

Art flâneur

Haughty culture

Tim Richardson swans off to the low countries to see YBAs turn their attention to tulips but is disappointed by the beer

IN a spectacular – if I may make so bold – piece of art flâneurism I travelled to and from Amsterdam in a day in order to visit the exhibition *Turkish Tulips* curated by Gavin Turk at the Van Loon Museum. Now that the Young British Artists (YBAs) of the 1990s – like Turk – are Middle-Aged British Artists (MABAs?), certain of their characteristics have remained constant while new preoccupations have emerged. The artists of this generation are still basically occupied with subverting cultural and artistic cliché by means of satirical imitation and exaggerated parody. Hence the opening artefact in this exhibition is Turk's perfect replica in painted bronze of a commercial cardboard tulip box. But, like all English artists (and musicians) since the Anglo-Saxon period, they cannot resist the tropes of English pastoralism.

Admittedly, the topic of this

exhibition is the tulip and the way it has been treated as a cultural artefact in history as an import from the East (there are references to the contemporary refugee crisis in the accompanying catalogue, a mock newspaper). But almost all the artists whom Turk has persuaded to contribute new work to the show – including Damien Hirst, Cornelia Parker, Peter Blake and Mat Collishaw – have opted to celebrate the spectacular beauty of the flower rather than its place in culture.

If an appreciation of natural forms is one new development, then another is a little-noted aspect of YBA culture which has always been there: friendship. The impressive roster of artists assembled by Turk is testament not only to the affection and trust he obviously inspires, but a general sense of amity among these artists which makes for a touching subtext to the show. The YBAs coalesced as



a group early on, largely thanks to the curatorial impulses of Hirst (as putative “leader”) and the encouragement of visionary teachers such as Michael Craig-Martin and the late Helen Chadwick (both represented in this show). It is impressive that the group has remained cohesive even as some of them have become ever more rich and successful; Turk’s own recent retrospective exhibition was held at Hirst’s Newport Street gallery. The YBAs have remained recognisable as a group for far longer than most other artistic movements of the 20th century. Is there a more impressive example of the value of sustained group friendship in any other contemporary art or design discipline?

In fact, this exhibition at the Van Loon Museum emerged out of friendship. It is an historic-house museum which presents formal rooms and grand bedrooms in their 18th- and 19th-century guises. It still belongs to the Van Loon family, who occupy the upper two floors of the house (formerly the servants’ quarters). Philippa Van Loon is chair of the trustees and “contemporary art adviser”. She speaks perfect, uninflected English because she has spent half her life in Britain and studied sculpture with Turk at Chelsea College of Art in the late 1980s. Van Loon told me that she and Turk had been friends

ever since and that he had always wanted to present an exhibition at her grand family home. (For his part, Turk has subtitled it “The Looney Tulip Show”, which Van Loon bashfully admits is an old nickname.) One of the triggers for the show was the *Liber Amicorum*, a tiny handmade book, dated 1597, on display in the museum. This “friendship book” was a kind of autograph book signed by friends and trusted associates of the family. Turk conceived of the show in part as his own friendship book of fellow artists.

As for the works themselves, there are striking contributions from Anya Gallacio, a digital print of petals encased in thawing ice, and Craig-Martin, a silkscreen homage in blues and purples, to Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographic portrait of entwined tulips. These are among the works presented on one wall as a suite of prints in the Bird Room on the first floor; a number of them are to be offered as a limited-edition portfolio of prints. Perhaps most effective are those works which have been embedded in the historic rooms, notably several pieces by husband-and-wife team Rob and Nick Carter. “Five Tulips in a Wan Li Vase” is a framed video of 25 minutes’ duration, an edited version of ten days’ of continuous filming of tulips blooming, fading, wilting and



Turkish Tulips, Museum Van Loon

finally dropping down dead. The piece seems entirely appropriate to its setting while the atmosphere of the room itself enhances its power. The exhibition moves on to the Bowes Museum in Co Durham in late summer (July 29 – November 5).

Since the terms of my Amsterdam assignment was strictly no-expenses-paid, I limited my flâneurist consumption to a diet of alcohol, coffee, cigars and chips. When in Amsterdam I always pay a visit to Architectura & Natura on Leliegracht, which is the best natural history, architectural and landscape-design bookshop in the

world, run by the estimable Gaston Bekkers. However, on asking for a “large beer”, in the English manner, in the bar on the corner of the street/canal, I was surprised to be given two smallish glasses of beer. It transpired that this was the barman’s idea of a pint. I considered this an impertinence and told him so. I don’t mind having two drinks on the go at one time – a whisky chaser for example – but being issued with two identical drinks, unasked for, in the middle of the day seemed an affront to natural law, or common law, or whatever legislation covers this area.



Photo by Peter Mallet, courtesy of the artist and Blain Southern

Mat Collishaw, *The Centrifugal Soul*, 2016

Back in London's Hanover Square I dropped in on the new solo show at the Blain Southern Gallery by one Turk's tulip artists, Mat Collishaw. This was a spectacular event with three new large-scale works in two darkened rooms, each of them making reference to nature. The one which seemed to attract most attention, with everyone filming it on their phones, was a zoetrope installation featuring hummingbirds and bower birds. A zoetrope is an early form of animation with a frisson of the fairground; a kind of merry-go-round garlanded with images (in this case, lifelike models) which

whirs around at high speed creating the impression of continuous movement or flickering film. Strobe lights exaggerated the effect to create a crazy elegance.

Less showy but more rewarding was a piece entitled "Albion": a massive light projection, like a luminescent and gently flickering x-ray, of the Major Oak in Sherwood Forest. Spread across the floor, this fugitive piece nevertheless seemed to capture some of the majesty and mystery of a great and ancient tree. The third work was a series of exquisite *trompe l'oeil* paintings of British garden birds, all chained to perches, against graffiti

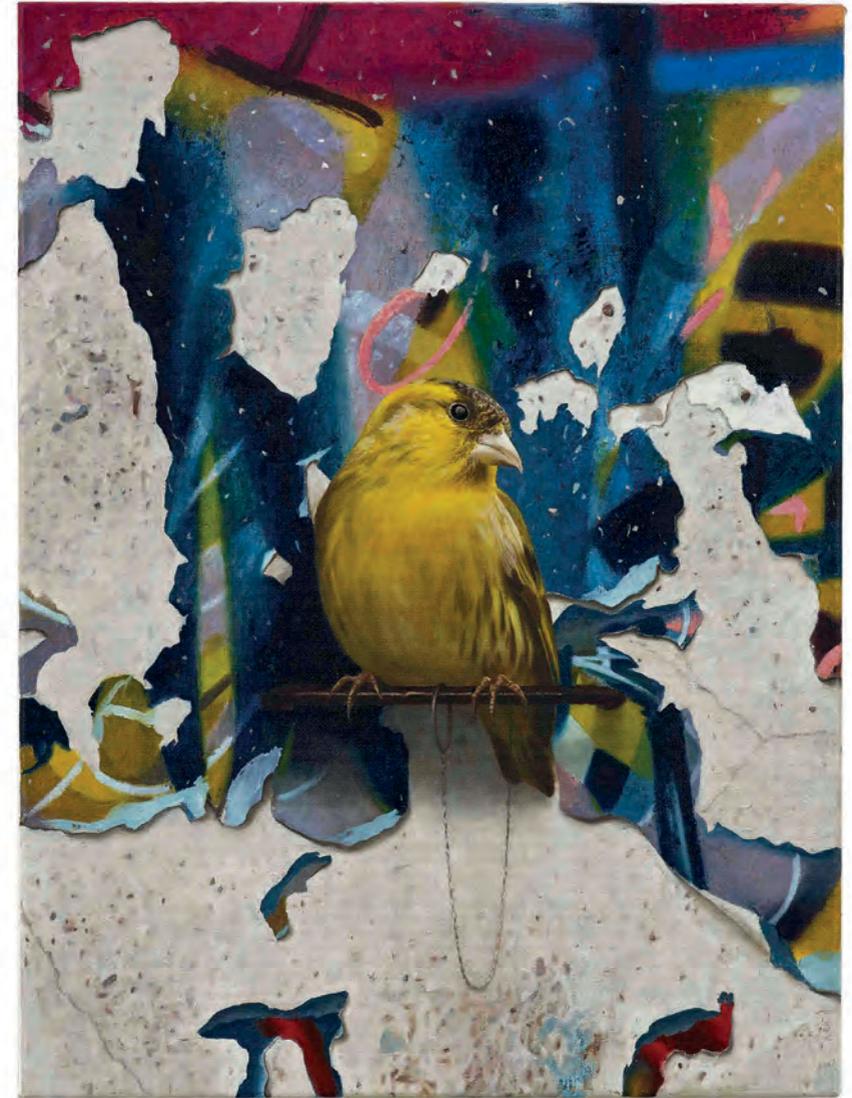
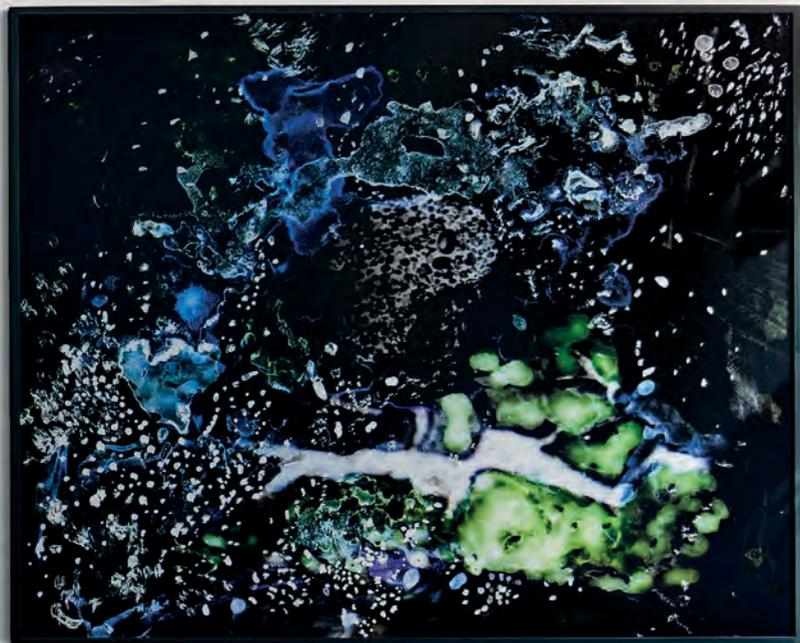
Mat Collishaw, *Gasconades (The New King)*, 2017,

Photo by Todd White, courtesy of the artist and Blain Southern



Courtesy of Belmacz and the artist

Hanna Mattes, *Steine #6*, 2015

backdrops that complemented their plumage while their dignity remained intact. The show was entitled *The Centrifugal Soul* – a comment on the superficiality of what we present to the world of ourselves, presumably through social media in particular, leaving an empty space where there should be a soul for a soulmate to discover.

Among the other interesting shows in the commercial galleries around Mayfair was Hanna Mattes' *Searching for the Cold Spot* at the tiny Belmacz Gallery opposite Claridges. This consisted of just two large-scale examples of her prints of

doctored negatives of images taken of meteorite craters and other landscape formations. The flecked and blobbed results are strange, beautiful and somehow related to Land Art. The gallerist mentioned that the artist is the film-maker Werner Herzog's daughter.

I toddled up Brook Street to an exhibition of paintings (1977–1992) by Georg Baselitz at the Michael Werner Gallery, where the work was impressive but seemed oddly dated – recent history being one of the most difficult sells. Brook Street is well known as the location of Handel's London house, now a



Photo by Plastiques Photography

Makoto Ofune, installation view at Olivier Malingue

museum and incidentally a good place for intimate concerts, but farther west I was interested to see a blue plaque adorning a tall, narrow house once occupied by Colen Campbell. In the early 18th century he was the leading neo-Palladian architect of his generation and designed several dozen mansions for grandees. It seems that Brook Street was a nest for artists who enjoyed Whig establishment patronage.

Back on New Bond Street I enjoyed discovering the work of the Osaka-based artist Makoto Ofune, whose first UK solo show was at the

new Olivier Malingue Gallery. Ofune painstakingly applies mineral pigments to Japanese hemp paper on canvas to create abstract works of shimmering intensity and depth, superficially reminiscent of works by Rothko, or a Turner sky. The centrepiece of the exhibition, a large piece entitled "Eternal", was first presented in 2007 and is continually added to by the artist so that it becomes a new work of art at each presentation.

In the big-gallery world, I paid a visit to the *Queer British Art* show at Tate Britain. I don't think I have ever before come across such a



Cast of Thomas Browne's skull by Charles Williams c.1900



Recreation of Thomas Browne's study, various volumes and objects c.1600s

concentration of bad art in a single show in a major gallery. There was a good section on Keith Vaughan and it was wonderful to discover the shimmering interiors of Ethel Sands, but on the whole the standard was average to risible. Even good artists, like Bacon, Hockney and Laura Knight, were not seen at their best, and there were many strange omissions (Cedric Morris? Gilbert and George?) On this showing, gay writers in the 20th century were far more successful and interesting than gay artists. The curatorial problem lay in the fact there was a confusion throughout as to whether

this was a social history show or an art exhibition. At one moment we were looking at Noel Coward's pink silk dressing gown, displayed in a glass case with a reverence one might have reserved for the Turin Shroud, the next we were contemplating some huge abstract painting. If this exhibition had been presented ten or twenty years ago it might have felt fresh and urgent as a topic, but I felt I had seen a lot of it before. And where was the wit and flair – those epithets most readily associated with a queer sensibility?

Finally, a modest exhibition at the Royal College of Physicians

by Regents Park devoted to that wonderful polymathical 17th-century doctor from Norwich, Sir Thomas Browne, who wrote discourses on obscure topics such as burial rites in different cultures ("Urne Buriall", 1658), the quincunx or figure of five in nature, and the importance of urine in medical diagnosis. One of his books was devoted to the debunking of well-known myths, including (spoiler alert) the story about badgers having shorter legs on one side of their bodies so they could run along hillsides. Browne was such an original that he had to invent new words to encompass his

new thoughts (in this respect he was second only to Shakespeare). Among an array of more than 90 brilliant neologisms were "electricity", "ambidextrous", "therapeutic", "medical", "cynical" and "prim". When his son acquired an ostrich as a pet, Browne wrote to him suggesting that he feed the bird a small iron bar. Thirty five years later the giant bird died and when it was dissected the bar was found intact and undigested in its stomach. Predictable, perhaps – but still definitely worth testing out. 🐪

left and right photographs by Mike Fear
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THE FLANEUR EXHORTS!

Big galleries:

Tate Modern

Giacometti. Blockbuster show devoted to the modern master of sculpture.
Until 10 September

National Gallery

Chris Ofili: Weaving Magic.
New tapestry piece.
Until 28 August

Dulwich Picture Gallery

Sargent: The Watercolours.
Another side to the Anglo-American artist.
Until 8 October

Whitechapel Gallery

A Handful of Dust.
Refreshingly innovative curation: art and dust. *Until 3 September*

Commercial galleries:

Annely Juda

Sigrid Holmwood:
The Peasants Are Revolting! Faux folk art.
Prunella Clough. Retro show on the experimental modernist.
Both: until July 8

Breese Little

31 Women.
Female artists from 1940s to the present.
Until 31 July

Mazzoleni Art

Colour in Contextual Play – An installation by Joseph Kosuth. Arte Povera theme.
Until July 28

Parafin

Hynek Martinec. Old Master imagery appropriated.
Until 15 July

Richard Saltoun

Dom Sylvester Houédard: Typestracts
Retro on sixties Benedictine “cult” monk poet-artist. *Until 14 July*

Victoria Miro Gallery I

Alice Neel, Uptown.
New York paintings.

Victoria Miro Mayfair

Milton Avery. American colourist.
Both: until 29 July

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