

# ArtReview

## **British Art Show 7: In the Days of the Comet** **Various venues, Nottingham** **23 October - 9 January**

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By Martin Herbert

The first British Art Show, held in 1979, featured 112 artists: the trend has been broadly reductionist ever since, with the current manifestation yoking together 39 participants. If survey shows on this condensed scale begin to look like they might support themes, BAS curators are rarely so foolhardy as to announce any, and BAS7's are no exception. Lisa Le Feuvre and Tom Morton instead privilege the poetic over the programmatic: their subtitle, taken from a 1906 H.G. Wells novel in which a comet visits and transforms a dystopian earth via a greenish fog, gestures expansively towards time, recurrence and beclouded moments of change. (One should, nevertheless, see such literary semiobscurantism as characteristic of our cultural moment.) A long view suggests that history consists of nothing but transitional moments. Perhaps, however - and the art forwarded here often suggests it - some moments are more transitional than others.

Few except outright contrarians are going to argue overmuch with BAS7's list of artists, which has shaken out not only in the curators' brainpans but in the pages of art magazines and in biennials, in prize shortlists and on the schedules of European kunsthallen over the past half-decade. Eloquently oblique newbies like Becky Beasley and Juliette Blightman? Check. Air-mile accumulators like Tris Vonna-Michell and Emily Wardill? Yup. Turner Prize-approved pros like Wolfgang Tillmans and Roger Hioms? Uh-huh. Regal old farts like Alasdair Gray (whose lovely, anecdotal portrait drawings are knowingly placed next to Charles Avery's Gray-esque bulletins from invented lands) and, in the shape of Sarah Lucas, an untopped holdover from British art's previous triumphalist phase? Present and correct. It's actually nice to have one or two examples of vexatious clubbishness to wrinkle one's nose at. Nevertheless, airily installed across three venues - Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Nottingham Contemporary and New Art Exchange (and later touring to London, Glasgow and Plymouth under the aegis of its organisers, Hayward Touring) - BAS7 does its job: it makes this look like a vivacious moment for art made in Britain or by Britons.

Yet its strength is not so much in brash confidence as in, almost paradoxically, a collective expression of anxiety and incompleteness, an accumulation of reflexive fluxions. For extended stretches, certitude fissures beneath our feet whether in the imploding history lesson of Duncan Campbell's filmic documentary collage about Northern Irish firebrand activist Bernadette Devlin (Bernadette. 2008); the barely-there urban and rural field recordings accumulated in Luke Fowler's quivering film *A Grammar for Listening* (Part 1) (2009); or the articulately voiced bruised idealism in Ian Kiaer's conflation of weary-looking neominimalist canvases and scatterings of floor-bound objects (from blank circular name tags to architectural models) with supplementary references to estranged Soviet architect Konstantin Melnikov. Miscommunication underwrites Nathaniel Mel-lors's genre-pureeing film - arthouse sitcom? - *Ourhouse* (2010), in which, echoing Pasolini's 1968 film *Teorema* (albeit minus all the sex), an outsider figure named "The Object" controls speech-acts

in country pile. Painting, here, leans towards a space outside of language altogether, whether through Milena Dragicevic's knotty conjunctions of portraits and appended objects or glimmering refractions of being-in-the-world: Phoebe Unwin's semiabstractions, for example, are ghosted by those of Howard Hodgkin.

One might contend that passing through all this and feeling it stack up is like watching something big and indistinct shearing foggily away, and something else being tentatively birthed: the latter conjecture exemplified by works like Spartacus Chetwynd's *The Folding House* (2010), a dirty-modernist, Rietveld-esque platform fashioned from old windowpanes that pragmatically posits a future constructed from wreckage. One might also contend that this is a seriously pretentious way to interpret an art exhibition. Whatever: BAS7 is sufficiently spacious and controlled, mapless and nudging to precipitate the lapse.