

The Body in Women's Art Now: Flux, Rollo Contemporary Art

Written by Sarah Kent



'Squiggles of paint energising the canvas seem to embody her sexual excitement': Cecily Brown's 'New Louboutin Pumps'

***Flux*, the second in a trio of exhibitions devoted to images of women by women, immediately grabs your attention with an in-your-face animation by Swedish artist Natalie Djurberg. Clay figures enact grotesque stories that have a nasty, fairytale edge. A naked mother plays with her five children until, one after another, the youngsters climb into her vagina and disappear.**

This return to the womb proves problematic, though, for as the siblings jostle for space, their limbs begin to pop out through the mother's back, belly and thighs, eventually turning her into a monstrous composite lumbering clumsily around the room like an arthritic spider.

In *The Necessity of Loss*, a man in 18th-century dress controls his passion for a young girl by lopping of his offending penis, arms, legs and finally head. "What do we do when you're only a face?" asks the distraught child in a speech bubble before resolving the question by removing her knickers and pleasuring herself with the

man's phallic nose. These dark comedies are achieved with such aplomb that they seem utterly plausible as demonstrations of the parent/child relationship, which makes them as subversive as they are funny.

'The woman is so active that the squiggles of paint energising the canvas seem to embody her sexual excitement'

The English painter Cecily Brown is best known for translating hard-core porn into the bravura brush-work normally associated with masculine virility. But there's a problem; adopting demeaning images of women is not an act of reclamation, but a reiteration that doesn't offer much redress. On show here, *New Louboutin Pumps* is the most interesting. A naked couple are having sex in what looks like a studio. Traditionally the scene would be of an artist and his model, but, placed centre stage, the woman is so active that the squiggles of paint energising the canvas seem to embody her sexual excitement and to lay claim to the space as an arena for her creative energy (rather than his).

Brown's commanding canvas makes Tracey Emin's monoprints look rather tame. [Lying on her back with legs splayed, a woman masturbates](#). At White Cube last year, Emin showed a video of the drawings animated into a loop of never-ending onanism that produced a lonely mood of neurotic frenzy. In the stills, the rapidly drawn angularity of the lines suggests desperation and anxiety and, although the images acknowledge female desire, they also imply an urgent need for a man, which is hardly an empowering message.



In Tiina Heiska's series *Butterfly Caught* (pictured right), a blonde girl in a pink frock wanders into a dark wood. The Finnish painter portrays the girl from behind in blurry images suggesting movement; we seem to be tracking her as she walks on ahead. To say that a sense of menace permeates the paintings would be an overstatement; they are more ambiguous and disconcerting than that, especially once you become aware that, essentially, they are a foil for your own fears.



With all vitality drained away, the adolescents in Sarah Lederman's paintings are like the victims of some voracious vampire. The waifs in *Ascending in Tights* (pictured left) are so light that they levitate, leaving a trail of watery paint trickling from their scrawny bodies. *Annunciation* offers a view of the Virgin Mary not as a willing recipient of the fertilising seed so much as a victim bullied into submission. The purple blotches round her eyes suggest a beating, while her naked body, hunched shoulders and traumatised stare make her seem more like a sex slave than a saint. The suggestion is that the myth of the virgin birth is a patriarchal con inducing women to accept sexual advances while denying their own needs and desires.

The strong statement is made so quietly, however, that the implications have to be teased out.

The girl in Helen Carmel Benison's video *Saturation Between my Legs* is bursting with robust health, yet as she stares to camera, her unsmiling face suggests ambivalence about the message being conveyed. Lush images of flowering vegetation saturate the screen with heightened colour. Amid this cornucopia, she sits with a mirror between her legs from which fireworks explode in orgasmic cascades, as though her crotch were on fire with cosmic energy. Flowers and fireworks may be saccharine, MTV clichés, but the presence of a projected eye positioned so the mirror becomes its pupil suggests that the artist has read *The Story of O* as well as Berger, Baudrillard, Barthes et al and is exploring (or parodying) current thinking about female sexuality and the power of the gaze and of our projected fantasies.

The theme supposedly linking these disparate works is the instability of the female body and the uncontrollable nature of desire. It's vague enough to include almost anything and, as this assemblage of powerful pieces indicates, it could be the catalyst for a much larger and more comprehensive show. Yes, please.

- [The Body in Women's Art Now: Flux](#) is at *Rollo Contemporary Art*, London until 5 November then at [New Hall Art Collection](#), Cambridge from 7 November until 5 December

Animal logic lets kids draw on experience

The Xtra Diary



WHO commissioned this study then?
Is it a coincidence that at a time when zoos are the least cuddly and fluffy they have ever been, a piece of research comes out to say they are good for children.

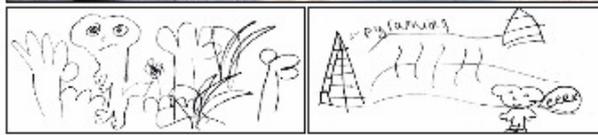
Everyone knows you can't argue with that logic.

Dr Brady Wagoner of Denmark's Aalborg University and Dr Eric Jensen of the University of Warwick, asked children to draw pictures of animals in their habitats at the beginning of their visit to London Zoo and directly after and apparently found "clear developments in the pupils' understanding of different species".

Funny that. Apparently children had drawn sloths in icy habitats because so many of them had seen the Hollywood movie *Ice Age*.

After they drew them in the rainforest. Around 120,000 children a year visit London Zoo in Regent's Park, and we can expect a few more on the back of this research.

■ Pictured: right top, Clore Rainforest Drawing – ZSL London Zoo and, below, Meerkat Drawing (before and after) – Eric Jensen.



A fine body of work

BODY politics but not as we know it. The latest instalment of a three-part series of exhibitions exploring the representation of women's bodies opens in Fitzrovia next week.

Transgressive bodies, rebellious bodies, sexualised bodies and uncontrollable bodies – they're all on show – a reminder that the woman's body is never fixed but constantly in a state of flux.

Works by Tracey Emin, Cecily Brown, Helen Benigson and Tiina Heiska feature heavily at Rollo Contemporary Art in Cleveland Street.

The exhibition opens on September 8 and runs until November.



Sarah Lederman: *Ascending in Tights*

Best of British (or English) luck

WHAT is Britishness? For those who believe our island identity is inextricably bound up with cups of tea, red telephone boxes, cricket and cucumber sandwiches, put this in your diary.

On Saturday The Crown Estate and Jermyn Street Association (those two bastions of ye olden days) are throwing a party called The Art of Being British, aimed at celebrating English eccentricity.

Diary reckons there will be a few

Welsh and Scots with something to say about the promiscuous interchange of British and English.



As well as food stalls (a hog roast among them) and shop offers, there will be a special performance by musicians from the Royal Academy of Music, and the Ritz have loaned out a Rolls-Royce Phantom for the day.

The Art of Being British is on tomorrow (Saturday) from noon until 5pm in Jermyn Street.

Beams in the eyes of the beholders?

ARTIST Martin Creed's Work No. 700 (2007) continues the outdoor sculpture programme from Hauser & Wirth at Southwood Garden, St James's Church, Piccadilly, from Monday September 5 until the new year.

It comprises three "progressively slimmer steel I-beams" on top of each other.

The rusted beams are 12m long and, say H&W "...neatly stacked, discarding their previous functionality to form a whole in keeping with Creed's distinctive 'artistic logic'".

When Creed won his 2001 Turner Prize for an empty room featuring the lights flickering on and off at five-or-so second intervals, there were calls for the £20,000 prize to be



© Martin Creed, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

given back and the annual award itself to be disbanded.

In his defence at the time, one art expert explained: "He wants to make art where he is doing as little as possible that is consistent with doing something... The fact that many people find his work so baffling indicates that he's working on the edge."

He still is, very successfully, currently with a major show in Edinburgh and another due for Madrid in November.

Go to the church to judge for yourself if the work of this son of Quaker parents, who was born in Wakefield,

grew up in Glasgow and now lives and works in London. www.hauserwirth.com

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