

Mining Couture – Huddersfield Art Gallery

16 June – 11 August

Reviewed by Robert Clark

Mining Couture is neither one thing nor another. It is neither here nor there. On entering the installation an appropriate response might be bemusement. It is not clear what kind of exhibition this is. Despite the obligatory wall-mounted introductory texts, the visitor is left uncertain as to where the artist Barber Swindells (in fact the collaborative duo Claire Barber and Steve Swindells) is coming from, what she/he is getting at, what the point of the show is.

On closer inspection and reflection one can identify a mix-up of all kinds of disparate disciplines. There are elements of clothes design, drawing, documentary video, photography, sculpture, nature studies, bouncy castle construction, social anthropology. There are references to the posh finesse of haute couture and to the nitty-gritty grind of the mining industry. It's staged in a gallery so it must be art, but it's far from evident what kind of art we are dealing with here.

A video monitor features a collage of fragments ranging through The Pitman Poets, National Coal Queen poses, dressmaking sessions and colliery closures. In an adjacent room a video is projected in blurred focus like an animated Gerhard Richter. On the sidewalls there's an ink and crayon sketch of 24 Hours at the Coalface by Malcolm East and, for some reason, a framed snap of a bull. A glass topped museum vitrine contains an assortment of leather glove exhibits including an exquisite miniature pair, no larger than a fingernail or two. A caption informs us that in 1865 the Yeovil area was producing 421,000 dozen pairs of gloves a year and that fifteen to twenty women, mostly working from home, would be involved in sewing each pair. A notice-board wall is a mass of scraps: dressmaking patterns, sketchbook pages, iconic publicity shots of Marilyn Monroe and Marlon Brando, notes from a countryside trek: "12th October 2011 2oz of acorns picked from a single oak tree by the road to fishing pond."

Then there's the enigmatic central exhibits. One to Twenty reproduces the design of a fireman's leather glove (properly named a Firemaster) on a gigantic scale as a deflated inflatable playground sculpture. Ventilation Dress is a full-scale reproduction of an auxiliary fan (also known as a booster fan) used to boost the air supply to new coal mine seams. This sculptural fan however appears to breathe rhythmically and is clothed in a blue floral dress which is apparently an exact copy of the pattern of a dress once proudly worn by one Margaret Dominiak, the National Coal Queen for 1972. The wall-mounted texts draw my attention to the resemblance between the fan's form and a human lung and mention conceptual clues of interconnection such as 'seams' and 'fresh air', but this could well mystify me even further.

And of course the puzzle gradually emerges as the whole point. Barber Swindells' art isn't meant to mean one thing, to argue an issue, to illustrate a thesis. Its shifting focus and slipping form is a deliberate attempt to open up connections, to ask questions that are at times as imaginatively and even irreverently playful as they are academically seriously and soberly researched. Just fancy coming across that breathing Ventilation Dress spot lit only by a helmet-mounted torch in an otherwise pitch-darkened mine shaft. Try to draw a narrative trajectory between Ventilation Dress and a photograph of Marilyn Monroe with her dress lifted around her thighs by the updraft from a New York subway grill. Then connect these to those petite kidskin gloves and a jotting that reads "Blackberries picked from Snibston 'spoil'." Then again realize that this developing scenario is factually informed by the information that Pit Brow Lass dresses were traditionally dyed from

natural sources collected at Snibston spoil heap, thus affording the local women a very particular look. Something resembling poetry starts to resonate.

The most clearly clashing elements of Barber Swindells works lie in the traditionally mutually exclusive genres of craft design and fine art. One is supposed to deal with practicalities and aesthetic pleasantries, the other with wayward flights of utterly non-utilitarian reverie. Then there's the clash between the clear-cut responsibilities of sociological research and the open-ended improvisations of creative experiment. A further series of dislocations result from the fact that much of the Barber Swindells work was originally created as part of site-specific commissions and residencies at Snibston Discovery Museum and Yeovil Glove Factory before being installed within the culturally hallowed confines of Huddersfield Art Gallery. It's almost as if the artists are attempting to creatively curate their own past work within this very different context. So, if the work looks somewhat out of place, it's perhaps because in fact it is.

Intrepidly Barber Swindells put differing things together to see what happens, what thoughts and interesting quandaries might be catalyzed. This is an art of 'what if?' The art of collage and assemblage has of course a long history stretching back through the 20th century and beyond. When the surrealists championed Lautréamont's chance meeting on an operating table of a sewing machine and an umbrella they recognised an utterly new kind of marvellous beauty. The willed hybrids of surrealism might look somewhat predictable by now, but the aesthetics and thematic implications of collage remain one of the most potent trends of 21st century art. The centre no longer holds. Specialisms are only validated by a broader focus. Our universities are increasingly informed by multi-cultural and cross-associational studies. Mixed and multi-media artists proliferate and often blur the boundaries between documentary fact and fictional make-believe. On a daily basis perception is bombarded by more images and text fragments than at any time during the whole of human history. Artists put this next to that and the other to see what imaginative spark might link the space between them.

If the visitor to Mining Couture initially finds the show bewildering, maybe it's because we live in a state of bewildering cultural multiplicities. The health of our cultural ecology depends on drawing imaginative interrelationships. It's a matter of disorientation and reorientation, of thinking things through anew. Barber Swindells, like any artists worthy of the name, mirror aspects of the world in which we live. Today.

Robert Clark, Arts writer, The Guardian, and, under the name Robert Casselton Clark.

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