

Culture

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Don't want to be an American idiot

The 40 'talented young US' artists in USA Today are none of those things. Waldemar Januszczak takes a dim view

I had a dream. In this dream, Charles Saatchi, the ravenous collector of new art who is also an impresario, got his taste back and mounted a really good show. It was like Saatchi shows used to be: a startling selection of inventive, cocky and, yes, occasionally shocking art works produced by a new generation of talents that Saatchi had unearthed during his obsessive treks around the art world. Hurrah, shouted those of us who want Saatchi to succeed, who value what he's done for contemporary art and who've missed him since his taste collapsed. Saatchi's back.

So, that was the dream. The reality opened this week at the Royal Academy, where a display called USA Today claims to be unveiling 40 exciting young Americans whose offerings prove that American art is once again on the march. Saatchi, we hear, has grown disillusioned with British art. America, apparently, is where the action is.

Of course, Saatchi has collaborated with the RA before. The academy was the site of Sensation, that tremendous display of Saatchi-owned Brit Art that cemented the reputations of Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas and the rest, and triggered more scandals than there are penises in a Chapman brothers installation. USA Today is clearly an attempt to achieve that kind of impact again, using young Americans instead of our boys. Unfortunately, the attempt fails. And it fails dismally.

The 40 young Americans have been accommodated in that bulky building at the back of the RA that used to be the Museum of Mankind. It turns out to be a lousy space in which to show modern art. Getting around the messy sequence of interconnected rooms, arranged across two grand floors, involves constant breaks in the journey and endless disruptions of rhythm. It's difficult to get up a head of steam. And this new generation of talented young Americans is transparently untalented, not that young and rarely American.

Jules de Balincourt, who welcomes you to the foyer, was born in Paris in 1972, and his angry remappings of the USA, in which Wal-Mart and the Outback Steakhouse take the place of the 50 states, are motivated by a familiar French dismay at American isolationism. On the other side of the foyer, Florian Maier-

Aichen, from Stuttgart, produces large landscape photographs in which the normal hues of nature have been replaced by intensely toxic reds. Surely this is ecofriendly German photography in the Gursky mode.

Of course, America is a nation of immigrants, so we can't really hold it against the show that Wangechi Mutu, who makes surreal heads out of assorted bits of black female bodies — a politically correct Arcimboldo? — is from Nairobi, or that Huma Bhabha, who puts together ultramodern tribal sculpture from the kinds of discarded material you find in demolition yards, was born in Karachi in 1962. They could all hail from Timbuktu and still be welcome here if their contributions were potent enough.

All the art in the show has been made since 9/11, and all is said to question "America's place in global society". A shared disillusionment with modern America is supposed to unite the feeble 40. And yes, lots of the exhibitors take an easy pop at the Bushscape. Aleksandra Mir, from Lublin, in Poland, is another maker of new maps of the USA, across which she declares the Cold War to be Hot Stuff, in the style of a mustard advert in a hamburger outlet. Jon Pylypchuk, from Winnipeg, Canada, takes us to an Iraq of the mind, a pint-sized model army camp in which black munchkins in GI uniforms stare inanely at their amputated legs or retch uncontrollably across the floor.

I hope I'm not making any of this sound exciting. It isn't. Almost all of it has that Sellotaped-together feel of a student show. The unfeasibly named Dash Snow gives us a piece called F*** the Police, which consists of 45 framed clippings from American newspapers announcing bad behaviour by the cops — Police Captain in NJ Hooker Scandal! — over which the artist has smeared blobs of semen: his own, I presume. It's gone yellow. That's the level of political discourse to which we're exposed here. Barnaby Furnas, who does actually have something going for him apart from his fine Dickensian name, paints scenes of comic warfare in which characters in stovepipe hats, Uncle Sams and Abe Lincolns, shoot themselves silly at the top of Hamburger Hill. If Furnas is seeking to make the point that modern American belligerence was born in the civil war, and I think he is, then it's a rare example of joined-up thinking in a very dumb show.

Saatchi has always had a debilitating weakness for slacker art. Young America is a bottomless source of the stuff. This entire display stinks of stupidity and an absent education. Has anyone here read a book or studied history or looked at a Botticelli or questioned a technique or patiently thought their way through an artistic conundrum? Not a chance. This is a generation of paint-happy know-nothings brought up on hamburgers and porn, a talentless bloom of post-pop trailer trash that makes our own Brit Artists look like a parade of Einsteins by comparison. The last time Saatchi dipped his arm into the American cesspit, 15 or so years ago, he managed to locate some giants. I remember the first appearance at the Saatchi Gallery of Jeff Koons and Cindy Sherman, proper

American artists with lots to say, whose terrain was not dissimilar to that of the media-savvy slackers gathered here, but whose levels of invention and originality were so much higher.

By my reckoning, only three of the 40 exhibitors have anything going for them. Furnas we've mentioned. And I suppose the Formula One futurism of Kristin Baker adds up to something new. Baker's dad is a racing driver, and the lurid paintings she produces have a stab at capturing the flash-past colours of rocketing racing cars, and even the noise they make. If painting racing cars ever becomes a worthwhile speciality for an artist, then Baker will be quids in.

In general, the putative post-9/11 seriousness of this display is invisible from beginning to end. In the whole show, there is, I suggest, only one work that takes us into dangerous political territory and might honestly be described as shocking, and that is a sculpture by Bhabha, which the artist has wisely declined to name. Made of clay and a black plastic rubbish bag, it seems to show a figure spreadeagled on the ground in the Islamic position of prayer. The black plastic liner has become a makeshift burqa. Coming out of the back of the praying figure is a primitive tail of the kind an armadillo might sport.

There's only one likely reading of this work, and that is to see the spreadeagled figure at prayer as a religious specimen in which evolution has gone into reverse. Hence the tail.

USA Today, Royal Academy, W1, until Nov 4