

Red White and Blue. POP PUNK POLITICS PLACE

CHELSEA SPACE, CHELSEA COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN.

13.11.12.

CHELSEA space is open to the public but part of an educational facility. It is not a commercial gallery, therefore as curator and director, Donald Smith feels a freedom that other curators may not enjoy. From CHELSEA space, there is a clear view across the parade ground of the campus, to the roof of neighbouring Tate Britain where a statue of Britannia sits, looking across the river, trident in hand. The director of Chelsea Space took this symbol of traditional British art and culture as a starting point from which to work up the idea of an exhibition.

The Jubilee celebrations, the Olympics and Royal Wedding this year, all prompted Donald to consider other major national celebrations from the past – Festival of Britain in 1951 and the Great Exhibition of 1851. And to draw parallels between the festivals; all staged at times of austerity, all considered as a contribution to national identity and designed with a legacy in mind. In particular the Queen's Diamond Jubilee this year, evoked memories of her Silver Jubilee in 1977, also the era of Punk music, with its political, anti-establishment lyrics.

This exhibition explores the politics of punk, the influences of music on art, (and art on music) and 'looks at how the soundbites of austerity, legacy, and national identity have resonated across the last half century'¹. Interestingly chronology is ignored and instead we are presented with the curator's free associations, kick started by a connection he makes between the Britannia on Tate Britain and a famous punk named Jordan dressed, as Donald describes her, as a subversive 'DIY Britannia' in Derek Jarman's film *Jubilee*, 1978.

Jordan's Dance, made in 1977 starts the exhibition (we do not get to see *Jubilee*). This slo-mo video plays in a small dark room with four other films on various monitors and there is an op art album cover. The connections are clear in some cases. Samplings and appropriations and historical layerings and echoes bounce around this small space. The scale of the moving images invites scrutiny, we are being asked to examine and look and get closer. At first I was a little disappointed with the smallness of the projections and wanted a little drama, some scale. And felt that the mixing of different sound tracks was distracting. But in retrospect, this part of the exhibition works well. It is intense and dark and sets the tone - one of reverberations and echoes, with a blurring of boundaries both formal and metaphorical, that is, historical and political.

The corridor that connects the first dark room to the larger exhibition space is described as "a billboard alley of photographic images, pop art, graphics and posters; imagery piled high, international and

¹ Smith, D. Exhibition catalogue.

layered with histories"². I found this to be extremely interesting and extremely frustrating. The imagery is disparate and yes, 'piled high', in a salon hang, but some of these images are too far away to see and this would be a great wall in the main gallery space. There is no accompanying text or captioning, but 16 of the images are given text in the partial 'list of works'. Some of these are chosen for their imagery based on the Union Jack; Red, White and Blue (roundels and targets); allusions to punk music and the Silver Jubilee in 1977; musician-artists are represented; there are posters from 1951, 1978 and 2011; a Sarajevo Olympics spoof poster references the contrast with war torn Sarajevo a decade later; there are collages made from woodcut letterpress prints made in Buenos Aires (the artist works in London). Even Czech-born Pavel Buchler is there and I have to admit I have now lost the thread, the associations are coming so thick and fast. But I am not unhappy. This is fun, like a game of spot the connection. And has some deeper significance, for Britain has become multicultural and the imagery and anarchy of the punk era has been absorbed, tamed, incorporated into national identity. The punks of 1977 are now middle aged.

The exhibition hinges on a pair of double portraits by Syd Shelton, *Two Jubilees, 1977-2012*. Both taken at Jubilee Mansions, Stepney, in the year of the Queen's silver jubilee in 1977 and the Diamond Jubilee this year. This is a neat ending to the corridor as we move into the final part of the exhibition.

The largest space in the gallery is hung with the work of four artists, all made since 2000, but predominantly made in 2011 and 2012³. At this point I am keen for guidance, and am grateful for explanation of the embedded references to, amongst other things: imagery inspired by Iggy Pop and symbols of Anarchy (in the cut out by Simon Periton); the 'shape of the body of Ian Curtis's guitar' in Neil Clements minimalist paintings; and motifs from 90's graphics in Nicky Carvell's digital drawings. The Daniel Sturgis' painting is red, white and blue and feels most at home in terms of the rest of the exhibition, picking up the formal play of national ID colours and pop culture playfulness. However, this room does not sustain the strong threads and themes played across the rest of the exhibition, and formally it is less potent as well. Above all, these are paintings, play modernist, post modernist, post pop, but in all, they are quite emptied out 2D paintings (and a cut out) and so the depth of research so evident in the rest of the show, becomes a little 'flat' at this point, is a little too subtle. This may sound abrupt, but this reflects my experience of the exhibition. The last room is a diminuendo; we have moved from noisy and multi-layered and arresting and unchronological, to still and quiet and not nearly as sharp. The clash (pun intended) of history/ monarchy / national identity versus anarchy/youth/rebellion is missing in this last room. But again, on second thoughts perhaps this room represents the UK now, a somewhat flattened cultural landscape.

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² Smith, D. Exhibition catalogue.

³ I acknowledge that the design of the gallery must be very restrictive, and difficult to work around, and I understand this must force some decisions about the hang.

