

A brush with young America

Good painting is the last thing Richard Dorment expected to find at the Saatchi Gallery's show of new American art

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AH, the wonderful world of modern art. As soon as you enter the Saatchi Gallery's Young Americans 2 (London NW8, from September 10 to November 22) you hear a strange, irregular thumping sound, like someone ineptly hauling a heavy object around the adjoining gallery. The source of the commotion turns out to be a prosthetic leg, complete with shoe and sock, writhing and kicking against the gallery wall.

On closer inspection you discover that the leg is attached to an electric motor, which is mounted 10 ft from the floor by a rope made out of 10,000 industrial rubber bands. The motor twisting the rubber bands clockwise causes the leg to rise up from the floor and then to bang against the wall like a lunatic trying to kick his way out of his cell. When the bands unwind, the leg collapses on to the floor as though exhausted, and the whole process begins again in an anticlockwise spiral.

At first I thought Twist clever but silly. After watching it for a few minutes I thought it clever, silly and curiously touching. At times its random jerkings and flailings look angry and frustrated, but then you look again and it appears to be performing a little jig, its shenanigans provoking laughter and pity in about equal measure, like a wooden puppet whose attempts to dance end in frustration and failure. It is not irrelevant to know that the artist who made it is an ungainly 6ft 7in tall, 21-stone Californian named Martin Kersels.

If kinetic art is alive and well in Kersels's hands, Josiah McElheny is doing wonders for the venerable craft of glass-blowing. The single work he shows at the Saatchi Gallery is called Verzelini's Acts of Faith, and it consists of a vitrine full of elegant glass bowls, vases, pitchers and goblets of his own making. The labels explain (truthfully) that Giacomo Verzelini was a real person, a famous Venetian glass-blower, resident in Elizabethan England, who died in 1606. His act of faith - at least according to McElheny - was to make exact copies of the glass receptacles depicted in religious paintings by his Renaissance contemporaries. As far as I can determine, Verzelini never did any such thing.

McElheny has made three-dimensional copies of a chalice shown in a Last Supper by Veronese, the vessel containing wine in Caravaggio's Supper at Emmaus, and a vase from an Annunciation by Tintoretto, then attributed these to Verzelini, who, he tells us, used them as aids to private religious devotion.

Think about it for a moment. In McElheny's version of art history, Verzelini's act of faith was a leap of the artistic as well as of the religious imagination. There is something wonderfully poetic about the idea of an artist giving three-dimensional existence to imaginary objects, then using those objects to visualise miraculous events which, sceptics would say, were themselves imaginary.

As well as being a homage from one craftsman to another, McElheny's work is a meditation on the way art creates faith, faith art. And just to add a further twist to the story, a 19th-century Venetian glass manufacturer, Antonio Salviati, actually did make objects similar to those McElheny claims for Verzelini. You can see them in the V&A.

If anyone had asked me last week to describe the most interesting art coming out of America, I'd have mentioned artists who work with photography, video and maybe installation. And yet in this show there are three good painters, and one first-class one.

In the first category Elizabeth Peyton uses thinned oil and watercolour to make smallish-scale, apparently offhand portraits of British pop stars such as Liam Gallagher and Jarvis Cocker. In her hands, pigment dripping like runny mascara is used to depict skinny, boneless creatures smoking and snorting and stretched out on couches like odalisques. The apparently slipshod painting technique perfectly matches the decadence of her subjects.

Her vague forms, dissolving shapes and indeterminate outlines evoke a grungy world where drugs and celebrity cloud thought and blunt feeling, where nothing feels solid or real.

Decadence of another sort is the subject of John Currin's portrait in oils of the imaginary "Ms Omni", an ultra-chic, X-ray-thin socialite of a type any New Yorker would recognise instantly as wielding considerable power on the board of more than one major museum. She personifies a certain kind of American woman, just as Currin's big-boobed babes busting out of their brassières or flat-chested good girls, prim in their prom "formals", are not individuals but types of American female - at least as they feature in the fantasies of American males.

Like Bruce Nauman, Currin has an irritating genius for telling his audience exactly what they don't want to hear. The current good ol' boy of American art, Currin insults women by reducing them to the caricatures that men secretly make of them. In his imaginary portraits, age is repellent in women but not in men, sexuality pornographic, goodness insipid. If Bill Clinton were an artist he'd paint like John Currin. There could be no more effective antidote to Currin's low-down, dirty-minded humour than the cool abstractions of Clay Ketter, who exhibits large squares of unprimed hardboard painted with transparent white builder's spackle in such a way that the soft beige ground shows through the pigment. A cross between the minimalism of Robert Ryman and the abstract expressionism of Mark Rothko, Ketter's beautiful paintings perfectly balance hard geometric shapes with suffusions of transparent white.

I didn't much like Ketter's three-dimensional constructions, which to me looked too much like ordinary kitchen units and not enough like works of art.

I wish I had space to write about the work of Tom Friedman and Sue Williams, the one a virtuoso at making fascinating objects out of ordinary things such as drinking straws, toothpicks and plastic cups; the other a hard-edged painter who investigates the synaesthetic relationship between colour, language and emotion. Neither is all that good, but both are worth a second look.

But I must proceed to the most promising painter in the show, the Californian Laura Owens. At first glance the empty spaces in her huge, pastel-coloured landscapes and interiors look a little dull, like paintings people buy in department stores to hang over sofas. But gradually the perfection of her technique becomes apparent - for example in a vast expanse of light-blue sky painted in such a way that there isn't a dead passage in it; in the way a splodge of strong colour creates the illusion of depth and distance in a landscape that wouldn't otherwise have them; in the squiggle of impastoed paint squeezed straight from the tube to create the three legs of an easel.

Hers is an art of exquisite details, of edges beautifully meeting edges, of passages that look descriptive but then suddenly seem to detach themselves from the painting and become wholly abstract.

There are 14 artists in this show. About half of them caught my imagination; the rest I hated. So, this time, I'd say Mr Saatchi has done pretty well. And since I saw a preview of the exhibition, which opens on September 10, there's still time for him to do some winnowing.



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Abstract

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