

Where are the laughs? British Art Show 8 is a super-serious riff on our toxic material world

It's got a kiddy TV talent show, a Tom of Finland dungeon and a talking bog man. So why does this five-yearly art survey feel like an elegy to our failures? It needs to lighten up

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Mmm, rubber. The cloying smell of the industrial rubber curtain at the door to a dark room is the kind of invitation I can hardly resist. Inside is Patrick Staff's strangely fractured film about the Tom of Finland archive, and the leather-clad denizens of the house in Los Angeles where the late artist's alarmingly priapic erotic drawings are stored. The Foundation is queer in every sense - though a bit chaste in its treatment of the material. The installation is stygian enough, but it is a pity we never get to see any action in the dungeon.

The British Art Show 8 could do with a bit more fun. Another film installation, by Rachel Maclean, is shown in a playroom decorated in toxic kiddy-colours - the aesthetic of plastic toys ramped-up to the max. *Feed Me* is part noxious fairy tale, part TV talent show. Maclean plays all the parts, from the innocent child to the adults and monsters that groom her. "I Luv yooo ... I 'Heart' You", she squeals to a smooth-talking, decrepit old creature with fangs. Another of her characters is a hard-bitten cross between Margaret Thatcher and Bette Davis. By turns tooth-achingly sweet, cynical and unwholesome, Maclean's *Feed Me* will make you never want to inflict commercialised, consumerist childhood on a brat again. I would say don't take the kids, but they'll probably just want to know if there's any tie-in merchandise you can buy them.

Materiality is the guiding principle of the eighth, five-yearly survey of current British art, now filling Leeds Art Gallery. The theme, devised by curators Anna Colin and Lydia Lee, concerns "how artists engage with the material world". Self-evidently, this is what artists do. It's what everyone does, come to think of it, all the time. Now the material world has blurred into the virtual, and the whole thing seems to be a free-for-all.

There are tombstones as chairs and benches, unravelling woollen heads, a reading of an essay on Gertrude Stein's sado-masochistic play with her lover May Bookstaver, a pair of cut-out figures that turn out to have live ant farms embedded in the Perspex

tubes that run through them. There are plastic colons, bubbling stews of goo, and lots of moving-image works, plus a performance programme and a compendium of images based on Immanuel Kant's 1790 Critique of the Power of Judgement. Room after room, my own powers of judgment are sorely tested.

I have seen every British Art Show since its inception in 1979. Except as barometers of the artistic and curatorial weather at the time, most have been forgettable. The last iteration, which opened in spaces all over Nottingham, was livelier and more surprising than those before it. The closure of Leeds Art Gallery for a major refurbishment (and the dispersal of its collection to long-term loan shows) gives the opportunity to mount the exhibition for over three months in a single venue, before work on the roof begins. BAS8 then travels to Edinburgh, Norwich and Southampton.

The installation was still incomplete on my visit, though Eileen Simpson and Ben White were playing fragments of hits from 1962 (now out of copyright), little riffs and hiccupping samples of songs too brief to be recognised, on turntables by the grand staircase. Snatches of music wafts up to the paintings by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye on the upper floor. Many of the people in her portraits look like they're waiting for their song, or for something. Anything at all.

Laure Prouvost's new work plunges one gallery into darkness as spotlights roam and her affecting, intimate voice (spoken as though she were a computer hard-drive) converses with the computer's fans. Daft as it seems, Prouvost's work is much tighter and more stripped-down than the baggy, shaggy-dog installation that won her the Turner prize in 2013.

Bedwyr Williams is on a roll. A giant egg has cracked open to reveal a screen, where we journey along the M11 to Cambridge, only to discover the artist as a talking bog man, unearthed by archaeologists from a Fenland grave. Grey-faced, Williams talks us through the social whirl of a drinks do at Kettle's Yard Gallery, as if the soiree would itself be the subject of an archaeological dig some day.

Williams loses me there for a while, but his voiceover carries you along. Too much humour in art is wearying. I don't think Stuart Whipps's car, a wrecked body and chassis of a 1979 GT Mini, is meant to be funny at all. He wants ex-employees of the Longbridge car plant to restore it during the run of the show, then plans to drive it to the last BAS8 venue in Southampton in a year's time. The project has a certain symbolic value, though the resurrection of British industry is even further down the road.

Mikhail Karikis's recent film Children of Unquiet takes us to the semi-abandoned village of Larderello in Tuscany - an almost surreal landscape dotted with industrial pipes, cooling towers and steaming fissures in the ground. This is the site of the world's first geothermal power station, originally built in 1911 and since modernised and largely automated, leading to the abandonment of the workers' village. It looks a haunting place. Dante knew it well; he located hell here.

Karikis shows local schoolchildren playing among the houses, singing and reading to

one another from books about love, and a species of wasp that pollinates an orchid whose flowers resemble the female wasp's reproductive organs. What the children make of this I have no idea. I haven't much idea either, except that it chimes in with the artist's ideas about love and renewal.

I don't mind that some works puzzle me, and I'd rather be puzzled than bored - but there is quite a bit here that strikes me as dull. John Akomfrah and Trevor Mathison's new black-and-white film, *All That Is Solid* (referring back to Karl Marx), is high on atmospheric bleakness - rain, statues, trains, bare trees, flashes of JFK and Martin Luther King, a pram stranded on a beach, ringing telephones, repeated faces and a sense of threat. It seems to be an elegy for a failing world. I hope there is more to it than a succession of portents, but it will take repeated viewings to find out. Perhaps the most telling moment comes in a collaborative work by Ahmet Ögüt, with Liam Gillick, Susan Hiller and Goshka Macuga, who Ögüt has invited to design sculptures as collection points for contributions to student debt relief. Macuga's collection box is a quid-in-the-slot telescope, that lets you see the buildings across the street and a patch of Leeds sky on the payment of a pound. The idea is the main thing, or maybe it's the money, in a material world.

British Art Show 8 is at Leeds Art Gallery from 9 October to 10 January 2016, then touring.

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