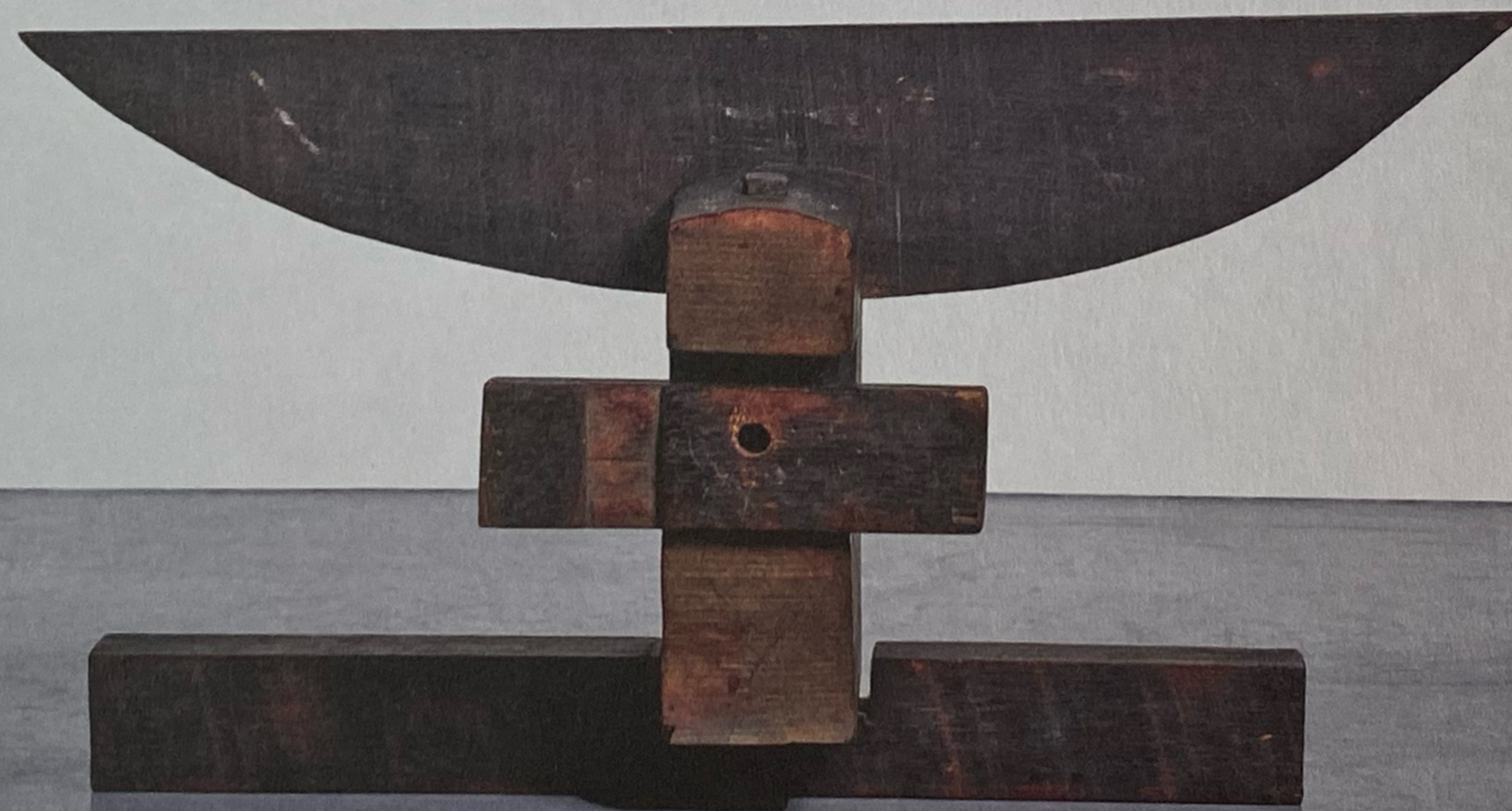


Revisiting Modern British Art



EDITED BY JO BARING

The 'Imagination' section displayed in an adjacent gallery was centred on the LYC Museum and Art Gallery founded by artist Li Yuan-chia as an art-work in its own right, as well as a hub for nurturing art & community. Li first arrived in the UK at the invitation of fellow artist David Medalla to exhibit at Signals (1964–6), the gallery Medalla co-founded with Paul Keeler, Gustav Metzger and Marcello Salvadori.²⁶ Signals existed for only two years; but in that short period, it became London's foremost forum for the international avant-garde. Underpinned by an ethos of inquiry, exchange and collaboration across disciplinary and geographic boundaries, it introduced a conservative British art world to an extraordinary group of artists working in experimental ways, including Lygia Clark, Li Yuan-chia, Hélio Oiticica, Mira Schendel, Jesús Rafael Soto and Takis.

Speech Acts was an invitation to generate new stories and expand existing ones through making use of existing collections and archival material. It was an attempt to break the repetitive cycle of telling the same stories that has been dominant in history writing and exhibition making. Recent prominent examples of this tendency include the exhibition *Conceptual Art in Britain, 1964–79* (2016), that gave no account of the work of Araeen, Medalla or Li; or a scholarly study, *London's New Scene: Art and Culture in the 1960s*, that devotes one paragraph of its 400-plus pages to Signals while agreeing with, and quoting, Guy Brett's charge that the contributions of Signals and the artists it engaged with have been 'overlooked or marginalised'.²⁷

Reassuringly there are signs of a new urge to enter into a more critical and questioning engagement

with the past. Notable recent examples include: *All Too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life* (2018) which inserted the Indian-born Francis Newton Souza (1924–2002) into British art's canon of figurative painters.²⁸ An intriguing intervention was *Haegue Yang: Strange Attractors* (2020–21) where Yang, in dialogue with her own works in a solo exhibition, traced a genealogy of abstraction in Britain through a selection of works by Barbara Hepworth, Naum Gabo and Li Yuan-chia.²⁹

The exhibition at Tate Britain, *Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s – Now* (2021–22), places many of the artists that were included in *The Other Story* in a powerful story about the influence of the Caribbean diaspora on Britain's visual culture.³⁰ I see *Postwar Modern: New Art in Britain, 1945–65* (2022) at London's Barbican Centre, which also includes the work of several *The Other Story* artists in an expansive narrative of postwar British art, as 'one of the first, though long-overdue, institutional attempts in London to answer Araeen's call – not to elucidate art's "other stories" but to present Britain as a site of encounter where artistic practices and art's histories became entangled and enriched'.³¹

These last examples are a hopeful indication of a fresh impetus to long-term collective effort towards history writing and exhibition making as a form of repair.³² This effort has the capacity for more expansive accounts of works by artists such as Araeen, Li, Lim, Medalla, Shemza and Aubrey Williams (1926–90), and the potential to transform our understanding of British art – to make us question concepts like abstraction, conceptualism and modernism that we thought we knew.

NATALIE RUDD

CHAPTER 11

BACK TO THE FUTURE: MODERN BRITISH IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Many artists working in the UK today have drawn upon the legacies of modern British art to drive their work forward. Through a process of looking back, artists have established intriguing dialogues across time and place, breaking new ground. Together, these contemporary interventions challenge persistent perceptions of modern British art as unfashionable or dowdy, incapable of inspiring radical influence or sway. Acknowledging the enduring relevance of modern British art enables new narratives and assured legacies to move into view.

Artists working today approach British modernism from a critically engaged position, not from a standpoint of nostalgia or patriotism. The curators Alex Farquharson and Andrea Schlieker observed this trend in the exhibition catalogue for *British Art Show 6* (2006): 'In these post-Postmodern days, artists are retrieving certain Modernist tropes and inspecting them under the light of contemporary values to see to what use they may be put in very different times. Unexpected hybrids result from these experiments.'¹ Of course, the conscious remixing of source material has a longer heritage. Artists have always looked to other artists for inspiration; it was Marcel Duchamp who established an open and playful approach to sampling, assuming a magpie attitude when borrowing from other sources. Taking a cue from Duchamp, artists today continue to sample, quote and namecheck. The appropriation of modern British art, however, should be acknowledged as one thread within a global fabric of cultural allusion.

BATON PASSES

The most straightforward way of securing artistic legacy is through direct dialogue with the next generation. Many British artists have enjoyed successful careers as teachers. Teaching not only provides a

FIG.97 Olivia Bax, *Kingpin*, 2020
Steel, polystyrene, chicken wire, foam, newspaper,
UV resistant PVA, paint, plaster, funnels,
powder coated steel stands
270 × 450 × 250 cm (106 ¼ × 177 × 98 ½ in)
The Ingram Collection



useful source of income but it also creates a forum for sharing skills and ideas with emerging artists. The trajectory of the British sculptor, Phyllida Barlow, offers an intriguing insight into teacher-pupil interactions. Barlow encountered unhinged sexism on her first day at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, back in 1963, when her tutor, the sculptor Reg Butler, proclaimed: '... because you are a woman, I'm not that interested, because by the time you're thirty you will be having babies and making jam'. Fortunately, Barlow had the tenacity to circumnavigate this discrimination, finding a mentor in sculptor George Fullard (1923–73), her former tutor from Chelsea School of Art, who reassured her that 'women will actually be the major artistic drive in a few years'.² Fullard was a charismatic figure, committed to supplanting dogma with fresh thinking. As Barlow recollects:

Worn out processes were revitalised through new descriptions: casting was magical because, like a conjuring trick, an object is made to disappear and then reappear in a completely different material; welding was as facile as sticking with glue and should therefore be used only in an emergency; wood was alive; metal was like paper and could be treated like fabric for dressmaking; and clay was mud. And on and on it went. ...³

Fullard encouraged his students to seek inspiration from beyond the art world. He cited Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin and *Tom & Jerry* cartoons as important sources of absurd everyday encounters, material collisions and happy accidents. It is easy to discern the influence of Fullard's teaching on Barlow's sculpture, not in a particular motif or process, but through a shared spirit of insistent, playful material adventure. It is also important to acknowledge Barlow's own contribution to teaching. As Professor of Fine Art at the Slade, Barlow taught many artists including Martin Creed (b.1968), Douglas Gordon (b.1966) and Rachel Whiteread.

Working as a studio assistant for a more established artist can provide fruitful opportunities for mentorship and ideas exchange. There are many examples of this apprenticeship model, including Rachel Whiteread's initial assistance to Alison Wilding (b.1948), and Rana Begum's (b.1977) former support to Tess Jaray (b.1937). The sculptor Anthony Caro

(who himself assisted Henry Moore during the early 1950s), employed a succession of artist assistants from 1966 until the end of his life. Remarking somewhat flippantly that he was 'absolutely useless at making things', Caro employed recent graduates and emerging artists to help fabricate his sculptures; however he also sought to create a collaborative working environment based on discussion and engagement.⁴ As Caro commented in 2010, 'Relationships do play a part in my work. When an assistant starts out there is not much of a relationship, but this grows as time goes on.'⁵ For Caro, the artist-assistant relationship worked best when it was built on two-way dialogue and mutual learning. The London-based sculptor Olivia Bax (b.1988) began working in the studio towards the end of Caro's life in 2010. Bax's brightly-coloured, lyrical sculptures comprise steel armatures, which she augments using found objects, chicken wire and pulped newspapers (FIG.97). For Bax, the experience of working in Caro's studio was transformative:

My work changed so much in the three years that I worked with him. When I first started my preferred material was steel, but I got curious about other materials – probably because I was around steel all the time. I found it interesting that he didn't really care about how materials were joined. He was like a composer. He was very good at directing people and material to make a composition, but whether that bit of steel was bolted or welded wasn't really a concern ... that became the important thing for me in my studio – what's the most outrageous way of joining two materials ...?⁶

CONTESTATIONS

Some aspects of modern British art have become a source of enduring controversy and contestation. Unsurprisingly, the 'big boys' have attracted the greatest scrutiny: there have been many attempts to bring looming giants down a peg or two. The British sculptor, Henry Moore, enjoyed global recognition during his lifetime; his reputation towered over the international art scene like an immovable monolith. Not everyone felt comfortable with the sheer extent of Moore's reach. In 1967, 41 artists signed a strongly worded letter to express their

FIG.98 Simon Starling, *Infestation Piece* (*Musselled Moore*), 2006–8
Installation view at The Power Plant, Toronto, 2008
Steel sculpture based on Henry Moore's
Warrior with Shield (1953–4), zebra mussels, plinth
162.6 × 76.2 × 76.2 cm (64 × 30 × 30 in)
The Artist and The Modern Institute



outrage at Moore's proposal to donate an extensive selection of his work to the Tate. Previous assistants (including Anthony Caro and Phillip King) and former pupils (Elisabeth Frink and Eduardo Paolozzi) added their names to the letter, fearing that the gift would eclipse exhibition opportunities for younger artists. The proposal was reluctantly withdrawn.

In 2014, a major exhibition titled *Body & Void: Echoes of Moore in Contemporary Art* was held at the Henry Moore Foundation, Perry Green. Accompanied by a substantial publication, the exhibition assessed the influence of Moore's work on 18 (mostly male) artists including Damien Hirst (b.1965), Des Hughes (b.1970) and Bruce Nauman (b.1941). Intriguingly, many of the artist statements in the publication refer to memories of early encounters with Moore's ubiquitous work. As the Glasgow-based artist, Simon Starling (b.1967), recalled: 'His huge bronzes seemed to drop from the sky in great meteor showers and felt in my young mind rather clumsy and anachronistic, even provincial.' Using research-based processes, Starling has exposed the institutional and, at times, problematic nature of Moore's influence. The idea for *Infestation Piece* (*Musselled Moore*) (2006–8) (FIG.98) emerged during a 2005 visit to Toronto, during which Starling visited the gallery dedicated to the display of Moore's gift of over 40 works to the Art Gallery of Ontario. Starling was particularly intrigued by Moore's *Warrior with Shield* (1953–4). The acquisition of this work resulted from the insistent advocacy of Anthony Blunt – Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures and Director of the Courtauld Institute who was exposed as a Russian spy. Starling submerged a steel copy of *Warrior with Shield* into Lake Ontario. Two years later, the work was carefully recovered from the waters, its surface intricately encrusted with a colony of zebra mussels. This invasive species first entered Canadian waterways during the Cold War, spluttered out with the wastewater from cargo ships travelling from the Black Sea. Starling's laden replica embodies natural and cultural processes of colonisation, lifting the lid on another side of modern British art: the dodgy backroom deals, dubious connections, and entrenched systems of power and influence.

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FIG.99 Glenn Brown, *Decline and Fall*, 1995
Oil and canvas on board
58.4 × 54.6 cm (23 × 21 ½ in)
Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

REVIVALS

The conscious use of appropriated imagery enables conceptual leaps across time and place. The artist Glenn Brown (b.1966) scours art history in search of source material for his paintings. He works from mass-produced reproductions, barely concealing his tracks. Brown has drawn inspiration from the German-British painter Frank Auerbach (b.1931), who is renowned for his gestural and expressive use of impasto painting techniques. *Decline and Fall* (1995) ruminates on a small section of one of Auerbach's many portraits of Juliet Yardley Mills (FIG.99). Devoid of Auerbach's trademark encrusted surfaces, Brown's version has a smooth, seamless appearance, painstakingly articulated using fine brushes. Each craggy crevice is rendered with flat, photorealist precision to create a macabre presence. As the artist has explained:

The overriding mood of the 1990s was that 'painting is dead'; conceptual art and photography had killed it. ... If painting was, in fact, dead then what better place for a young artist brought up on the isolated flatlands of Norfolk with a liking for gothic horror to be, than in its morgue? Pulling out books from a library shelf was like pulling out the recorded lives of the irrelevant, the ignored and the deceased. Auerbach's paintings seemed to have a ready atmosphere of the graveyard. My slowly painted detail encapsulates the flesh of the figure like a painstaking autopsy.⁸

The title of Brown's work alludes to Edward Gibbon's epic treatise, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1766–88), extending Brown's reflections on individual decline to embrace collective narratives of loss.

The use of appropriation to fuse past and present narratives underpins the art of Keith Coventry (b.1958). Working across painting, sculpture and curation, Coventry blends art-historical references with contemporary social issues. His bronze casts of crack pipes, for example, recall the exquisite still life paintings of Giorgio Morandi; aerial plans of social housing estates appear as abstract Russian constructivist compositions. Despite these attempts at disguise, the utopian ideals of modern art fail to



FIG.100 Keith Coventry, *Girl Waiting at the Entrance* (from the series *Echoes of Albany*), 2004
Oil on canvas, wood, gesso and glass
82.5 × 72.5 cm (32½ × 28½ in)
Private Collection

restrain the narratives of social discontent and collective failure bubbling beneath the surface. In 2004, Coventry turned his attention to W.R. Sickert's *Echoes* – a series of over one hundred loosely painted works inspired by genre illustrations found in old copies of *Illustrated London News*. Coventry responded with *Echoes of Albany*, a series of 42 paintings produced using Sickert's late, loose style (FIG.100). Each work features a snatched vignette, a suggestion of a lewd encounter partially explained: opulent furniture, women in a state of undress, suited men looming in the shadows. Each scene is captured using a claustrophobic claret palette. The setting for these works is Albany, the infamous 18th-century apartment block in London's Piccadilly, where Coventry himself had once lived. Coventry's deliberate jumbling of past and present within the context of one building operates as a kind of haunting: suggesting longstanding connections between creativity, debauchery and abuse of power.

A reconstructive impulse has also informed recent exhibition making. Several important shows have investigated points of connectivity between modern British art and contemporary practice.

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The *Early One Morning* exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in 2002 was timed to coincide with a display of *New Generation* sculpture at Tate Britain, enabling a gentle thread to connect the coloured, abstract sculpture of the 1960s with the work of a younger generation of sculptors including Jim Lambie (b.1964) and Eva Rothschild (b.1971).⁹ Artists have also made curatorial interventions into collections of modern British art. *Unpopular Culture*, Grayson Perry's (b.1960) 2008 curated exhibition from the Arts Council Collection, delved into the holdings of postwar painting, photography and sculpture to explore British art 'before it became fashionable'. In the accompanying catalogue, Perry wrote of his desire to reflect 'a picture of British culture when life was slower and when, maybe, we were more reflective, more civic and more humane'.¹⁰ The experience of curating the exhibition prompted Perry to make a number of new works including *Head of a Fallen Giant* (2007–8), an intricate bronze which pays homage to the work of Eduardo Paolozzi, William Turnbull and nods mischievously to Damien Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull. Perry also designed a commemorative silk headscarf to mark the exhibition, adorning it with 25 intricate portraits of modern British artists including Elisabeth Frink and John Piper.

WILDCARDS

When considering the various ways in which artistic influence operates, it is important not to overlook how a lightning flash from another source can spark a new direction or idea. Drawing inspiration from another artist need not be all-encompassing. It can be light touch and fleeting: moments of synergy spanning otherwise disparate practices.

In 2006, contemporary British artist Lucy Skaer took the impulsive decision to visit the aging British-born surrealist artist Leonora Carrington, at her home in Mexico. Despite Carrington's lack of response to an initial letter, Skaer took the risk of turning up unannounced, armed with tea and cakes. After some initial reserve, Carrington engaged in conversation about her art and life, and agreed to be captured on camera. At less than one minute long, the resulting 16mm film, *Leonora (The Joker)* (2006) is as fleeting as it is silent. It lingers on Carrington's demonstrative hands, her



FIG.101 Lucy Skaer, *Leonora (The Tyrant)*, 2006
Oak table with inlaid mother of pearl
72 × 76 × 49 cm (28½ × 30 × 19¼ in)
Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

face mouthing words, her humble domestic surroundings. Although the meeting and the film add little to our overall understanding of Carrington, they occupy a special place in Skaer's practice. She perceives them as 'wild cards' – opportunities to apply Carrington's interest in irrationality to her own working processes.¹¹ Skaer responded with several works featuring surreal collisions of unlikely objects, with each work sharing its name with a tarot card. A particularly striking example is *Leonora (The Tyrant)* (2006), an antique table inlaid with mother-of-pearl silhouettes capturing Carrington's active hands (FIG.101). The work draws attention to the origins of materials and their association with British antique furniture. As Skaer has explained: '... all these tropical hardwoods and Pacific mother-of-pearl shell. I wanted the table to reflect the tyrannical stages of early colonialism.'¹²

Material connections across place and time provide a strong point of connection between Barbara Hepworth and the Montserrat-born British sculptor, Veronica Ryan (b.1956). Ryan has held an interest in Hepworth's work for many years, having read about her sculpture at school and later becoming the first artist-in-residence at Hepworth's Palais de Danse studio in St Ives (1998–2000). Ryan recalls the comfort of working in a space infused by Hepworth's presence: 'It's rather like having a friendly muse around ... I feel as though I have got Barbara Hepworth's approval.'¹³ The discovery of a magnolia tree in Hepworth's garden sparked a web of connections and personal memories. Magnolia pods bear a striking resemblance to soursop fruit, which Ryan had first encountered on a visit to Montserrat during her childhood, and which her mother had scoured specialist markets to source on her arrival in the UK. The underlying organic structures of these fruits also reminded Ryan of Hepworth's sensuous, undulating forms. Ryan's initial response was to work in marble, using donated offcuts from Hepworth's studio.¹⁴ A recent commission to mark the exhibition *Barbara Hepworth: Art & Life* at The Hepworth Wakefield has led to lighter, more playful responses, with small accumulations of objects presented on shelves, suspended from the ceiling, or pinned to the walls of the gallery dedicated to the permanent display of Hepworth's plasters (FIG.102). Hepworth's influence unfurls in subtle yet insistent ways across these

works. It is possible to discern a shared interest in casting and interior space. A mutual fascination with stringed forms is also visible: Ryan has woven coloured fishing line into intricate nets using techniques gleaned from fishermen on a 2019 residency at Porthmeor Studios, St Ives. In drawing inspiration from female predecessors, both Veronica Ryan and Lucy Skaer highlight the important contributions made by women to the discourses of modern British art.

Although Skaer and Ryan each undertook a kind of pilgrimage to the residences and workplaces of their chosen artists, distant travel is not essential for discovering 'wild card' influences. There are many connections to be made through quiet encounters with materials and a willingness to attune to surrounding echoes. The British painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (b.1977) makes the daily journey to her studio in East London. Her luscious paintings of Black people engaged in acts of repose and deep reflection have received international recognition in recent years. With a nod to the swagger portraiture of John Singer Sargent, and an appreciative glance back to Édouard Manet's painterly command of the picture surface, Yiadom-Boakye's canvases combine grandeur and sensuality with her own acute narrative awareness (FIG.103). She paints wet on wet, preferring to complete a painting in the same day. Her figures lean and drape with bored insouciance, often preoccupied or emerging from shadows. Whose ghost resides here? Again, it is W.R. Sickert – an artist whose paintings remain as fresh as the day they were painted, wet on wet, inspiring successive generations of artists, including Yiadom-Boakye. Fleeting speckles of light. Areas of dark recess. And those figures: languorous, listless; world weary with ennui. Yiadom-Boakye and Sickert: a most unlikely pairing, yet their paintings bristle with a shared understanding of the joyful immediacies of paint.

One thing is certain: modern British art is not the musty, overlooked corner of art history, but rather an active driver of contemporary ideas. Ultimately, however, the terrain remains delightfully unregulated, driven by personal interests and choices. There are many journeys still to take. Travelling back in time to explore echoes and ghosts enables us to catch sight of the future.

REVISITING MODERN BRITISH ART

AINDREA EMELIFE

CHAPTER 12

A PERSONAL CALL FOR A MORE EXPANSIVE BRITISH ART

The 20th century ushered in a time of unexpected freedom of expression – art sought to break the rules that had previously made up the foundations of our visual art consciousness. This autonomy of thinking and expression was explored with varied agendas, some complementary, some jarring against each other. British art made during this time is full-bodied, multifaceted and richly diverse. So, why has art history thought of it so singularly? British art has often been criticised for its provincialism. Can there really be a common theme to art made in one place? In its most literal sense British art is art made on these isles, but in this, how do we collect the art of Black British, Asian, and female perspectives, amongst the horses and aristocratic portraits in gilded frames and tie it up neatly in a Union Jack printed bow? What connects us?

We still find it valuable to consider art in national categories, but I am interested to understand how these labels have and currently enable or disable our understanding of the mobility of art, and how these established notions of time, style and influence have hindered a more expansive consideration of modern British art. Critical issues of race, class and gender have enlivened our approaches to art history – is there still value in identifying works of art as British, and why has nationalism been the first and foremost categorisation?

Britain's multiculturalism is one of its great selling points, and when we scratch at the surface of British art, we realise that this multiculturalism is nothing new – yet why does it not typify the canon? It is without doubt that Britain, which has been undergoing a long identity crisis, has had trouble accepting the varying definitions of what it means to be British. It is infinitely interesting that it is not just me, as a Black Briton, or other minorities that face this patriotic questioning. How can our artists face the scrutiny and prove their patriotism – must they? Do they want to? Is there anything to being a British artist? Why must