Bloomberg New Contemporaries

Bluecoat Liverpool 9 July to 16 October

Most of the 46 artists included in this year's Bloomberg New Contemporaries studied in London, primarily at the Royal College, Goldsmiths and the Slade. Given that such an education currently costs around £50k for three years – including tuition fees and lodging but excluding everything else – my first instinct was to look through this year's list for hyphenated surnames and forenames like Byzantia, Sebastian and Georgia. There's a bunch. There's a Bunting-Branch. My second instinct was to stop myself. Names don't tell you all that much, scowling when you were lucky enough to receive a completely state-supported art education is a bad look, the trajectory of university funding seems sadly irreversible at this point, and the art world in the UK has, aside from that interregnum between the 1960s and the recent past, mostly been the preserve of the relatively affluent. It doesn't make for bad artists, necessarily, though it clearly narrows the catchment.

In fact, Bloomberg New Contemporaries – which this year was selected by Anya Gallaccio, Alan Kane and Haroon Mirza, artists whose own aesthetics barely register in their choices outside a notable emphasis on materiality – feels particularly useful given the evidently widespread lack of a critical filter in east London's soft-cornered, pseudo-bohemian art world. At the same time, and naturally, the generation cherry-picked here (or generations, the exhibitors being born between 1965 and 1994, though most of them are in their 20s and early 30s) is reacting against the most recent paradigm of prolix digital videos, colour gradients etc. Most notably, and least surprisingly, while the trajectory of new art in the past half-decade was towards a form of materiality that doesn't deny the screen, many artists here revel in colliding physical textures, both organic and manmade. Digitality remains a shared issue – one among several – but the response has morphed.

If that sounds familiar, it should, not least if you have seen the current British Art Show (Reviews *AM*391). For the emergent sculptors at Bluecoat, key British forerunners appear to be materiality-manipulators such as Alice Channer, Caroline Achaintre, Andy Holden and Jesse Wine. We are, apparently, once again rebounding from chilly, machine-fabricated aesthetics into a 'craft' moment, albeit a gnarly one. Consider Lisa Porter's *Connections VIII (Deflated)*, 2015, crumpled and faintly limb-like tubes of ceramic in a deceptive metallic glaze; Byzantia Harlow's ebullient, careening floor-based panoply *What You Know About Fresh!*, 2015, a white, rumpled sheet strewn with bent shards of (again) glazed ceramic and topped with a distended metal frame; or Margreta Stolen's frontal relief *Omega "Purr"*, 2016, a luxury-and-conflict-condensing waterfall of furs that vertically bisects a curtain of black canvas and spills floorwards to bullet belts, glowing LEDs and fluffy white yarn.

The photographers, meanwhile, repeatedly tilt towards uneasy animism, as in Roxman Gatt's uneasy, carefully artless c-type series *Girls*, 2016, with its juxtaposition of pale pink ham being unwrapped and pale pink female breasts above a sunken ribcage; or Richard Nicholson's pseudo-sculptural gravitation to triangular forms, including a battered plaster cast of a classical sculpture with a half-restored crotch, wrapped red plastic strung amid ropework like an abstract Nobuyoshi Araki and an uprooted little tree dumped on paving stones, all collected under the title *Under the Pavement Lies the Beach 1-5*, 2015. Situationism, the selectors note in a roundtable in the catalogue, appears important for this generation as a source of strategies, presumably against apparently ineradicable, disaster-exploiting capitalism. See, in this regard, Jamie Green's *At first you break windows, then you become a window yourself*, 2015, a trio of avuncular snowmen in expanded foam, appended with silks after being 'dressed by Debenhams personal shopping service', and think, morosely, of Peter Cook's line, 'One of the ways to avoid being beaten by the system is to laugh at it'. (Animate inanimate things, here and elsewhere, naturally reflect the persistent influence of Speculative Realism.)

'New Contemporaries 2016' installation view

The rest tends, as usual, toward a smorgasbord. Painting, or 'painting', runs a gamut here, though again skewing on occasion towards the abject. There is the unapologetic twisted materialism of Sebastian Jefford's *A nutritious yet horrid morsel*, 2015, a rectangular lump of flesh-pink Plasticine doodled on in Biro, like a giant schoolboy's eraser, and draped in silicone casts of, well, actually I'm not sure what – maybe underwear – and in any case fitting recent times' post-post-minimalist artistic yen for the draped, the slumped, the collapsing: art that can barely hold itself up. There is Alfie Kungu's comically tall and narrow gloss-on-aluminium image of distended legs in tracksuit bottoms, culminating in dainty green Nikes. And there are deadpan spaces such as Zsofia Schweger's featureless but ice-cream-coloured Hungarian bureaucratic interiors, and Michael Cox's bluntly geometric view of a Dalston estate, *De Beauvoir*, 2015. Much of the painting – the last three mentioned, as well as Jack Bodimeade's sad, wristy, anthropomorphic little studies of plug sockets and Oriele Steiner's subaquatic figure studies in greens and blues – feels inward and out of time; this may be no bad thing.

Video, conforming to no codes and carrying little historical baggage, mostly comes over well as a flexible, fast vessel for ideas. Christopher DA Gray's *Becoming Boxers*, 2015, perhaps a study in self-confliction, is a piece of pugilistic prestidigitation. First a pair of hands fight each other, fingers individually punching, before those digits are surreally topped with tiny model figures, themselves toting miniature hands, and the fight goes on, with much of the effect in the pop-slap sounds of the 'punches', small yet brutalising. Zarina Muhammad's *Digjidad*, 2015, is an accelerating sequence of anti-IS memes, mocking IS's apparent recruiting via the same format and set against a squealing electronica track. In the presumably pseudonymous Richie Moment's videos, a goofy, hyper-aggressive hipster artist – apparently lifting his look from musician and professional troll Ariel Pink – struts through a fast-cutting fantasia of hot colour and bruising electronic dance music, making an elephant-in-the-room of emerging-artist precarity.

What would Bloomberg New Contemporaries look like to someone unversed in art? What mood might they extrapolate? The national (and, to an extent, international) one, probably: much here appears damaged, pugnacious, vexed, uncertain. Art is specific but also general, and the chord this Bloomberg New Contemporaries

sounds is dissonant and fragmentary, even when one allows for pluralism. Outside, meanwhile, is Liverpool, looking more battered than I have ever seen it. In Ruth Spencer Jolly's two-screen video *We Can Work It Out*, 2014, which plays to the local crowd, a young man and woman primly sing a version of the titular Beatles track, with pedantic augmented lyrics concerning what 'working it out' might actually entail. The video, naturally, loops. We can work it out: first it was a song, now maybe it's a mantra. ▮

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David Hammons: Give Me a Moment

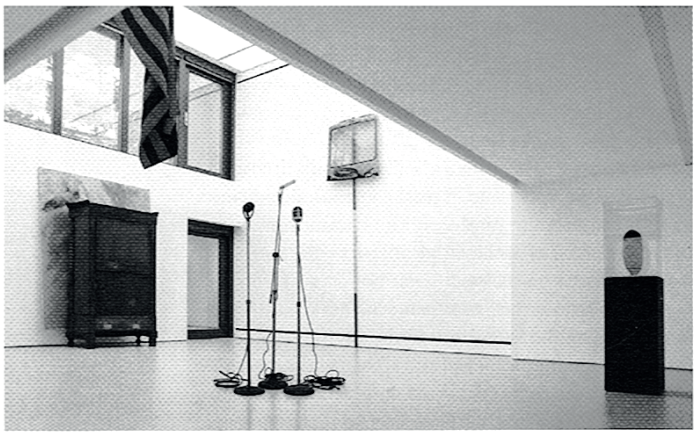
George Economou Collection Athens 13 June to 30 September

David Hammons has always interacted with the art world strictly on his own terms and in doing so has created a mystique around himself and his oeuvre that compels us to remember it and to seek out more. Not apparently prolific, his works pop up in group exhibitions and draw the viewer in with a mixture of repulsion and fascination. Repulsion at the detritus and rubbish he often fashions pieces from, and fascination with his ability to invest this material with presence and meaning. Encountering his work can still make contemporary art seem at first both impenetrable and offensive: the materials used may be picked from trash, and Hammons will juxtapose objects to fashion obvious and sometimes clumsy visual puns. He seems to care little for the work's reception, but these deliberately anti-aesthetic strategies have, ironically, made him something of a cult figure.

Greek shipping magnate George Economou, collector and Tate patron, has opened a private museum in Athens for mounting exhibitions and displaying his own collection. Having acquired three works by Hammons, and a curator who used to work with him in New York, the mounting of a solo show seems a logical next step. Nineteen works, all from private collections, are displayed across three rooms, with half from the 1980s and the rest spanning 1969 to 2015. This is not only the artist's first solo show in Greece but also his first retrospective in Europe.

The first room has five works made between 1989 and 2008. Instantly recognisable are three signature Hammons pieces: *African American Flag*, 1990, *Rock Head*, 2000, and *Which Mike do you want to be like…?*, 2001. For anyone not familiar with these, the flag is the stars and stripes reworked in Pan-African green, black and red, deftly asserting black America; *Rock Head* – a term for a crack user – invests a rock with quasi-spiritual significance, while dressing it in a wig made from Afro-Caribbean hair suggests an uncomfortable closeness between dignity and despair. *Which Mike…?* has three microphones, referencing Michael Jordan, Michael Jackson and Mike Tyson, neatly representing the three main pathways to celebrity open to young black men and capturing its irresistible yet dangerous allure. The other two works are *Untitled*, 1989, one of Hammons's series of basketball hoops fashioned from a steel pole, silver foil and a car windshield, and *Untitled*, 2008, which has an abstract canvas leaning face-against, and so obscured by, the mirror on a large wardrobe door. Two big critiques: one of basketball as the panacea for impoverished young black men, and one about the narrow, introverted scope of white art history. As an opening manifesto, this first space sets the tone for what is to come, with themes of race and class articulated with humour and not a little anger.

'Give Me a Moment' installation view



The next room contains a few examples that at first made me recoil, but then – typically for Hammons – intrigued. As part of a deliberate strategy to make 'unsaleable' works, Hammons has made sculptures from ephemeral materials such as snow and mud and even fried chicken. *Untitled*, 1989, consisting of golden chicken thighs suspended from cheap costume jewellery, is one of these. Repulsion at the thought of greasy fried chicken – a conservator's nightmare – quickly gave way to amusement at his riff on diet and bling, as well as the happy irony of the piece now being treasured in a private collection. *In the Hood*, 1993, is a hood torn from a sweatshirt and mounted on the wall. While it may be an irritatingly obvious reference, somehow it radiates an air of menace. *Blind Reality*, 1986, comprises some half a dozen old venetian blinds carefully fastened together to make a sculpture that is both elegant and desirable – Hammons quite simply turns ugliness into beauty. For comparison, two works from the early 1980s both deserve a mention. *Flight Fantasy*, fashioned from reeds, mud, hair and pieces of vinyl records, sits lightly on a gallery wall looking like a delicate ethnological fetish from a remote Pacific island. Only when the viewer moves in close is the reality of its less-than-exquisite composition revealed. *Untitled* works in reverse: an agglomeration of kitsch detritus – light bulbs, bottles, small dolls, jewellery, branches, tinsel, tartan fabric, key rings, wire, a raccoon tail – is fixed together and hung on the wall. Initial repulsion again gives way to curiosity and fascination as the objects metamorphose from rubbish to modern tribal fetish under my gaze.

Although a retrospective, the works in this show are not chronologically installed, which makes it clear how they all stand on their own – nothing in Hammons's oeuvre appears obviously dated when set beside something else. I could pick out more works to enthuse about, but an overview would best communicate the surprising power of Hammons's art. His startling juxtaposition of cigarette ends, bottle tops and old fried chicken with antique Japanese fabric, human hair and, say, elaborate antique furniture suggests a deftness in articulating his concerns with whatever is at hand. Moreover, his ability to infuse his media with meaning, to turn discarded rubbish into almost spiritual artefacts, testifies to the transformative power of his art. Artists influenced by him cite his work as being crucial to changing their attitudes about what is abject and ignored, and therefore widening their aesthetic boundaries. Drawing on African-American and Japanese culture, Hammons's raw materials root him within an 'anti-aesthetic' of rude, ugly craft, but charged with a knowing, cosmopolitan sophistication. His work feels like a new take on Arte Povera, though he uses objects that most practitioners of that group would have shunned. In doing so, he develops a new black American aesthetic which continues to shake my comfortable ideas about what constitutes the art object. ▮

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