Beck's Futures 2

2 June — 21 July 2001

Beck's Futures was established in 2000 as an annual prize and exhibition which aims to identify, recognise and support emerging artists at an early stage in their careers. The competition is open to artists of any age, working in any medium, the only limitation to entry being that they must be working in the UK. Each artist is awarded £4,000, with the overall winner being awarded a further £20,000. This year ten artists were shortlisted from over 200 nominations. They are: Shahin Afrassiabi, Fabienne Audéoud and John Russell, Simon Bill, David Burrows, Brian Griffiths, Dan Holdsworth, Gemma Iles, DJ Simpson, Clare Woods, and Tim Stoner, the winner of the 2001 prize.

The judges were Richard Flood, Chief Curator of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Katerina Gregos, Director of the Deste Foundation, Athens; Gary Hume, Artist; Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen, Director of Exhibitions at the ICA, London; Zadie Smith, Author and Writer-in-Residence at the ICA, London, and Anthony Fawcett, Art Consultant for Beck's Bier. Originally shown at the ICA in March and April 2001, the exhibition's tour starts at The Fruitmarket Gallery, and will travel to Liverpool, Newcastle and New York.

The exhibition features the artists' most recent work as well as a number of new commissions, and the selection is broad-ranging in approach and medium. In the large gallery downstairs Fabienne Audéoud and John Russell have collaborated to create a series of paintings based on documentary photographs of 'classic' performance art and of historical and religious paintings, often depicting violent scenes. Loose connections between the recent and historical images are made – a copy of Grünewald's famous Crucifixion scene from the Isenheim Altarpiece is placed near to a depiction of a performance by the Vienna Actionist, Hermann Nitsch, who re-enacted the crucifixion over 24 hours in 1975. The text scrawled beside or across the images varies their effect and impact. At times it makes clear the source of the image – a photocopy from a book with fragments of text caught alongside the photograph – distancing us from the emotive impact of the original performance. In others, words are scrawled across the image, unconnected with their background, but describing extreme emotional or physical states – an act of calculated vandalism.

Fabienne and John started to collaborate a year ago, and their shared work is influenced by their different backgrounds. Fabienne was previously involved in performance art and music, while John was a member of the BANK collective, a London-based group who performed public 'interventions' during the 1990s. The artists that they have chosen to paint or copy show an insider's knowledge of the art world, the list reading like a catalogue of the coolest heroes for the post-modern age: Ingres, Caravaggio, Duchamp, Jeff Koons and Vanessa Beecroft.

The crude, sketchy paint and abrasive messages of Fabienne and John's work are at direct odds with the perfection and control of Dan Holdsworth's photographs on the opposite wall. It is easy to forget the man-made subjects of these images – pylons, car parks, motorway signs, and a space station – as

they are transformed into colour-saturated, ethereal scenes. Holdsworth prefers to photograph deserted structures or man-made landscapes, often shooting them at night using long exposures: any movement or figures are lost in ghostly trails, and the colour balance is skewed to suggest an alien landscape. There are strong overtones of Sci-Fi films throughout, and inevitably these are strongest in the series At the Edge of Space (1999). Shot at Port Spatial de l'Europe – the European Space Station in South America – Holdsworth's vision of an unnaturally pristine white interior has strong parallels with Stanley Kubrick's aesthetic universe in 2001: A Space Odyssey. Beyond the futuristic references though, there is a suggestion of an older cultural tradition - metamorphosis – the magical blurring of organic and inorganic, natural and man-made. In Untitled: A Machine for Living (2000) a pylon stands silhouetted against an intense blue sky, like a giant mutation of the pine trees that perch beside it along a cliff's edge, and in Megalith (2000) a prosaic, blank, roadside hoarding is transformed into an extraordinary light sculpture, the title suggesting some ancient ritual purpose.

In the centre of the room Brian Griffiths has created a modern-day monument, using found materials collected from car boot sales and junk yards. The Earnest Harbinger (2001), with its portentious title and heroic rider, sets out to suggest the overblown pomp of historical statues, but the effect is closer to a child's improvised game, or model, with basic materials put together in the simplest, most obvious way.

Shahin Afrassiabi also makes use of everyday objects, but his installations are reserved and deadpan. The Art of the Northern Commune (2001) is an arrangement of everyday objects: a TV showing daytime programmes separated from three circular carpets by a wedge-shaped wooden frame, a sample of anaglypta wallpaper, a car boot sale painting and various other props. The objects themselves are familiar and unremarkable, and the choice of materials, style, and colour is consciously unfashionable, stuck in a time-warp of 1980s bedsit decor. It is their arrangement that is curious, as the purposes of the frame, or the neat circles of carpet, are unclear. The installation seems like an incomplete display from a museum of social history, or a partially constructed interior design window display.

In the smaller side gallery Clare Woods' paintings show details of twigs and trees, based on photographs taken at night, lit by a camera flash. The trees are turned into an abstract pattern of expressive drips and lines, reminiscent of Jackson Pollock, but Woods' paintings are created with enamel paints on MDF to achieve a seamless, impersonal surface. Their titles also move the imagery away from any idea of pure abstraction: they refer to the names of asylums and orphanages, with overtones of confinement, loneliness and mental anguish that come to mind even today. Darkness, barren trees and dense forests traditionally hold associations of fear, the supernatural, and horror, and Wood's tangle of eerily-lit branches suggest some kind of psychic projection, or a mental landscape.

In the large gallery upstairs DJ Simpson's epic Secondary Modern (2001) is a large-scale image constructed from laminated black gloss formica which is scored and marked using an electric router. The unconventional medium is used for its formal effects and the surprising range and quality of marks and

lines that it allows. Again Abstract Expressionism, and Pollock in particular, come to mind. Like Pollock, Simpson seems to be fascinated with gestural marks and body-encompassing scale, but his medium subverts these classic hallmarks of Abstract Expressionism. The glossy surface and machine made marks do not read as calligraphic veils, and the scale simply makes the piece architectural – a wall of marks – rather than drawing us in, or affecting our perceptions.

Simon Bill, too, works with unconventional materials, creating playful images, which at first sight seem to be abstract and decorative. At close quarters the arabesques and patterns turn out to be made from parcel string, dental floss, marker pen and fake leaves. Their forms are simply generated by the techniques that he uses – sewing, drilling, gluing or carving – but their simplicity belies a more sophisticated knowledge of visual precedents. Pointy Birds (2000), for example, seems to echo work by dada artist Francis Picabia, and there is a dada-ist absurdity in Bill's choice of titles and the mischievous freedom of his choice of media and imagery.

On the adjoining wall Tim Stoner's paintings are carefully built up with transparent oil glazes applied to suggest the texture of printed colour-separations. The imagery initially suggests glossy advertising, with happy, anonymous figures silhouetted against strong back lighting. In Folk (2000) a group of people dance hand-in-hand while bunting flutters over their heads: in the background the roofs and chimneys of several houses appear. The men wear top hats and the women seem to wear identical head-dresses – the suggestion is of some kind of May Day celebration, all traditional costumes and idyllic village greens, but the image and its place in time are ambiguous. Similarly Cabaret (2001) depicts girls kicking up their heels, clad in old-fashioned costumes, suggesting a dance routine from 20s Hollywood. The odd nostalgia of his subjects, and their anonymity, are important for these are timeless motifs – the circle of dancers referring to a tradition in painting running from Poussin's Dance to the Music of Time to Matisse's The Dance, while dancing showgirls were the thoroughly modern subject matter for artists such as Toulouse Lautrec or Walter Sickert.

Gemma Iles is the youngest of the artists, and her photographs are constructed using family and friends as actors. She tries to emulate the iconic quality of film stills, capturing her figures in private, introspective moments, set against a bleached-out, indefinite background. As viewers we can speculate about the narratives from which these stills seem to have been lifted, but there are few clues to go on other than the facial expressions of her subjects and their gestures: even the titles simply document the month and year the photograph was taken. Without any information, or a given narrative, we are thrown onto our own responses and empathy with the figures she shows us – by default the images become psychological portraits, the emphasis firmly on the mystery and expressiveness of a human face.

David Burrows also creates constructed images, but their atmosphere and effect is closer to the world of cartoons and spoof horror films. His scenes represent an aftermath – the debris of a party, a suspiciously abandoned bathroom and a murder scene – but the stains and spills are cut from 'Plastic Foamtastic' giving the set a kitschy, playful feel. The material takes on a life of

its own, beyond what it is intended to represent, and in Flower Spill (2001) the blobs of foam give the impression that they have somehow come together to form a surreal, Magic Roundabout bed of flowers.

Wisely, Beck's Futures does not try to pinpoint new trends or movements, yet some common interests do emerge in this year's selection: a freedom in choosing materials and medium, and a knowing use of craft materials; a strong consciousness of visual culture and the history of art, with the possibilities and limitations which that knowledge brings; an updating of traditional visual genres of portraiture, landscape, still life and narrative; a subversion of cultural hierarchies with references to television and pop culture playing off the expectations of 'High Art'; and occasionally a wistfulness or nostalgic feel for childhood or some unidentified lost past.

The exhibition is complemented by Beck's Futures Student Film and Video Festival, running continuously in Gallery 4 upstairs.

Gallery Events

2 June	Meet The Artists 2pm, Admission Free, all welcome
7 & 9 June	Rembrandt's Scarlet Woman A performance by Yasmijn Karhof inspired by Rembrandt's housekeeper and mistress Geertje Dircx. 2pm, Admission Free
16, 23, 30 June	Drop-in activities Join Charlie Hackett for an alternative view of Beck's Futures 2 11am – 5pm each day. Free.
7 July	Chad McCail in conversation with Jason Herzmark Selected for last year's Beck's Prize, Chad McCail will talk about his work and career one year on. 2pm, Admission Free, all welcome

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