Same Old Story?

In recent years, curators have increasingly juxtaposed work by contemporary artists with that of their historical forebears, a trend that asks us to reconsider established art-historical categories – in both museum and market contexts.

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The past is a foreign country, then the sprawling kingdom that is contemporary art has been busy annexing it in recent times. This summer saw Michael Landy, the erstwhile Young British Artist, unveil a roomful of effigies of saints at the National Gallery in London, based on paintings by Cranach, Crevelli and other Renaissance masters. Titled ‘Saints Alive’ (until 24 November; Fig. 1), his kinetic sculptures are the latest in a series of ‘transmations’ of historical works. Last year, Grayson Perry set his signature ceramic pews amid an amorphous mass of unattributed artefacts at the British Museum. ‘Metamorphic: Titian 2012’, staging a dialogue between National Gallery and the Royal Ballet, centred on three British artists’ reinterpretations of Titian’s mythological paintings in the form of new works and stage designs for ballets. The past, it seems, is everywhere – colonised by, or perhaps colonising, the art of today.

Was it always thus? Undoubtedly, historical art is no longer the anathema that it was perceived by many contemporary artists during the 1960s – at least in Britain. Discussing his residency at the National Gallery (the three-year tenure which gave rise to ‘Saints Alive’), Landy confides: ‘I thought this place had nothing to do with my practice when I was a student. I just didn’t think it had any relevance.’ Certain of his Goldsmiths College peers were more positive in their enthusiasm. In 1996, the academic John Roberts summed up the spirit of the age as one of ‘fucking with antiques’ in relation to traditions and orthodoxy. Writing in The Guardian in 2012, Will Self recalled that he admired the Goldsmiths generation in their heady heyday precisely because of ‘their conscious rejection of all codified styles and models’.

But that 1990s cult of nonces, underpinned by a ‘philistine’ rejection of history, is far from over. A benefit art such as the Chapman brothers’ destruction of Goya’s portraits 2003 inpanelessly revealed the way in which art history has continued, and indeedly, impinged on the here-and-now. Even Dean percussion (paganic engagement): rejection entices a perverse kind of embrace. There is no longer new, moreover, about art which either afflicts or affirma the art of the past. Where there has been a discernible shift is in a conversational level. ‘Dialogues’ with the past, based on the juxtaposition of raw and old works, have proliferated both in museums and commercial contexts. This summer saw the second instalment of Frize Masters (17-26 October), running in parallel with London’s Frize Fair Art and devoted to art before the year 2000 – anything from a polychrome sculpture of Christ by multi-coloured mobiles by Alexander Calder, from gutta percha to Silo LeWitt letterworks. In one respect this is a welcome, if belated, answer to the broad temporal span of fairs such as Masterpiece. But Frize’s imperatives are also reflecting a broader trend in curatorship, an impetus to set new art against that of the recent and distant past.

In several instances, historical institutions have invited artists to engage with their collections. For ‘Metamorphosis’, Minna Moor Ede – the National Gallery’s assistant curator of Renaissance paintings – asked Chris Ollis, Conrad Shawcross and Mark Wallinger to respond to Titian’s celebrated poems (themselves visual ‘translations’ of Ovid’s Metamorphoses). Each artist focused on the myth of Diana and Ariadne. Shawcross created a wondrous goddess as a towering robot sitting atop a tripod, beside a pair of wooden anthers that had been mechanically carved (Fig. 3). He described the installation as an ‘epilogue to the story, completing the sequence of discovery and death in Titian’s two paintings of the myth. Diana is literally ‘loving her prize’. Wallinger constructed a live ‘peep show’, a stage-set bathroom in which an access door was the burining Diana; viewers became voyeurs. In a sequence of Chagall-esque paintings, Ollis merged Ovid’s characters with scenes of his home in present-day Trinidad. Moor Ede increasingly realised that all three artists were drawn to the basic story behind the paintings. Narrative has long been an uncontrollable concept, which may be what made it so appealing: ancient fictions offered an escape from more modern ideas.

Elsewhere, the pairing of contemporary and historic artists has crossed forth more obliged possibilities. It has also asserted irreconcilable differences. Poussin and Twombly: Arcadian Painters’ at Dulwich Picture Gallery in 2011interoplated works by American abstract painter Cy Twombly with Poussin’s beatiful trick heart behind Poussin’s paintings’, Cullinan observes. ‘Twombly was certainly more studious and mimetic than the appearances of his works might lead one to believe – my recollection of him is as a formidable dabbler.’

Several exhibitions have gone further in their collapsing of distinctions, dramatically eliding old and new, curator and artist. Grayson Perry’s ‘The Tomb of the Unknown Gentleman’ at the British Museum in 2012, which integrated his pots with an array of ancient curiosities – an Indian amulet, inscribed Roman bronze nails – was a case in point. As he admitted at the time, ‘I have taken the risk of putting any own works up against a selection of already very potent objects’, in order to show the ‘distance’ between them.

A similar intention to synthesise divergent historical moments tantalisingly lies behind a new body of paintings by John Baldessari, the gaudier of American Pop-Conceptualism, best known for his corrosions of cinematic or news imagery. In his exhibition ‘1 + 1 = 1’ at Moscow’s Garage Center for Contemporary Culture (until 24 November), he cites and garbles portions of 18th- to 20th-century paintings (Fig. 3). ‘I was just inspired by a 19th-century painting of, when
he states: 'At one time I thought I would be an art historian, so that's in my genes I guess.' Furthermore, he suggests that he has actively straddled the roles of curator and painter: 'The idea came from looking at countless art history books, looking for art that I could marry with other art. The purpose being to create a new artist, a hybrid artist.'

Ironically, attempts at a dialogue between new and old are often about leveling differences and merging contexts. To an extent, this is inevitable and even necessary, as exemplified by Painting from Life: Carracci Founds, a 2012 exhibition at Ordovas in London (Fig. 2). It assembled oil studies by Annibale Carracci alongside portraits by Lucian Freud, including the former's Head of an Old Woman (c. 1620–90), of which Freud is known to have said: 'I wish I could paint like this.' But Carracci's studies are loose sketches that he would never have dreamed of presenting (Dulwich Picture Gallery: Sylvie Bradley, who organized the show, has pointed out that his Head of an Old Man was 'not what he wanted to achieve ultimately; he probably would have used this and idealized it to make it into St Peter or one of the Magi.') The apparent stylistic proximity between Freud and Carracci belies very different conceptions of painting. 'Rough and raw' was an end for Freud, but only a means for Carracci.

In such contexts, there is also a risk of Freud's and his generation being typecast as 'Old Masters' of the 20th century in a way that downplays their modernity. Frieze Masters (in title and presentation style) compounds this through its attempts to confer 'old masterly' status on living — or recently dead — artists. Late 20th-century works are effectively lumped together with classical antiquity and the Renais-
sance. Identifying the problem inherent in this inclusive category of the 'contempo-
rary,' collector David Roberts last year remarked: 'I can see that someone who buys contemporary art would buy a 1960 Yves Klein, but I'm not so sure they would buy a 16th-century work.' This kind of smudging of categories today governs the very presentation of contemporary art. For all its 'Great Exhibition' exhibitionism, praise for last year's Frieze Masters frequently centred on the extent to which it resembled a modern museum display. (Designed by architect Annabelle Selldorf, its floorings and walls were restricted to five gradations of white and grey.) The presentation of art in blue-chip galleries — many of them, selling stuff — Selldorf — rents on just such an era are of the divide between museum and commercial gallery. It would be hard not to find an art dealer that even vaguely resembles an old-style emporium of the kind described by Thomas Mann in his novella Glasius Der (1902), packed with the 'vainies of the world... ornaments, vases, jewellery and objects d'art, the naked statues, the bones of women, the painted reliefs of paganism'.

In their architectural scale and white-cube aesthetics, contemporary galleries and public institutions are closer kin than ever. But in certain museum exhibitions, there is also a growing — apparently reactionary — appetite for precisely the Wunderkammer clutter evoked by Mann. As Moore Ede recalls, of Perry's 'Room of the Unknown Craftsman': 'you could step into that show and not be sure which piece was a Nigerian armour, and which was something that Grayson had made in 2012. It was brilliantly done.' Certainly, this and other heterogeneous displays imply a reaction against the crassly ordered style of many contemporary exhibitions. But in another sense, they con-
stitute just another relaxation of definitions in the sense way as the visible distinctions between galleries and institutions have fallen away, art-historical taxonomies are ever-
susceptible to being swept under the carpet. Ultimately, a problem of indefinability hangs around categories such as 'Old Masters' and 'contemporary'. The most successful instances of diachronic exhibitions are those that recognize the porosity of definitions without doing away with them, where there is a tension — rather than a cosy reconciliation or rigid opposition — between now and old. Cullinan proposes that 'the difference between Poussin and Twombly was as important, if not more so, as the similarity. It was this tension between them — two artists who couldn't seem more divergent and would never agree in temperament or meet in time — that showed how far subject matter and theme can be transformed over the ages.'

A dialogue, then, is necessarily by a two-way dynamic, and potentially a fraught one. 'We have an ever-increasing problem in that we're moving further and further away from the art of the past,' Moore Ede tells me. 'As time moves on, Titian's getting older and older. But all of these artists were modern once, and contemporary artists are very good at reminding us of that.' The series in Meta- morphosis reshaped classical mythology in cedar to reflect or dissect present-day concerns — bearing out Frank Breidner's assertion, in respect of literary masterpieces, that 'the books we call classics possess intrinsic qualities that endure, but possess also an openness to accommodation which keeps them alive under endlessly varying dispositions'. She identified in each artist a desire to deviate from the Renaissance and classical 'sources' precisely in order to reanimate them: 'each turned their back on Titian while they then evoked something entirely new... Actaeon as a huge purple stag had returned, in Chris's mind, to have his wicked way with Diana.'

A certain temporal — and epistemological — distance appears to be vital in allowing the art of the past to be so comfortably accommodated. There does not even need to be an explicit debt from the newer artist to the older one. 'A juxtaposition, or better a dialogue, between the work of two artists working at two different times can show so many interesting aspects,' Christos Gouliyatidis, 'not just if one was looking at the other, but perhaps the way they approached a subject'. This autumn, she will stage an exhibition of Rembrandt and Frank Auerbach paintings (4 October – 1 December), a project co-curated with Tao Dibbits of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. 'I selected works that came from the period when Auerbach was looking at Rembrandt intensely,' she explains. 'We paired them up works by Rembrandt from the Bijkassan collection which they related to. It meant identifying shared (and unusual) themes such as 'industry and friendship, as in the case of Rembrandt's Portrait Of Dr Beautt and the two portraits of E.O.W. (Stella Wijn) by Auerbach.'

relations are inevitably tentative, throwing up as many contrasts as congruences.

As first glance, a gloriously discordant impulse runs through Baldessari's latest works. Combining fragments of Old Master paintings with slits from film noir, his Double Feature series channels the playful sensibility of many a 1960s postmodern appropriation. But what sets the project apart is its very opposition to pastiche. The artist stresses his desire to restore potency to a new image rather than derive or denigrate it (the more usual task of the too-clever-by-half appropriation). He has explained: 'On the one hand I think the older the image the more it is enhanced of meaning — where it is a cliché. It's dead. Because cliches are dead. I like the idea of playing Dr Franken-
stein and reviving the dead, a metaphor, with life again. Because cliches are true — they have just lost their meaning. At the same time, Baldessari implies that certain aspects of the past cannot be recuperated, nor need be: 'any historical art, painting etc. that doesn't speak to the present is not interesting to me.'

In his 1985 book about the lure of the long-ago, The Post is a Foreign Country, David Lowenthal observed that 'fusing most of history, men scantly differentiated past from present, referring even to remote events, if at all, as if they were then occurring.' Amid the growing trend for diachronic exhibitions, there is a risk of backsliding to this earlier assumption, of forgetting Witgensteins's aphorism about content: 'If a lion could speak, we could not understand him.' As projects such as Carracci Founds, 'Metamorphosis' and 'Poussin and Twombly' have variously shown, an eloquent dialogue can be formulated — explicitly or implicitly — but it involves reading a careful line between accommodating differences and cancelling them. Bridging the distance between then and now requires an acknowledgement of the past's foreignness, and even its irretrievability.

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