

**Gilda Williams,
'Review: Stop Short Changing Us'
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'Stop short-changing us. Popular culture is for idiots. We believe in ART.' This is the emphatic title of 'radical art group' BANK's recent show of self-portraiture in the surprisingly traditional forms of figurative sculpture (some even disguised as old-fashioned cast-bronze) and painting (as in oil on canvas). The unusually long title also tops the accompanying unusually long press release - more an essay, really, or group manifesto about the world of BANK.

There is plenty of reading material available from London's guerrilla-like curating/artmaking foursome (members: Simon Bedwell, John Russell, Milly Thompson and Andrew Williamson) about themselves and their work. Notoriously, they have their own artworld tabloid - at turns witty, then cruel - also called *BANK* and which over the years, has produced no less than 36 poisonous issues. The artists' collective has organised a handful of well-publicised, well-attended group shows; like their writings, BANK'S exhibitions combine the straight (as in quality curating - new talent, a theme, a good installation) with their signature post-punk, late-adolescent irreverence.

Despite the wealth of well-worded literature and publicity by and about the group, despite their being so consistently active and prominent in London and so bent on asserting themselves, BANK remains enigmatic. Their work is deeply contradictory: traditionalist in their materials and aspirations (BANK'S intention is to produce High Art), they flirt with anti-establishment roguishness (say, the name *Gallerie Poo-Poo*) and trash culture (the *National Enquirer-like* tabloid newspaper). They are shamelessly self-engrossed and yet desperately devoted to 'the scene' and preoccupied with the reception of their work. They are generous, even self-sacrificing, in their promotion of art in a sincere, life-consuming way, and then they're viciously sarcastic in their attacks on artist colleagues and the artworld in general. Maybe one reason they remain perennially apart is that most folks are just scared of them. Or perhaps BANK has genuinely succeeded in producing work that resists absorption into the art system. Indeed, they aim to fulfill a very peculiar collecting agenda: art that represents a 'solid gold investment opportunity' (their words) while at the same time administering a stiff whack in the collector's consumerist gut. I'm not sure how many works they've sold so far.

The exhibition itself is a giant self-portrait or better, an examination into the collective Self through self-portraiture. No one would describe their techniques as accomplished, but it would be wrong, nevertheless, to lump their sloppy pictures in with bad or dumb painting. This is a compulsively symmetrical exhibition, mirroring the symmetry of a four-member group with a four-letter name. On view are two groups of paintings, one large format, the other small, made up of four canvases each, and four sculptural groupings of the four figures (except one, strangely, which depicts the three crucifixions at Calvary, don't ask me why). The smaller paintings, nos 3, 11, 27 and 42 in the series 'Recovering ourselves group empathy', all of 1998, are four out of many more paintings each visualising a significant personal memory, collectively painted. The four large canvases are plainly titled *Group portraits*; some are inexplicably set in unfamiliar, exotic surroundings, like Vietnam or some distant volcanic island. Yet even in these tropical settings, even when they're thousands of miles away from the London art world, even with Krakatoa erupting behind them or demon *Apocalypse Now* helicopters threatening overhead, BANK remains determined in its angry, local monomission. They continue to stare back at us accusingly, still bitching 'Stop short-changing us! Popular culture is for idiots!' and on and on.

Three of the sculptures, finally, represent them as naked (pink fleshy fabric stretched over a tiered wooden structure, like emaciated Michelin men), or wearing identical artists' blue-collar-type uniforms, or melting into each other like lumpen, fibreglass Burghers of Calais.

'BANK is a family', says the group. 'To its four members BANK represents the possibility of creative ways of living - caring for each other, co-existing, inter-relating, socialising, whilst simultaneously producing art'. So theirs is a surprisingly redemptive, utopian project, echoing the communal aspirations of Hermann Nitsch or Otto Muehl, whose lives' work also paradoxically combined attempts at an Arcadian, socialist community with a pinch of personal violence. They refuse (and yet invite) being dismissed as pranksters. The temptation here would be to indulge in some facile psychoanalysis of group behaviour, the most recent manifestations of their pathology exemplified in the Artists' Uniforms they've taken to wearing whilst painting which, moreover, seem deliberately to negate the gender differences among them, the asymmetry of the three-male, one-female combination. And what do we make, for example, of their insistence on publicly confessing to the rather inbred nature of their lives?

Nevertheless, you can't help but admire their ceaseless interrogation of the heaviest issues they can think of, poring over the achievement of greatness. They seem as merciless with themselves, in their unflattering self-depictions, as they are with everybody else. But one hopes they don't implode altogether and turn completely myopic, growing all gnarled and twisted around themselves. They've contributed a lot, and have succeeded in maintaining their edginess intact without selling out, without going BANKrupt, so to speak. BANK is an oddly reassuring presence, and their exhibitions are always the fruit of serious thought and effort. The jokes, I think, are mostly a decoy to distract us from politically-charged work that bears no resemblance to the political art we're used to.