



I thought I was the audience and then I looked at you

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Ruth Claxton

29th February - 27th March

Ruth Claxton's exhibition *I thought I was the audience and then I looked at you* showing¹ at Kirsten Lavers' Taxi Gallery in 38 Stanesfield Road in Cambridge (TG website) is an extrapolation of Ruth's theme of the audience that she previously exhibited at EAST International last summer (RC website)². In the EAST International exhibition Ruth raises questions of presence and ways of seeing with cheap Taiwanese replicas of prestigious ceramic ornaments, mutilated or decorated depending on your point of view. She uses e.g. clay, hairpieces, glitter or what looks like spaghetti to obstruct or even completely prevent "them" from seeing, or us from seeing their faces. Some have had their heads removed. The space is big and bright and you feel strangely aware of your size as you make your way through the space, weaving between the sculptures placed on the floor or on little tables tentatively piled on top of each other. The accessibility is almost overwhelming as the "bull in a china shop" emotionality takes over. Are we just trampling all over art? The romantic theme (TG website) of the ornaments, depicting shy and prudent girls and romantic and courtly young men is strangely suggestive of something unobtainable and references the mantelpiece that would home a display of these ornaments as a shrine to romantic love. Critic Dan Smith has acknowledged this romanticism and describes the mutilation and abuse as done in "cute and endlessly inventive ways" (Smith 2003 p.29), whereas Sotiris Kyriacou refers to the piece as a "cornucopia of modified car-boot-sale junk" (Kyriacou 2003 p.71). The verdict is of an unmistakably sweet nature.

¹ February 29th –March 27th 2004

² The work was also exhibited at the Wunderkammer exhibition in Birmingham in the same year.

The Taxi Gallery exhibition has a different set of messages. The gallery itself in suburban Cambridge is not exactly on the main road. With hardly any promotion of the exhibition apart from the local events website (WAN website)³ and a brief mention in Arts East (Whittaker 2003 p.9) the gallery balances a strange relationship between the locals who have shown an interest in it even before any artwork was installed (TG website) and the art buff that makes the effort to locate and visit the gallery. The work shows nothing of the artist and the gallery does not provide any information. With no information provided, the viewer has to rely solely on her or his own experience. All they know is the name of the artist, and that therefore they can probably make the assumption that the artist is a woman. How deliberate is that? Is Ruth placing herself in a camp that challenges the celebrity status of the artist as the hangover of the YBAs in the 90s settles in?

The sheer alteration of space creates a black and bleak undercurrent for Ruth's audience who now walks around the space, around the cab and peers in. We are not intruding on the space physically but psychically, we are looking in from the outside. The artworks are in the backseat, there is no control, and no visibility of their own destiny. The front seat is empty, there is no one driving this cab. No one has been for so long, that a small puddle of water has collected in the front and the windows are smudged, presumably by other visitors getting in touch with their scopophilic side. There is no time, there is no meter running. We stand on the outside peeping in. We might as well bring our binoculars and a wheelchair. The ornaments have become a fetish object placed in the back of the cab. The small pastel coloured lamps and little

³ The Cambridge Evening News website doesn't have the Taxi Gallery on its search list.

side tables on and under which the ornaments are placed may attempt a domestic feel to maintain the mantelpiece reference from the larger exhibition but in the black cab they become a specifically lit stage. They become our projected fantasies; our Hollywood nurtured romantic ideology mutilated, decapitated. The film noir reference is stark and a little frightening. As dusk settles in, the lights come on and the black leather of the backseat takes on a bigger role. The leather brings an edge to the romantic arousal, the nocturnal activity of making a trip to Stanesfield road becomes charged and here is a rear window worth looking in through. The light from the streetlamps is reflected in the puddle in the front seat. The backseat, a concept historically charged with teenage sexual fantasies, is like a gaping mouth that is just about to devour the display and the moist glistening on the edges has an unnerving connotation of saliva (presumably the interplay between the lamps and the damp spring air). The innocently looking abuse and the playful mutilation of the figures hits a core and the romantic dream becomes a tantalising nightmare. By stretching the imagination just a little bit, decapitated women become femme fatales and the visually impaired men become their prey.

But who is the voyeur? The audience surely but then the title of the exhibition is confusing. It implies that the audience that thinks they are doing the looking is actually the one that's being looked at. In Kirsten Lavers' front garden this becomes unsettling. Is she looking through the binoculars, sitting in her chair, looking out at us? Have we become the exhibition for the artist to enjoy? Challenging the contemporary art experience Ruth and Kirsten take no prisoners. The sting in the tail is on Ruth's website. She claims that "the audience of disrupted ornaments look on, blindly cosseted in isolating balls of suffocating prettiness" (RC2 website). Has she

embarked on the Magritte train of trying to wake us up? The space, the obstructed vision of a ceramic fantasy, with the tantalising black leather of the backseat create an almost Chronenberg like feel.

All this tension and heightened sense of an exhibition experience is the black cab vs. the white cube at its best. Our passive acceptance of the white cube is challenged. The mantra that the space shouldn't distract from the art is dumped. Here the space is an integral part of the exhibition. There is no art without space. Ruth's everyday sculptural objects suggest that maybe there is no space without art. But with the unobtainable desire so embedded in the works, the longing of being somewhere else (TG website) suggests that we have become so removed from ourselves that the art in our space doesn't register as art. Instead we buy it, place it, dust it and dream about it, becoming our own audience.

By using the found object originally liberated by Duchamp and developed and evolved through the work of artists such as Joseph Beuys, Ruth places herself firmly in 20th century sculptural tradition and takes her cue from contemporary sculptors and thinkers ⁴(RC2 website). Ruth's work benefits from the historical *conceptualist* nursery room and speaks to the informed audience, familiar with her conceptual and historical heritage. What it says to those who don't fit those criteria is another story, some might say ... not much. The absence of any local residents at the opening was a stark indication of how the exhibition or maybe indeed the gallery itself is accessible only to a willing few.

⁴ The sculptors are Franz West (b. 1947), Tom Friedman (b. 1965), Jim Lambie (b. 1964), Urs Fischer (b. 1973), Eva Hesse (1936-1970) and Nigel Rolfe (b. 1950).

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accessed 21/03/2004

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