

DAILY MAGAZINE SAATCHI ONLINE
REBECCA GELDARD ON WORKING THINGS OUT: SPIKE ISLAND, BRISTOL

Until its re-launch this year, Bristol arts organisation Spike Island had become a fixture on the UK art map predominantly for its international residencies. Now, after a substantial face-lift following a £2.25 million redevelopment grant secured by architects Caruso St John, the space is capitalising on its strong relationship with artists to expand its exhibition programme. The jewel in the crown of their summer triple bill in the revamped space – which features a collaborative video commission by Rosalind Nashashibi and Lucy Skaer, and a solo show in the project space by recent Falmouth graduate Primrose Coke (below) – is an ambitious group show, 'Working Things Out', loosely themed around British sculptural practice and the everyday.

This huge old Brooke Bond D warehouse still retains a whiff of its industrial past. The original swing doors that would have separated the factory floor from front of house require a hefty shove to open into the main space housing the group show, which has recently been divided in half by a gargantuan brick wall that appears very much part of the architectural furniture. It's hard to imagine quite how imposing this space was without it.

But after the initial scan and sharp intake of breath at the scale of the place, all eyes head to the floor spattered as it is with a large ring of small, glossy blue puddles, which appear to be wet paint but are actually painted bits of resin created by Richard Forster. The same circular form exists on the other side of the wall, as if reflected, neatly showcasing the new spatial dynamic of the site while making tongue-in-cheek reference to process-driven sculpture past. While the pointless purposefulness of the piece initially sits equidistant between poetry and banality, when you discover that each component has an identical replacement other, it loses the sense of risk that suggests interventive as opposed to decorative intention.

If Forster is deliberately setting us up for disappointment with his first piece, with the second he works the process in reverse. For the small black and white crowd scene on the far wall of the central space appears incongruously replicated amongst a bevy of handmade and carefully doctored objects. Even when eyeballing every subtly rendered individual within his curious pencil drawing of an American church congregation it's difficult to believe that they have been smudged rather than printed into life. Whether religious or sport fanatics, the air of concentrated normalcy remains the same.

Richard Forster



Sara MacKillop's 'drawing' sets up a similar visual ruse. The small rectangles of envelope liner patterns oscillating on a single piece of paper owe as much to op art as they do product design. MacKillop has extracted these obfuscatory swatches from their origami homes to marvel at the contrast between their sublime invention and pedestrian purpose.



Chelsea MA student Haroon Mirza's sculpture 'Nightlight FM' brings together notions of domestic taste and the power of art to suspend disbelief. Upon a glass shelf, perched precariously atop a rubbish bin, a repro wireless (a visible spaghetti mass of wires on the floor contradicting this techno terminology) emits a monosyllabic row somewhere between Morse code and a car alarm. In these times of 'terror' there is something quite menacing about a smoking bin. But the clouds wafting from the tea-stained vessel are in fact puffs of steam created when the operative circuitry meets several inches of water. The balletic pose struck by this combination of very familiar objects is arresting in itself, but the real treat is to learn that what you thought was obvious sculptural smoke and mirrors is actually a feat of homespun engineering.

Haroon Mirza, 'Nightlight FM'

The architectural drama of Sophie Macpherson's large, roughly crafted, white interior screens, on the other hand, is not born of a belief in quasi-magic and the gender split in art production (the piece is called 'The decline of the principal boys') but perhaps a site-specific urge to give this monumental space a run for its money. Partially barring the way to gallery 2, they play teasingly with the notion of public access, but while substantially higher than their 'real life' counterparts, pose little threat to the lofty elevation and physical stature of the room.



Sophie Macpherson

Jonathan Owen's handmade objects provide critique on the world of interior design, not as a viable craft but of the social aspirations associated with it. A beautiful, partially carved black papier-mâché drainpipe and foam board and wooden screen entitled 'Mortgage music', carefully shift the focus from aesthetic pleasure to the public consumption and bastardisation of design. The blueprints for these pieces were a William Morris print and a tiny textile detail made by his daughter, May, respectively. The cut-out clarity of these pieces resonates neatly with Andy Wake's mixed-media montage of cartoon imagery: far from being undermined, the narrative sense – devoid of the human and other details designed to articulate drama – is redefined with each viewer interaction.



Jonathan Owen

Recent UWE graduate Milo Brennan's found sign at the exhibition entrance bears the motif of a single inverted comma. Sanded layers reveal different colours and textural detail, the evocative power of which (there is something distinctly 1920s Paris about it) transcends the matter of authorship – the quiet but insistent issue that threads this well-chosen collection of works together. The curatorial interplay between craft and appropriation affords new readings of a familiar theme.



Milo Brennan

Rebecca Geldard

Rebecca Geldard is a freelance writer and critic living in London.

Posted by editorial on July 21, 2007 04:19 AM

The Saatchi Gallery

Copyright 2003–2008 © The Saatchi Gallery : London Contemporary Art Gallery