
BOOKS & ARTS

Peter Jay's faith in economics, America and humanity is restored
Grey Gowrie finds David Hockney still witty and original after 50 years
Ferdinand Mount insists that Samuel Beckett's enthusiasm for cricket, golf, chess and bridge are relevant to his work
Michael Tanner wonders why Wagner's first indisputable masterwork, *The Flying Dutchman*, is never well produced
Patrick Carnegy sees politics eclipsed by deviant sexuality at the RSC



MUSÉE GRANET COMMUNAUTÉ DU PAYS D'ARENPROVENCE. © CPA, MUSÉE GRANET

Influence on Francis Bacon: 'Self-Portrait with Beret', c.1659, by Rembrandt.
Review by Andrew Lambirth — p53

Exhibitions

Anything goes

Andrew Lambirth

Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970–1990

V&A, until 8 January

Postmodernism is a term with a surprisingly long history. It was first used in the 1870s and was subsequently employed by dazed or disaffected commentators with some regularity throughout the first two thirds of the 20th century, until it became de rigueur in the ghastly decade of the 1970s. The architect Charles Jencks pronounced the death of Modernism at 3.32 p.m. on 15 March 1972, and Post-Modernism (hereinafter known as PoMo) was fairly, or unfairly, upon us. But what actually is it?

Essentially, it meant the end of all seriousness and the shunning of order, moderation and reason, the denial of a belief in the perfectibility of the human race and the merit in striving for something better. Encouraging the coexistence of all styles, PoMo offered a celebration of confusion, a glorification of pastiche and parody (very minor and parasitic art forms), and a wholesale and uncritical 'anything-goes' attitude that was dangerously asphyxiating to rational thought or more modest individual creativity. Supposedly subversive, it was actually chaotic and hopelessly juvenile.

Spectacle, brash humour, sensationalism, a bottomless pit of the tasteless, kitsch and tawdry — PoMo embraces all these with an abandon which is almost sexual in its intensity. There are some horrible things in this exhibition, and inevitably some rather good ones. Nearly everything by the brilliant Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass (1917–2007) is worth looking at, though some of his objects lose clarity and are too contrived. His cheerful ceramic totems would make rather good chimney pots, but his ziggurat teapots are plain silly. (Silliness is endemic to PoMo.) On the other hand, I loved his Murmansk centrepiece in electroplated nickel silver, and his variegated Casablanca sideboard.

Among the other objects to hold my attention were Richard Slee's Picket Fence Vessel, the junk jewellery on a large and inventive scale by Bernhard Schobinger, Alison Britton's deliciously squiffy Big White Jug, Adrian Saxe's outrageously bobbly covered jar and three dinky little aluminium models of buildings by Philippe Starck.

Bricolage (literally: pottering about, doing odd jobs, used now for the reinterpretation of unlikely objects) gets utterly out of hand in PoMo, though it has moments of wit, especially in the early years before striving for effect became so desperate. Look, for instance, at the Adhocist Chair

(1968), made from gas pipe, tractor seat and wheels. Incredibly uncomfortable, I've no doubt, but quite fun — for a few moments, at any rate; rather like the Consumer's Rest chair, fashioned from a supermarket trolley. (Overheard exchange: 'My sister has that exact same thing in her bedroom.' 'Really? Did she make it? It's so cool.') Few of these exhibits manage to exert a lasting appeal, and I remember seeing cheaper, nastier ver-

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sions of many of the furniture designs abandoned in skips in the 1980s and 90s.

A large proportion of the show's liveliness rests on installation: flashing lights, music, video screens and ludicrous costumes. There are some real self-inventive stars here, such as Andrew Logan, Leigh Bowery and Grace Jones, and Laurie Anderson gets a whole room to herself. (I saw a girl sitting rapt on the floor listening to 'O Superman', sucking her thumb contentedly.) There's another room of 2D stuff: celebrations of *The Face* magazine, album covers, posters, photos. The chance for many people to revisit their recent past could well prove irresistible. Alternatively, we can all be reminded

of the dangers of constructing a self through commodities. There are plenty of weird things to see, at any rate. As a friend said, she hadn't been to the show yet but would take her children — it was about their level.

As a strong antidote or pick-me-up, let me recommend two exhibitions of painting which will stimulate and enrich rather than overwhelm the visitor. Ordovas is a major new gallery in the West End, set up by the redoubtable Pilar Ordovas, who has many years' experience working in Post-War and Contemporary art at Christie's and then Gagosian. Arranged over two floors at 25 Savile Row, opposite the vast new premises of Hauser & Wirth, Ordovas offers a handsome and flexible space which sets off its inaugural show to great effect. *Irrational Marks: Bacon, Rembrandt* (until 16 December) is a remarkable exhibition which investigates the influence of Rembrandt on Francis Bacon, focusing on Rembrandt's 'Self-Portrait with Beret' from the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence. It's an extraordinary achievement to have secured the museum loan of a Rembrandt, and Ordovas matches this with a key selection of Bacon paintings, backed up by archive material and film footage of Bacon in conversation. This is the kind of exhibition our national museums should be mounting; but once again



Grace Jones maternity dress, 1979, by Jean-Paul Goude



Mysterious interior: 'Art Class', 2011, by Simon Edmondson

the initiative is taken by a private gallery.

Most people who know anything about Bacon are familiar with his references to such Old Masters as Velázquez and Van Gogh, but his relationship with Rembrandt has never before been the subject of in-depth scrutiny. Yet Bacon much admired Rembrandt's self-portraits, particularly the late ones, and often visited 'Self-Portrait with Beret' in Aix. He described this unusual and probably unfinished painting as having hardly any sockets to the eyes, and called Rembrandt's late self-portraits 'a tightrope walk between appearance and caricature'.

This, of course, is the same route that Bacon himself took, as can be seen in the half-dozen self-portraits gathered here. This is an excellent and thought-provoking display. A hardback catalogue (price £50) containing scholarly and informative essays on both Rembrandt and Bacon accompanies and extends the exhibition, maintaining the high standards of the whole enterprise. Ordovas is evidently a gallery to watch.

A contemporary painter showing in another recently opened Mayfair space is Simon Edmondson (born 1955), currently exhibiting at Agent Morton (32 Dover Street, W1, until 28 November). Edmondson first came to prominence in London in the 1980s at the Nicola Jacobs Gallery, and soon began showing in Berlin and New York. In 1991 he moved to Madrid where he still lives, and concentrated on consolidating his standing in Europe. His work hasn't been much in evidence in England recently, so this exhibition of new works is most welcome. It consists almost entirely of large paintings in oil on paper, of slightly mysterious interiors, perhaps depicted after a disaster or glimpsed in a revealing but unusual state of disarray. Other paintings suggest the complex emotional activities of the bed chamber. All are constructed with great sensitivity to the expressive possibilities of paint. The tensions and Pyrrhic victories of the human spirit have rarely been so subtly suggested.

Theatre

Act of vengeance

Lloyd Evans

Inadmissible Evidence
Donmar, until 26 November

Jumpy
Royal Court, until 19 November

Fashionable Londoners go to the Donmar Warehouse to engage in shut-eye chic. It's a weird way to relax. You buy a ticket to John Osborne's 1964 classic, *Inadmissible Evidence*, and you sleep through most of its two and a half hours. All around me were seats full of happy dozers. How I envied them. Mind you, I felt bad for the cast because the snoozers were nodding and drooling in full view of the stage. Entertaining the unconscious isn't what thespians go into showbiz for. Still, they'd read the script so they knew the scale of their enemy.

Osborne's bright idea was to create a self-loathing misanthropist and to watch his world collapse around him. He made the central character a lawyer (named 'Bill', significantly) as an act of vengeance against the divorce specialists who had purloined large chunks of his fortune. So Bill is a solicitor in a crummy practice somewhere off Fleet Street. Oddly enough, he tells us, 'the law is there to be exploited just like it exploits us'. Er, hang on. I'm lost already. Solicitors feeling exploited by the law? That's as likely as astronauts feeling exploited by space travel.

Anyway, the law isn't Osborne's main target here. It's sex. And in particular the terrible things sex does to poor old men. Bill can't stand women. But he needs them, too, so he's always chasing skirt. And although he's a fat, sour, bald, whiney, humourless, middle-aged misery-guts, he's also a sex champion. He's got four women on the go. His long-suffering wife, two gorgeous secretaries and a sophisticated 40-year-old beauty who loves him unconditionally and finds it amusing that he plays around in the typing pool. I mean honestly. It's impossible to believe a single syllable of this vain, empty, shapeless, diseased, hectoring twaddle. To be fair, Osborne does add a joke. Just the one, though. It's about a posh girl 'donating her virginity to Oxfam'. If he'd penned a cou-



ple of hundred more like that he might have written a half-decent play.

Douglas Hodge, usually so dependable and lovable, can't find a consistent tone for Bill. He tries to give him the full Alf Garnett hysterics. (Or perhaps he was just trying to wake up row B.) Then he attempts a richer and more considered Shakespearean meltdown. That's hopeless, too. He briefly enters the zany wonderland of the Spike Milligan sketch and withdraws, defeated. Nothing works.

In Act Two, the play goes from boring to baffling. The cast of eight have to perform about 12 roles but the duplications aren't indicated in the programme. It's impossible to know what's going on. Of all the play-scripts I've seen on stage (rough total, 1,000), this is among the three or four worst. If you really want to know how bad it is, imagine rewatching those clips of Gaddafi's lynching. Remember what that felt like? This will make you sicker.

Better stuff at the Royal Court. *Jumpy*, by April De Angelis, is a rich, bustling family comedy about middle-class parents groping their way towards the big five-oh while their teenage kids start groping each other. The play's essential seriousness is beautifully leavened by snatches of out-and-out farce. This is a tricky cocktail to mix properly and, although not everything works, the bulk of the show is perfectly convincing.

Doon Mackichan, as an ageing cougar, steals the first act with a weirdly inappropriate striptease routine which manages to be hilarious, slightly icky, rather tragic and quite sexy all at once. I wasn't even sure why her character did it. But never mind. Tamsin Greig, as a hassled mum trying to connect with her narky young daughter, gives another of her deeply felt and painfully funny accounts of womanhood in crisis. Greig's great skill is to convey lightness and darkness, weight and fluffiness, in the same instance. Both registers come across with absolute clarity, each unimpeded by the other.

Although De Angelis writes very acutely for women, her teenagers are more schematically drawn: burning bundles of anger, confusion and grunting. Her men aren't particularly well rounded either. Like the females in Osborne's play, the chaps here seem to pop up exactly when they're needed by the opposite sex. Richard Lintern does a quietly brilliant turn as Roland, a handsome ageing actor. 'I've been horribly busy,' he confesses at one point. An innocuous line but it got a big laugh because it captures the aggressive boastfulness of success. And he characterises one of the more familiar agonies of parenthood as follows: 'Our children like their friends more than us. And we like them more than we like our friends.'

This is the best show of the autumn season so far. And it's targeted at parents rather than teens, perhaps. But your teens won't complain if you drag them along.