

## **Adrian Searle**

### **'Been there, done that'**

#### ***The Guardian, Tuesday April 3, 2001.***

Tomorrow's Talent Today," proclaims the publicity for Beck's Futures, yet another competition art show. But first a word about sponsorship. The prize money - a total of £64,000 - comes from Beck's beer, and the media sponsors for the show at London's ICA are Dazed and Confused magazine and the Guardian. Hi, I'm Adrian, your media partner for today, and I'm drinking a refreshingly diuretic bottle of Beck's as I write this.

The shortlisted artists are all, I suppose, "emerging" artists, though some - painter Simon Bill, ex-Bank member John Russell and sculptor Brian Griffiths - have been showing for some years. Some artists have been commissioned to make new works; others have just brought stuff in from their studios. There is a film and video section too, which hasn't opened yet and has a separate celebrity judging panel. I suppose I ought to mention the judges, but the details, like the beer, are already giving me a headache.

I can't look at DJ Simpson's huge walls of routed-out, painted board without thinking of German artist Imi Knoebel's Battle Paintings, monochrome works whose surfaces were hacked, gouged and scarred, in parody of the painted gesture. These violations were a small but significant detour in Knoebel's career, while Simpson, like most young artists, is known for doing just one thing. This is often mistaken for rigour.

Simpson noodles about with the electric routing tool, carving deep channels, phone-cord spirals and dog's-leg meanderings into the plywood. Here and there he digs shallower, biomorphic shapes into the surface, recalling Patrick Heron's wobblyislands, Matisse's scissored seaweed, Jonathan Lasker's huge, repainted doodles. The references keep on coming, but I don't know if these are quotes or just unconscious riffs. However deep the cut, this balancing act between heavy-duty physicality (hear the roar of the power tool, smell the smouldering timber) and the lightweight drawing is pretty superficial.

There's something a bit more interesting going on in Shahin Afrassiabi's cock-eyed installation, a sort of deconstructed living room in which various elements of domestic life - the TV, a bit of plumbing pipe, roundels of geometric patterned carpet - are juxtaposed in novel ways. But having drooled through several series of Changing Rooms, it all looks horribly familiar. Beck's Futures (now in its second year) is mostly a journey through modern manners, with too many name-checks and style quotes. It is as if a lot of the artists are desperate to find a patch of unclaimed territory in an overcrowded world of art. They worry about originality but end up confusing the words imitate and innovate. Look at Afrassiabi and think of Jessica Stockholder.

Dan Holdsworth, Gemma Iles and David Burrows all show colour photographs mounted, but not glazed, on board and aluminium. From a conservation point of view, this kind of presentation is hopeless, though it makes the images look glamorous and punchy. This is

such a cliché. Burrows photographs his funny little sculpted "plastic foam-tastic" forms, setting them in wacky, knockout scenes. It's a bright, sickly coloured art joke. The objects, which sit on the floor of the ICA, are sort of cute exploding 3D droplets, Monet's waterlilies as cartoon bath toys.

Iles's and Holdsworth's photographs are probably meaningful, but I don't really care. We've been here before. Holdsworth's photographs contain no people, just sports fields at night, nocturnal cities in the flare of streetlights, an empty white interior in a high-tech factory. These brooding hinterlands, and Iles's human inter-zones, cropped portraits of moments of tenderness and out-of-focus ennui, are only academic and dutiful. Couched as serious investigations, they look like advertising campaigns in search of a product.

Clare Woods's paintings, derived from photographs of bare branches at night, look a bit like blown-up details from Jackson Pollock, the gestures frozen in cake-layers of enamel. This heavily mediated play on abstraction is an interesting place to be. I can't help thinking that, again, it's all too programmatic. This is a problem of a lot of younger art now: it is circumscribed by little technical innovations rather than driven by a bigger subject. The real trouble is that things that are too ambitious, too complicated, too conflicted scare the dealers and the collectors away.

You want complicated and conflicted? John Russell and Fabienne Audéoud make troubled reworkings of other people's art: their raw, grubby, disenchanting paintings are based on infamous, violent, disturbing and scatological earlier works. Here are performances by the Viennese Actionists, Chris Burden getting shot, Mike Kelley doing things with poo. Bits of Caravaggio and Ingres are in there too, overwritten with bilious fragments of text; over the Ingres are the illuminating lines, "I have the aggressivity of a little dog whose arse hair is being pulled off." Such studied rage. A video monitor shows Russell and Audéoud re-enacting William Burroughs's accidental killing of his wife, when he tried to do a William Tell routine, shooting a glass off the top of her head. Paint, not blood, spatters the wall. Audéoud does a very good, dramatic death scene. As a student, she made brilliant video performances, and she deserves better roles than this.

Next to them, a ridiculous, huge pantomime horse made of brown carpet, with a rider clad in bin-liners, charges over a crumpled-paper landscape. This, Brian Griffiths's *The Earnest Harbinger*, is symbolic of something. Is it a phantom vet, galloping to Cumbria to give the farmers an injection or to put them down? Is he a courtly knight in a world of rubbish? Of what is he a harbinger, and why so earnest?

The best work here is by painters Simon Bill and Tim Stoner. Bill's work used to belong to roughly the same school of nihilistic shock-painting as Russell's, with the ghost of Georges Bataille floating around in a transgressive universe of devil-worship and horribly mutant forms. Now Bill's oval paintings look like old-style modernism, but redone using odd conglomerations of paint, polystyrene, coloured string. There's a portrait of a sad-eyed monkey, extruded abstract body parts, junk geometry. He has a great feel for materials, for disrupting the familiar, and there's something haunting about his recent paintings. He's shifting a familiar language into a territory of his own.

Stoner shows two large paintings. A ring of dancers in some kind of national costume dancing under the bunting in the street, and a circle of cabaret dancers in high heels, hoofing through a routine in blue, hazy stagelight. Outlined in fierce penumbras of light, in both paintings the figures are immobilised in some strangely incandescent moment. The paintings have almost no discernible surface, there are no gestures, the light is too fierce. The figures are coruscated silhouettes. The subject of Stoner's work is light, and how painting both creates an illusory space and destroys it with its flatness. The figures imply movement and rhythm, but in painting this is impossible. The dance in painting - think Poussin, Renoir and Matisse - is always about this paradox between immobility and movement, time and timelessness. It is all just an accretion on the surface. What complex paintings they are. They make you realise what a rich, deceptive, unfinished business painting is. I am glad Stoner took over my rickety, leaky studio when I gave up painting.

The winner of Beck's Futures, announced on April 10, will get £20,000; the runners-up will walk away with £4,000 apiece. Tomorrow's talent today? Most of us would prefer today's talent today, thanks, to cut out the wait. But it does give me a chance to enjoy my beer.

· Beck's Futures is at the ICA, London SW1 (020-7930 3647), until May 20, then tours.