

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Aesthetica

A Retrospective of “The Quiet Man of the YBAs”



Showcasing a huge variety of works from the late Angus Fairhurst, Arnolfini draws attention to the range of artistic talents, and the implicit melancholy of this often overlooked member of the YBA generation.

As one of the founding members of the notorious YBA generation, Angus Fairhurst's organisation was instrumental in the seminal *Freeze* exhibition of 1988, and his influence has indirectly pervaded the art world ever since. Fairhurst was found hanging

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from a tree in Scotland in March of last year just days after the close of his solo show at Sadie Coles HQ. A retrospective at Bristol's Arnolfini encompasses works from the artist's prolific career and introduces the casual viewer to the plethora of talents of Fairhurst, labelled "the quiet man of the YBAs" for his refusal to revert to the marketeering and shock tactics of his contemporaries.

The exhibition is curated by Arnolfini's director, Tom Trevor, who having worked with Fairhurst on three separate occasions, is confident that the gallery is the venue for this initial review. Those familiar with Fairhurst's ubiquitous gorillas will be surprised at the sheer range of works on display and Trevor's primary aim is to make audiences aware of the "full range of his practice, the amount of different media he worked in and all the different strands of his work."

Fairhurst's work, by its very nature defies the easy categorisation of which art critics are so fond. "He is very different, there is a very subtle aesthetic" at the heart of works exploring such multifaceted themes as artifice and nature, layering and cycles all combined with an implicit irreverence. "Angus would always take the piss out of serious conceptual stuff, but at the same time he made very rigorous conceptual work and was very concerned with the formal qualities, the aesthetics of it." This exhibition, caused by Fairhurst's untimely death, allows the artist in his own macabre way to escape the label of YBA. There is a very fine quality to the work, which you wouldn't automatically associate with the Goldsmiths classmates such as Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas whom he would often exhibit alongside. For now, at least in hindsight, Fairhurst's overwhelming melancholy is also apparent, "there is an emphasis on repetition and the absurd emptiness of our daily cycle, our lifecycle actually, when you look back at his work, alongside humour and self parodying."

Spreading over three galleries, the exhibition pays tribute to Fairhurst's talents in a multiplicity of artistic mediums, from a specially commissioned wallpaper of his *Underdone, Overdone* oil on canvas series, and finely detailed gorilla line drawings, to the infamous early *Gallery Connections* sound installation and numerous collage pieces. *Gallery Connections* has always been a particularly popular piece because of its impudence toward the introspective world of private art dealers and it epitomised how Fairhurst welcomed a more inclusive contemporary art scene. As such, by placing a drum kit alongside the *Underdone, Overdone* series, Trevor hopes to encourage participatory aspects, which Fairhurst would have welcomed, and ends the retrospective with a series of animations and a gallery of drawings. Trevor acknowledges the grand scale of the exhibition and hopes for it to contribute to Fairhurst's legacy as a fine artist who cut through much of the hype of the late 20th century scene: "It really is a massive show. Maybe we'll try and change the rules of the Turner Prize and get him nominated for that, who knows."

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For Trevor there was no difficulty in aligning such a variety of pieces together, “it felt really natural, organic, all the works do intertwine. There are some interesting juxtapositions, but ultimately there is the spirit of Angus operating there.” One implicit facet of Fairhurst’s work is the idea of the cyclical repetition of life and returning back to nature, something that Trevor highlights as having “a particular resonance now we know what happened last year.” At times the artist even showcases a minimalist absurdity almost in the tradition of Samuel Beckett, where everything recurs over and over again with a melancholic lack of control, conversely showcased alongside an impeccable talent.

As Trevor describes Fairhurst’s practice the nihilism of existence is astutely apparent, “you just put an instruction there and it does its thing despite you, then he just waited to see what came out the other end. For example, with the *Underdone, Overdone* series, as they build up the layers then the image disappears because it becomes over laden, but then it becomes something else.” Such observations come some way to aligning Fairhurst’s disparate works into a more coherent whole, with the recurrence of such layering in the animations and low expectation paintings further along the exhibition. The retrospective, by placing the artist’s various stages of work alongside each other, provides an opportunity for us to discover what the previously unquantifiable Fairhurst emphasised, and that is the complex layering and repetition of our own lifecycles. Trevor’s curation also recognises the often uneasy relationship that Fairhurst experienced with the worlds of media and artifice, his “focus on advertising and the media, but at a very surface level.” These subtleties set the work apart from the traditionally (if one can use traditional for a movement that continues to provoke controversy) YBA attitude. “It was a very particular thing, it was not the shock tactics that a lot of his contemporaries were into, it wasn’t selling a brand.”

Ultimately Trevor hopes for Fairhurst’s exquisite practices and inherent humour to be made most apparent. Upon reading Fairhurst’s tributes among artists and critics recurring praise centres around his good nature and wry attitude to life. As a rather premature retrospective of one of the founders of a movement, which is still so dominant today, this humour must pervade the exhibition because it is such an integral part of the work, of the generation, and a difficult preset has been made to consolidate this with the spectre of the artist’s demise, “he was such a funny guy, everyone loved Angus, but he also had a sort of melancholy.” Recognising the struggle Trevor urges that “the whole thing should obviously be a celebration of his creative spirit, part of it will be sad, but then I think it’ll be a really enjoyable exhibition because it will be funny.” As we head into a period of economic uncertainty that parallels the art scene in which the Goldsmiths’ generation did so much to challenge the status quo, and then came to dominate themselves, we can toy with the idea of another radical shift from market values. *Freeze* occurred just before Britain’s last recession; *Freeze*’s primary player Damien Hirst and his contemporaries went on to ride high on the wave of an art boom

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which has seen market dominance for the last 15 years. “Damien exists in that market world, he’s omnipotent and that’s part of his integrity. Angus’ integrity was a self critical loop rather than a display mode for the market.” With a prominent exhibition in a time of major economic change, it seems apt that the focus should be on the quieter of the YBAs and, with an irony that Fairhurst would appreciate, the idea of the art, rather than the market can dominate as “more qualitative rather than saleable concerns come to the fore.”

Fairhurst’s work is “about quality of ideas” and when questioned about a shift in attitude Trevor acknowledges, “it’s bound to happen in a sense, because there’s not going to be so much other pressure from the market. If that means that we have a platform for pushing what it’s all about, that’s great news.” Subsequently, the Arnolfini exhibition can become representative of the complexities of a generation that remains at the forefront of the industry, and also of the industry to come.

The *Angus Fairhurst* exhibition was on at the Arnolfini, Bristol until 31 March 2009.

www.arnolfini.org.uk

~Pauline Bache March 2009