

# A dose of eclectic shock treatment



**VISUAL ART:** There is something for everyone at the Lisson Gallery's new show — if you are broadminded enough, says Richard Cork

With August only a few days away, even the most frenetic young artists might be forgiven for lapsing into a high-summer torpor. But the contributors to *A Shot in the Head* at the Lisson Gallery in northwest London have gone into overdrive. More than 40 artists from across the world are exhibiting in this crowded, unpredictable and provocative survey. Its overall impact is akin to an excitable cocktail, fizzing with bizarre ingredients and threatening to destabilise everyone who samples it.

Anything seems possible once you start exploring these uninhibited offerings. Simon Wood announces, on a deceptively sober printed card, that "I want to make myself into an industrial diamond". Elsewhere in the same room, a pair of blue flip-flops lies discarded on the floor.

Above them, projecting from the upper half of the wall, Stefan Nikolaev's shower unit seems suspended in space. White plastic curtains are drawn defensively around it, and they resist attempts to open them. But the hiss of water can be heard behind, combined with a young man's voice tunelessly singing *Space Oddity* and *Perfect Day*. Peer through a slit in the curtains, and you will find the shower is an illusion: totally dry, and inhabited only by recording equipment. But the sound of spray and singing fills the rest of the room so convincingly that the man's self-absorbed presence can be felt in an intimate, almost palpable way.

Pierre Bismuth adopts a more elusive tactic. He confines himself to the ground-floor window, with words stuck on the glass de-

scribing an event outside the gallery altogether: "Every two hours, in the pub on the corner of Bell Street and Lisson Street, an actor will order a pint of lager, while at the same moment, an actress pretending to work in the gallery will answer the telephone." It all sounds too removed from anything we are likely to experience, and nobody can be in the pub and the gallery's office at the same time.

Bismuth's teasing statement has to be taken on trust, whereas Jemima Stehli leaves no doubt in our minds about the events in her work. Six rows of colour photographs hang above each other on a wall, documenting encounters between Stehli herself and six male artists, critics and curators. Invited to a studio, they had to sit and watch her strip off. They were also asked to take photographs, by triggering a hand-held switch attached by cable to a nearby camera.

But Stehli cleverly ensured that the images show the observers as well as the observed. Moreover, the men are viewed from the front while she is seen from behind. Cast in the role of voyeurs, they display hugely varied reactions. Matthew Collings, unshaven and resting his left leg jauntily on his right knee, starts by grinning and treating the whole spectacle as an uproarious joke. As Stehli discards her black top, jeans, bra and pants, however, he sobers up.

By the end, when she stands before him wearing only a pair of black high-heel shoes, his legs are apart and he stares up at her with a concentrated frown. Matthew Higgs, by contrast, tries to subvert the entire ritual by gazing resolutely at the camera. Pale and rigidly upright in his chair, he avoids looking at Stehli and remains deadpan throughout. But he ends up appearing embarrassed, like a classic English puritan unable to cope with such a brazen display of female flesh.

Male visitors staring at Stehli's images also find themselves implicated in the voyeurism.

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While I was viewing her work, a young man came up to inquire if he could take a photograph of me. When I asked why, he replied: "Because you're a critic." Only afterwards did I realise that he must have wanted to show me hovering, like a Peeping Tom, next to Stehli's exhibit.

Not that *A Shot in the Head* is preoccupied with sex. Ceal Floyer's large, bleached photograph of a half-full (or, depending on your mood, half-empty) glass could hardly be more austere, even though she challenges us to interpret it either in a hopeful or gloomy way. Petroc Sesti's piece is more mysterious, lighting greenish water in white latex stretched from a nearby wall so that the whole luminous sculpture looks like an enormous, phosphorescent teat.

As for Douglas Gordon, he takes understatement to an extreme. Having raised expectations by placing a video screen in the far corner of a room, he allows it to stay blank until interrupted, at brief intervals, by a single, mournful sentence: "A moment's silence (for someone close to you)." After another period of blankness, the same words reappear in negative, white against the surrounding dark. But Gordon, so often the most cinematic of artists, does not permit anything else to invade the empty screen.

Verbal messages, in fact, play an important part in a surprising number of exhibits. Above one doorway, a glowing blue neon piece by Gary Rough consists of two dangerously complacent words: "VERY INTERESTING". The fact that the word "VERY" flashes on and off makes the work seem all the more pleased with itself. But it also suggests that Rough has a sense of irony.

Martin Boyce, on the other hand, places a sampler-style prayer at the centre of his large wall. Painted in white on a pale grey ground, it asks God to "bless the corners of this house" before hoping that He will "bless the crystal windowpane that lets the starlight in". All this pious optimism is undermined, however, by diagonal white lines lancing across the wall. They resemble fissures, and slice through the prayer with such aggression that the prospect of domestic benediction suddenly seems remote.

The words deployed by Jonathan Monk are painted in gold, and easily missed. He has inscribed them round the sides of a skylight, thereby forcing us to change position several times in order to read the entire sentence: "The Mount Fuji Weather Station (the south western edge of the crater), Japan, 14th July 2010,



Rise and shine: the unpredictable show features work by 40-plus artists, including (clockwise from top left) Gary Rough, Douglas Gordon, Jemima Stehli, Ceal Floyer, and Petroc Sesti

dawn." This terse, enigmatic message appears to hold out the promise of an assignation.

Perhaps Monk hopes that whoever buys this piece will agree to meet him at this remote locale in ten years' time, and thereby bring the work to completion. If so, the straightforward simplicity of the words is misleading, and masks the prospect of a strange, arduous encounter.

Francis Alys, by contrast, produces photographic evidence of

unplanned assemblies in Mexico City. Five black-and-white images, each carefully annotated with details of the date, time of day and much else besides, chart the spontaneous movements of pedestrians in an enormous civic square. The space is dominated by an immense flagpole.

Every passer-by ignores it in one or two of the photographs. But when the sun's intensity makes the flagpole cast an elongated shadow, Mexicans stand

in its dark, comforting to protect themselves from heat. They form a line, on a near-ceremonial foot

Jane and Louise Willis the other extreme, display large, sumptuous colour photographs of an entirely deserted interior. All crimsoned kitsch, with an absurdly ornate staircase curving the centre, this palatial determined to impress. absence of customers

**Around the galleries**

■ **Traces of Paradise** is a nicely mild and self-effacing title for the Brunei Gallery's remarkable exhibition on the archaeology of Bahrain from 2500BC to AD300. Four thousand years ago it was a hub of world trade. As a result of all this, the archaeology reveals the passage of many and diverse civilisations, from the expressively primitive (much of it recovered from the enormous fields of burial mounds) to highly sophisticated gold jewellery of the Hellenistic period.

The show is also, encouragingly in these days of deep (and frequently justified) worries about illicit trade in antiquities and cultural imperialism in archaeology, a tribute to the continuing work of the London-Bahrain Expedition, which has been excavating the important city site of Saar in the north of Bahrain's principal island. Unimpeachable ideals can still work wonders.

Thornhaugh Street, WC1 (020-7223 3431) until Sept 15

■ **Lost Hammersmith and Fulham** at the Museum of Fulham Palace sounds like another of those "Quaintville in Old Photographs" exhibitions. But Hammersmith in particular has been for so long the haunt of errant artists and literary figures that the records of its past are of far wider appeal than merely local. As well as the old photographs there are excellent paintings and drawings, and constant reminders of such temporary or long-term locals as William Morris, William De Morgan, Cobden Sanderson and Burne Jones flit by on the fringes of our vision.

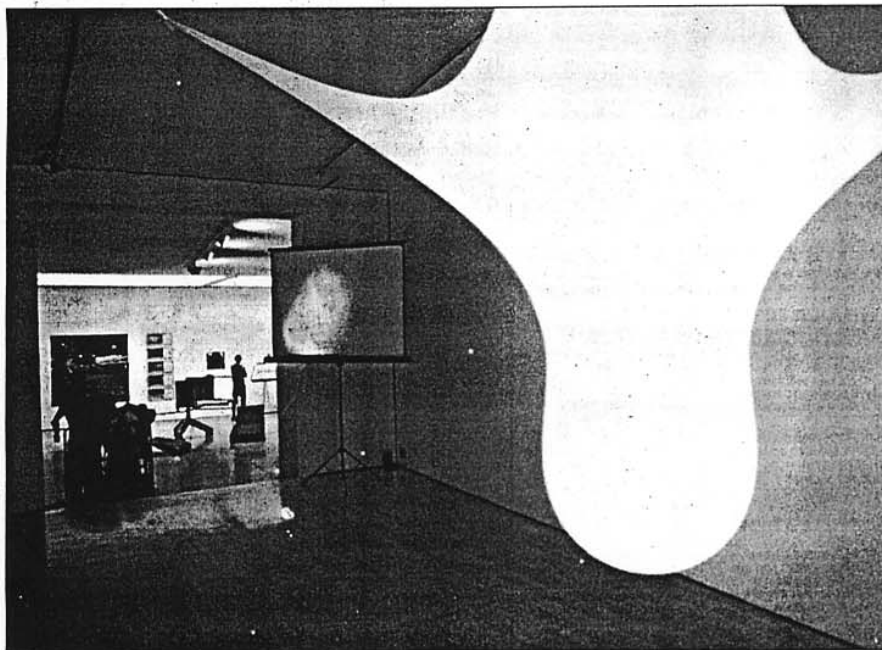
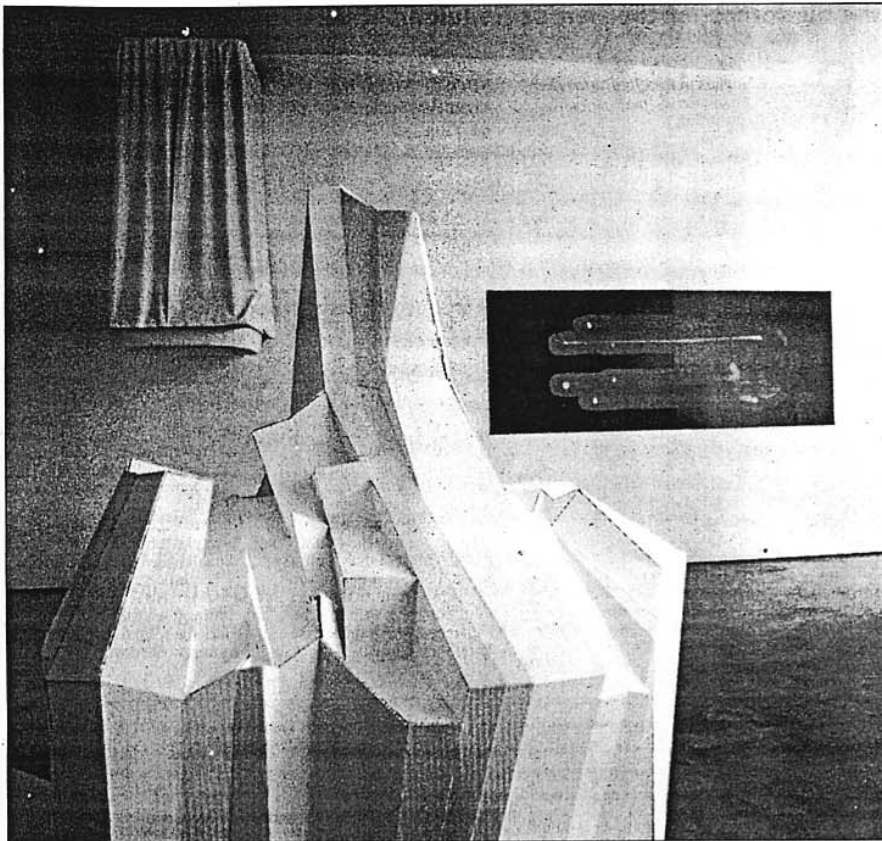
Now that Hammersmith Broadway is an international business centre, it is sometimes a little sad to compare the present scene with the leafy (and salty) past. But though much has gone, much remains, and even the ghost of Thomas Archer's Bradmore House has been dutifully re-embodied to join Frank Matcham's original interior of the Lyric theatre, hoisted up a couple of floors and encased in a modern block, but still in all its late-Victorian splendour once you walk into the auditorium. Bishop's Avenue, SW6 (020-7736 3233) until Sept 24

■ **A DIFFERENT** but no less potent kind of nostalgia is evoked by **Dan Dare at 50**, the current show at the Cartoon Art Trust. On April 14 1950 *The Eagle*, a new magazine for boys, was launched, and its star attraction was a homegrown science-fiction hero, Dan Dare, "Pilot of the Future".

Dan supported the good, comforted the cute (Stripey, the small elephant-like creature, was a constant feature of the series) and dispatched evil as often with a straight right to the jaw as with some fancy ray-gun.

These characters and their worlds were essentially the invention of Frank Hampson, whose work is described by Terry Jones in the catalogue as "one of the great creations of Twentieth Century imaginative literature". The show illustrates vividly the back-up of detailed research which went into the strip, as well as the fine economy with which it was drawn.

7 Brunswick Centre, WC1 (020-7278 7172) until Sept 8  
John Russell Taylor



Vanmechelen's *The Cosmopolitan Chicken*; Stefan Nikolaev's wall-mounted shower unit overlooking a piece by Matt O'Dell; and Petroc Sesti's *Untitled*

orn, and even futile. melancholy hangs ferman's contribuscule silver-plated re a fly called Hen-to live. By the time is claustrophobic hapless Henry d or died. I could f him, and only a of miniature toast oor testified to his ice. piranhas swimming

**Vanmechelen's  
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round John Latham's fish tank still seemed vigorous enough. He has given them submerged texts to read, but the piranhas appeared far too caught up in their predatory fantasies to notice the cerebral words installed in the water. They talk of *The Incidental Person*, a long-standing Latham obsession, and declare that "during the past year cosmological theory has begun to affirm the primacy of Event". He goes on to wonder if such a devel-

opment will aid "human self-understanding". Upstairs, though, scepticism gives way to purposeful experimentation with the natural world. A whole room is given over to an elaborate exercise in inter-breeding. Koen Vanmechelen, a young artist who rears chickens in the Belgian countryside, confronts us with a loudly crowing cockerel and three hens in a carefully constructed coop. By extensive breeding between nations, he

aims to produce a truly "Cosmopolitan Chicken". The genealogy of his experiments is disclosed in words and photographs on the walls, but the real focus of his complicated, noisy installation is surely the incubator. Here, the definitive European chicken may soon be hatched, bringing art and genetics into a closer, more edible alliance than ever before. ● *A Shot in the Head is at the Lisson Gallery, London NW1 (020-7724 2739, until Sept 9*