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'Good night ladies'
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Still only in its second year, Becks Futures at the ICA is the latest addition to a new annual round of contemporary art competitions, of which the Turner Prize is the most well known. Their rise isn't at all bad. The competition element seems largely fictional or at least very mysterious. I'm not sure anyone really believes in it, even the judges.

We feel art must have meta-meanings of some kind. They show us what the story is, what art's new perspectives are. Basically the competitions are surveys of new art with the spectacle of a competition being an acceptable metaphor for something like liveliness or worldliness.

The difference between the Turner Prize and other competitions is the Turner Prize is more spectacular. Compared to the others it seems to have a more totalizing job to do. It's certainly a popular symbol for something newly powerful about art. Becks Futures on the other hand is still attractively undefined. In fact it's in the fortunate position of being defined by not being the Turner Prize.

Going round the first Becks Futures last year I was struck by the open, loose feel of the show which was like going round an artist's studio and not like the big statement blast that the Turner Prize, by necessity, has to make. The ICA's sympathetic slight atmosphere of a festering village hall, its bits of underfunded shabbiness here and there, only added to the relaxed feel.

Becks is a fine word to have in the title of a contemporary art competition. No one expects it to be profound. It's a trendy beer, connected to art since the 1980s through sponsoring exhibitions. Becks makes you think of bock, which is what beer used to be called. There's a bock drinker in a famous Manet painting. So already there's a relationship to tradition as well as contemporaneity. What can we expect from this year's Becks Futures? Look at the label. It says only natural ingredients are used and the brewing system is in strict accordance with the German Purity Law of 1516. Should it be read factually as the literal truth? Is truth important? Do photos tell the truth?

Are slides true? I'm looking at some now, recent work by this year's eleven Becks competitors, most of which will be in this year's show. The moment for art is comic rather than profound or tragic. Not that nothing tragic is happening. But what was humane or considered authentic or truthful previously isn't any longer. Or at least, art describes a world we're all supposed to inhabit now, one of lost beliefs. We know the codes but don't believe in them.

John Russell (a former member of the BANK collective) now works as a duo with Fabienne Audeoud. I can't help laughing at this pair's slides, which show paintings in a lurid, free, expressionist style based on documentary photos of radical 1960s performance art events. I like the way the duo completely have their cake and eat it as well the way they totally know their onions. They take an active pleasure in their painterly playfulness, make very good jokes and they seem to be right in the middle of today's art knowingness thing.

These days we are driven mad by artists being so knowing but after all there's knowing and knowing, smug and smug. In these works, there is a sure choice of photos to paint from, indicating an art world insider's knowledge of post-war avant-gardism's top right-on moments. The art-erudition lets you know that there are things a popular audience, an audience of non-insiders, can't be expected to recognise but that these things might still be important. Should the audience be educated up? Should the artists dumb their own complicated heads down?

Artist showing his arsehole in the 60s/70s (probably Gunther Brus) is a title that lets you know there is an attitude of genuine questioning as well as one of gooning in these works. The game of expressionism - the painterly and spatial moves the artists allow themselves - says the same thing.

I don't know what a northern commune is, but I imagine from the staring guy on one TV screen and the far away-seeming landscape on another, that Shirrin Affrabisia's TV sets-and-domestic-furniture installation, Northern Commune (third version) references a notion of contemporary spirituality. He'll be creating a new work for this year's show, which will no doubt develop the theme of a certain kind of unlikely modern spirituality that Northern Commune explores.

The subtitle, third version, suggests art (modern art's tradition of pedantic, careful titling) and artistic integrity (it took three tries) and also symbolism (because it's a three); the staring face is religious-iconic, the landscape is paradise. Spirituality in a modern urban context and also in an avant garde art gallery context suggests camp. (Laminated furniture in installation art is always camp I think.)

I see Gemma Ilse's C-print photos as referencing the tradition of portraiture in art. Is expression in sympathetic human faces true or a manipulation, like chord sequences in rock and roll, which are known to produce nostalgia? The tone of these photos is earnest and the fact we are treated to a sight of occasional oldies as well as youth suggests something important is going on.

The apparently artificially heightened colour and science fiction brightness in Dan Holdsworth's photos of typical modern scenes reference art's aestheticism, partly; the saturated brightness also reminds you of movies. The colours seem treated so the scenes seem a bit radioactive and this makes you feel there's something ominous you ought to be seeing there, some extra staring you should be doing. This happens frequently in art now: instead of an aesthetic aura, a comment about aura.

Like all the art in the show Holdsworth's photos are aesthetic but with a much broader idea of what aesthetic means than would be thought reasonable or believable in any previous age. On the other hand there isn't any art in the show that could be called aesthetic in a non-complicated way. None of it wants to have the freshness of affect that usually goes with an ordinary idea of aestheticism, even decadent aestheticism. Instead everything is about mediated experience not direct experience.

You can make yourself faint conducting little ICA art seminars in your head about the mediated nature of aesthetic experience but why put yourself through the torture? If aestheticism is a fiction it seems real enough if you're a sensitive type.

In Holdsworth's photos something that seems to be artificially heightened at the same time asks to be seen as something he hasn't altered but which was already like that. Something very bright in modern reality photographed using a long exposure. An unreal-seeming glow here is only like the unreal glow that contemporary reality frequently has, in supermarkets when you've just stepped in from a dark car park for example, or occasionally has -- in an art collector's apartment when you're a bit floored by the first blast of expensive brightness.

A class dimension in these free association thoughts about supermarkets (say it's Kwik-Save rather than Waitrose) and the super rich, leads on to a theory about theory. Everyone knows theory now provides artists with a set of acceptable subjects and a system for interpreting them as well as a system from which to think them up. Theory is middle class, it comes from polytechnics and universities and it's a kind of bureaucratic knowledge-system the function of which is to preserve the power position of people who have a teaching career. They are like a new version of civil servants but preaching deconstruction instead of love of empire. Art since the 1980s describes working class reality - tabloid realism and attitudes -- rather than something special or exquisite (or aesthetic or auratic) that only aristocrats or aesthetes can know.

Gaps in the fit between art and theory can give rise to a feeling of absurdity, for example in catalogues and press releases where the explanations often seem ridiculously detached from anything you're looking at in the gallery. They can make you doubt the writer has ever been in the same room with the art.

But it's impossible to do anything creative or meaningful without some kind of system. Theory provides one. Even the received wisdom that we feel jaded about a 1960s idea of the technological future, which is a theme that Brian Griffiths' sculptures have explored recently, is a bit of theory-friendly wisdom. With his pile-up notion of form, or non-form, grotesque and bulging, faux junior school project seeming, Griffiths' satire on elegance or sophistication or anything that has some kind of purity has a theory feel not an old fashioned art feel.

An older system based on art's old moral truths just isn't used now -- we've got to face it. But there is an equilibrating process that goes on, where what seems cynical or jaded in relation to art's humanistic past, is made up for by a concentrated focus on accuracy and being specific, and a feeling that the work has its own logic and consistency. Theory as

explanation has a place here even if it's only as a sign of seriousness -- where seriousness is present but you can't at first see it.

Like aestheticism, art's relationship to seriousness is askew but not absolutely nil. We assume it's a defining characteristic of art now that it isn't idealistic because we live in an ideals-free world or a world where no one cares about higher values. But it's idealistic of artists not to want to be corny. They want to acknowledge they are as alienated as anyone except they've got some artistic creativity and they know art's new rules.

Simon Bill, DJ Simson, David Burrows and Clare Woods all paint in abstract styles. In art now it is received wisdom (you used to receive it at Goldsmiths but now it's available from all the art schools) that abstraction is used up in terms of new forms. Old ones are used cheerfully but it is expected the results will express some kind of sense of melancholy and loss almost automatically.

Personally I think a title like *Party Like Its 1999* with its date - 2000 - immediately following, lays on jaded whimsy a bit heavy. This is from one of David Burrows' slides, all of which show paintings that seem to reference both Sigmar Polke, the revered German post-modernist, and Yves Tanguy, whatever nationality this passed away old Surrealist was, but gross up the former's delicacy and make more mysterious the latter's dubious pseudo-artiness.

All the abstract painters reference Abstract Expressionism's spontaneity but in a distanced way. They rehabilitate spontaneity so that accidents are genuinely part of the language but not meant to be something astounding or connected to a moral idea about individualism and freedom, just something worth thinking about. So there is a loss in terms of higher values but a gain in terms of what values there are being accessible to everyone.

The artists take it for granted that abstract art's elitism makes it impossible to take it straight. It can only be a reference. They want to reposition it so it can be read as pop. They see it's theoretically possible to do that because pop culture is already full of references to abstract art; the way blobs, drips and painterly gestures find their way into fabrics, wallpaper, lava lamps and psychedelia. I assume the occasional use of titles from music culture (titles which in themselves acknowledge pop and rock's hierarchies of high and low) is to emphasise the pop/abstract point. One of DJSimson's titles, *You killed your European Son*, compresses *European Son* from The Velvet Underground and Nico, with *Kill Your Sons on Berlin*, Lou Reed's third solo album. The Velvet Underground were emotionally distanced, knowing, jaded, self-hating, and Lou Reed later on was even more so; only now he's slightly ghastly -- I don't know if we're supposed to think about all three states.

One of Clare Woods' titles -- *Ruberry Hill* - suggests Fats Domino. Maybe it's unconsciously about lost innocence. 'Blueberry' (if the reference really is Blueberry Hill) is diminished, plus the 'r' makes 'rue,' so it's a bit rueful.

Tim Stoner paints in an illustrative figurative style, one which immediately looks borrowed, only you can't say exactly what the borrowing is. For the show he's painted something

enormous in the same kind of style. What I'm looking at now though is three slides where the feel is of something poster-ish from the 1970s, maybe it's an advertising 'family-sell' look: holiday posters maybe, in trains or on stations.

Where are we going? How will we feel when we arrive? Will it only be the same as when we left? Stoner's scenes are all of figures in jolly situations. The nostalgia immediately says the apparent content of optimism, festivities and looking forward to the future, is likely to be unreal. The titles - Eternity, Folk, and Development - with their collective sense of an anti-nostalgia idea about community and society and people's hopes and aspirations, seem to go ahead and say it again, as if progress is doomed, which is a well-known idea.

The poster-like style is understandable by the folk, but of course they might not see it immediately as coded, or care to hear any talk about codes anyway. On the other hand they know nothing is real. In this context Eternity suggests 'stuck forever' as in entropy rather than infinity. Entropy is bad but contemporary while infinity is good but slightly religious, which is impossible. Which brings us to last orders and closing time.