

Other Britannias

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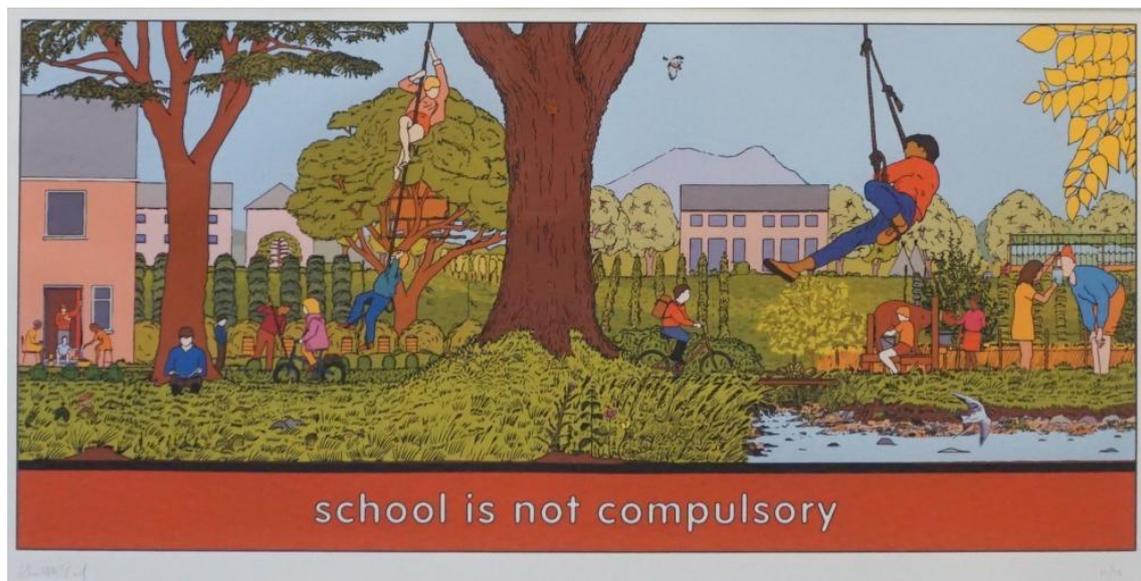
Much has changed since 1997, when the notorious *Sensation* exhibition anointed the head of so-called 'young British art' with the establishment's oil, and brought the tendency to wide public in Britain and abroad. Then the scenario appeared quite simple: a bunch of clever, well-educated, youngish artists, weary of academic exercises, impatient with the slow-moving and pompous art world, and culturally at odds with the stubborn suburban conservatism that sat upon the land, kicked against all that by making works that were irreverent, funny, relaxed about 'political correctness', and shocking to at least some of a parochial bend of thought. For a brief time, they were a fresh breeze in a fusty room but already at the time of their apotheosis, whispers could be heard that their work had little positive substance, was hardly different from advertising (and was so dependent upon the taste of a single advertiser), and that the noisy celebrity that surrounded them sheltered meagre talents and drowned out diverse voices. Or, to put it a little differently, that the uniformity of their work was produced not by the successful capture of the zeitgeist but by the conquest of the art world by the values of mass-marketed entertainment.

In any case, the conditions under which British art is produced have altered, and as 'young British art' has declined into sorry self-parody, a more confused and various scene has been revealed. Even in 1997, memories of recession and the collapse of the art market were fresh, and no one had confidence in the Conservative's handling of the economy; now the nation rests upon a sustained period of modest, steady growth. Then the Tories celebrated warm beer and cricket, among all those traditional virtues that had once made Britain great, and harboured an instinctive suspicion of the high-brow and the novel; now there reigns a technocratic government that is (if anything) a little too interested in the social benefits of high culture, and after nearly two decades of neglect, puts new money into the arts. Then artists courted the British press, which is among the most venal and degraded in Europe, cynically reflecting its vulgarity and obsession with all things British; now with the art market in better health, artists can afford to take a wider, more cosmopolitan view. Then it was clear that 'the poor will always be with us', and artists set out to convey their degradation to polite audiences to edify or more often entertain; now admittedly modest steps are being taken to alleviate their plight. All this has made the schoolboy nihilism of the previous generation's work seem out of joint with the times.



Michael Landy, *Scrapheap Services*, 1995

While it is clear that ‘young British art’ is critically (if not commercially) dead, it is hard to identify the new direction that British art is taking. There was always a slender strand in the old tendency that took social and political issues seriously, apparent particularly in the work of Mark Wallinger, Gillian Wearing and Michael Landy. In his elaborate, large-scale installations, Landy continues to explore the throw-away society, a system of production and consumption that disposes of people and things with equal insouciance. That strand has strengthened lately, as artists of Landy’s generation are joined by newly prominent artists and curators. Among political exhibitions shown recently are *Protest and Survive*, *Democracy!*, and *Unconvention*—the titles speak for themselves. Yet much of this newly made art treads gingerly into political waters, inflecting its statements with irony.



Chad McCail, *School Is Not Compulsory*, screenprint, 2000

Chad McCail’s utopian scenes jolt the mind, accustomed to (at best) tiny increments of political improvement. Yet the large messages are set within small frames, and the cartoon style of the drawings lead the viewer to reflect on the rhetoric of political visual representation, and to the frozen cultural forms that have often accompanied utopian projects, of Left and Right. In some of his works, Bob and Roberta Smith gives voice to ‘the people’, painting slogans that gallery-goers submit to the artist. Yet this apparent extension of artistic democracy is illusory, for Bob and Roberta alone chooses the slogans, and his taste runs to the absurd. Again, it is the rhetoric and the vehicles of political discourse, as much as its content, that are illuminated. Similarly, Grayson Perry’s various vistas, including grave political and historical scenes, are set against their clumsy, cartoon representation on ceramics. The artist has recounted how he turned to pottery because it was considered hopelessly tacky and unsuited to the expression of serious concerns. Here is an old tactic, still common, and apparent in much of the work on show: take two (or sometimes more) elements which, conventionally thought of, have opposing associations, then bring them into some neat compact, and let the resulting

incongruity do its work. Some recent examples include a gold-plated crowd-control barrier, modernist buildings portrayed in embroidery, and frozen blooms.



Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper and Parys*, 2000

That common move, often used by the 'young British artists', is also taken in the apparently diverse work of David Batchelor and Marc Quinn, the former marrying bright, sensual colour with po-faced minimalism and, although his sentiments tend towards artistic autonomy, adding in elements of the urban readymade; in some of the latter's recent work, coupling the style of slick marble depiction of ideal bodies found in, say, Canova, with the representation of the disabled. As with recent political work, the results generally oscillate in an uncertainty which the art world (sunk in postmodern truisms) takes to be undoubtedly radical.

Is it useful to think of this art as British art, or is it merely art that happens to have been made in Britain? That conglomeration of nations is transforming, as its constituent units, long bound to the Union, gain greater autonomy, and as the question of integration with Europe becomes ever more urgent. Furthermore, competing minority interests, ethnic and religious, clamour for recognition against the backdrop of the white agnostic majority, and it is uncertain whether their calls for justice and redress can be met by the cosy version of consensual multiculturalism which is official government policy and is subscribed to by most of the art world. Note, in thinking about ‘other Britannias’ (and there are many) that all the artists showing here are white, though not all are English. In the last few years, a truly novel situation has emerged in which it makes sense to ask: how much longer does the old Britain have? And, as that question is asked, ugly defensive gestures—nationalist, isolationist or overtly racist—are raised in reaction.

While most art shown in mainstream galleries, state and commercial, is content to play with the conventions of political engagement, there are other British art practices that offer more explicit statements, less buttressed by irony, or give greater opportunity for interaction with a public, or undertake overt attacks on corporate interests. Yet we cannot say too quickly that this work forms yet another Britannia, for it is usually made by those who think far beyond the Union’s fracturing borders, aspiring rather to reflect upon the global situation as a whole.