

SARAH LUCAS

tabloid feminism



Sarah Lucas' work operates with a casual post-feminism that contrasts with the more ardent women's art of the 1970s or even the theoretical rigor of the 1980s epitomized by Barbara Kruger. Lucas' work is political in the sense that she espouses a British working class aesthetic. Indeed the YBA (Young British Artist) phenomenon in general took up what might be called 'tabloid culture' with something akin to affection.

The YBA were born in the watershed between the decline of the Conservative Party and the first stirrings of the New (conservative) Labor Party which was to become the darling of the tabloid press they so skillfully cultivated. Sarah Lucas' work is quintessentially British in its disrespectful approach to both politics and *Kultur* and its fondness for decrepitude and imperfection. Instead of portraying the feminine in terms of beauty, like Cindy Sherman before her, Lucas pursues a less than flattering autobiographical account of existence that includes, amongst other things, references to: the greasy English breakfast, toilets, garden gnomes, no frills supermarket tights, and cigarette addiction (it must be the weather). With regard to the latter in a conversation with James Putnam Lucas reported:

I first started smoking when I was nine. And I first started trying to make something out of cigarettes because I like



to use relevant kind of materials. I've got these cigarettes around so why not use them. There is this obsessive activity of me sticking all these cigarettes on the sculptures, and obsessive activity could be viewed as a form of masturbation. It is a form of sex, it does come from the same sort of drive, And there's so much satisfaction in it. When you make something completely covered in cigarettes and see it as solid it looks incredibly busy and it's a bit like sperm or genes under the microscope.' {Putnam, 2000}

If one wants to play with labels—and in context of post-modern art an interweaving of established discourses is widespread—then one might refer to Lucas' work as pop expressionism. It is easy to understand, refers to popular culture (principally to British tabloid culture) and plays the crucial game of transposing high and low cultural references. Indeed Lucas' work is at its best when she is dredging the depths of tabloid sexism while simultaneously making high art references. This in a nutshell is the rhetorical mechanism used by Lucas and it is evident in a number of successful works.

Matthew Collings {Collings, 2002} makes an amusing comparison between Lucas' *Nude*, 1999, and an exercise in painterly abstraction from 1967 by the British artist Ben Nicholson. The comedy stems from the fact that Lucas is most definitely making artistic allusions to painterly abstraction while simultaneously intersecting these with references to the iconoclastic readymade sculpture of Marcel Duchamp. Most importantly she situates all these male-dominated references in the domain of the feminine. Perhaps this is why her work is so entirely unfeminine. The melon breasts an



extremely literal translation of the tabloid newspaper verbal pun 'she's got tits like melons' and the final deconstruction of gender offered by the bristly bottle brush curled up over Y fronts.

In *Bunny Gets Snookered*, 1997, a mock snooker hall is populated by Lucas' signature 'nudes' modeled cleverly on Picasso's post-cubist distortions of the female figure but also punning upon the 'master's' ability to create representations out of ordinary materials (the famous bull's head constructed out of bicycle seat and handlebars). Lucas effects her deconstructive appropriation by filling two sets of tights with stuffing and then unceremoniously clamping them onto office chairs with glueing clamps, the kind of tool one might find in a sculptor's studio, but it is also an ugly device with what in this context might be read as a rather *rude* red handle jutting out the back.

The Picassoesque nudes are thusly impaled on their office seats like a bevy of unfortunate female secretaries. And all of this crowned by the London pub machismo icon of the snooker table with its all too obvious sexual connotations of prodding balls into chutes. If one needed another post-modern combie-term then it might be 'tabloid popism'. And indeed this term might apply to the YBA phenomenon in general.

Lucas deploys a repertoire of visual puns that take us from the repulsive to the bathetic. When she reports that she is convinced that art had to be 'light' today {Collings, 2002: 19} we have to, at least, half believe her. Lucas' work is a mixture of visual puns, artistic allusions, self-expressionism and feminism/post-feminism. She projects a self-con-



sciously butch image intensified by an antiaesthetic deployment of montage.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 2000 a sexy-crimson futon is draped seductively from a garment rail and pierced by a phallic fluorescent tube. Two lightbulbs dangle scrotum-like beneath it, and two more are suspended breast-like in mid air attached, in a Picqassoeque manner, to bent wire clothes hangers. Beside this love scene is a very contemporary *mememto mori* in the form of a cardboard coffin. And in the middle of this sculptural collage is the quiet, poetic image of a warm red bulb set inside a dirty used galvanized iron vagina-bucket. The ensemble is both sublime and bathetic. The tangle of electric wires connotes sexual energy, the coffin reminds us that the ultimate end of sexual pleasure is the replacement of an old for a new life. It is a complex work that references the Surrealist object as well as the Readymade and brings these distant aesthetics firmly into the now with a strong, ironic feminism.

The potency behind what might appear at first sight to be pure playfulness is evident in her colour photograph of a filthy toilet with 'is suicide genetic?' neatly printed in brown letters on the inner bowl. Following Lucas' obsession with sexual punning one can read the toilet bowl as a vulva and vagina, a filthy dirty one leading to decay rather than to new life. This reference is reinforced by another photograph in which she sits naked on a toilet holding a black plastic toilet cistern. In this photograph the woman becomes one with the toilet. Associations between sexuality and filth do not end with Lucas they are widespread. But scatology not only involves repulsion it also embraces a *fascination* with filth and



putrescence. From a psychoanalytical point of view, at the level of a regressive polymorphous perversity the repulsive becomes attractive, the inside of the body becomes at one with the outside. *Is Suicide Genetic* also plays on the related theme of death which has a similar attractive-repulsive fascination—and one can also add her obsession with the ‘filthy habit’ of cigarettes at this point.