible amongst the flashes in the centre of the painting. Two Uncle Sam figures are firing at each other, mirroring what Furnas regards as the glamorization of war and violence today and the self-destruction of the US.

The latter theme is taken up by Rodney McMillian whose limp cut canvas replica of the façade of America's Supreme Court (2004), painted in swirls of blue and white, looks as if it will be washed away at any moment.

Questions of justice also concern Dash Snow whose piece called *F—the Police* (2005) consists of 45 framed semen-smeared articles from American newspapers depicting cases of police corruption, beatings and murder.

Ryan Trecartin's *World Wall* (2006) is a collaborative effort the artist made with friends after fleeing New Orleans at the time of Hurricane Katrina. His abandoned home takes on the shape of a grotesque and surreal Mardi Gras float of jumbled debris but still seems to remain optimistic and hopeful for the future.

Adam Cvijanovic's *Love Poem* (10 minutes after the end of gravity) (2005) is a beautiful, ethereal depiction of small-town America floating up towards heaven on Judgment Day. As you stand in front of the giant three-piece canvas, houses, trailers, cars, fridges and toys ascend dream-like through the bright blue sky resembling some three dimensional Renaissance religious fresco.

Some of the other art works that caught my attention included Florian Maier-Aichen's *Above June Lake* (2005) one of several eerie dark-red landscape photographs of raw nature scarred by mankind, Inka Essenhigh's *Subway* (2005) depicting commuters leaving trails of their rubbery bodies behind them as they rush about their business and *Crackhead* (2006), Terence Koh's installation of 200 glass cases containing granular, decaying casts of his own head. Press reports suggest two of Koh's sculptures, one of which, entitled *Medusa*, was composed of representations of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary with phalluses, were withdrawn from the exhibition but a spokesman for the RA blamed a fire at the gallery in August for their exclusion.

The RA exhibition received almost universal criticism from Britain's leading art critics. Waldemar Januszczak of the *Sunday Times* declared, "this new generation of talented young Americans is transparently untalented, not

that young and rarely American" who too readily "take an easy pop at the Bushscape." Brian Sewell of London's *Evening Standard* ranted, "Here nothing is original. America has no tradition, and very little culture." Adrian Searle of the *Guardian* proclaimed, "USA Today is an expression, more than anything, of impotence."

Most looked back almost nostalgically to Saatchi's 1997 exhibition "Sensation" that launched the careers of young British artists such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, which "shocked" respectable society and led to attempts by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to close it down.

For me, the main difference between *Sensation* and *USA Today* is the change from a largely self-indulgent, establishment-oriented art to one that is more outward looking and prepared to question the direction of capitalist society.

And there is a certain irony in Charles Saatchi's role in all this. As a young advertising executive he became notorious as the architect of Margaret Thatcher's 1979 election campaign and came to symbolise the greed and get-rich-quick attitudes of the 1980s. Now the art he collects is starting to show just what a disaster has resulted for the vast majority of the world's population.

There are clear limitations of course. Jules de Balincourt, for example, appears not to see anything further than the self-destruction of capitalism and I'm not sure if Josephine Meckseper sees all opposition as futile. But it is to be hoped that these artists deepen their art further and help contribute to changing the world in an artistically fruitful manner.



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