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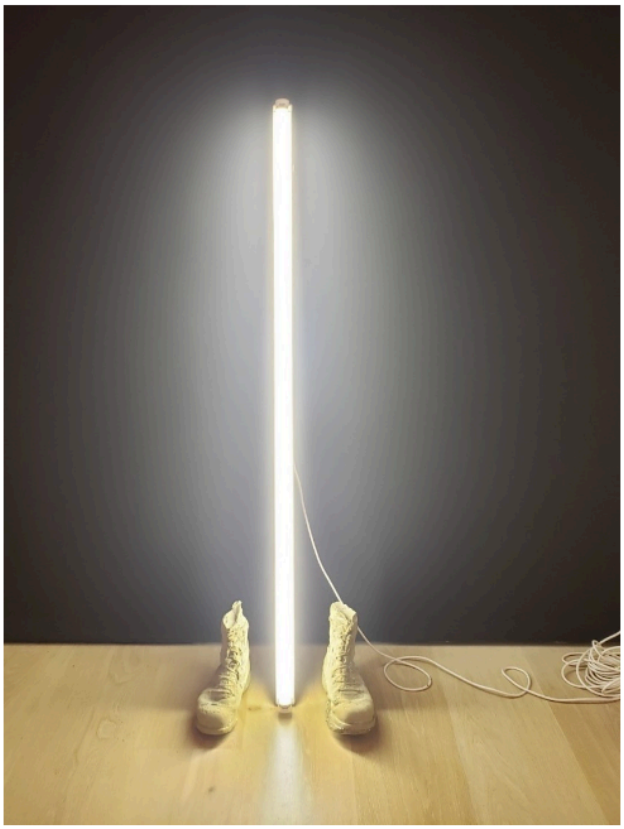

Sarah Lucas, “Unknown Soldier,” 2003, mixed media. (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

As a motivation for making art, sometimes *enough* is enough.

That seems to be one motor driving Sarah Lucas, the cheeky British Conceptual artist whose always smart, often deliriously funny retrospective exhibition is at the UCLA Hammer Museum. More than 130 works in sculpture, photography, collage and video made over the last three decades are brought together in the show,

slightly trimmed from its debut last year at the New Museum in New York, where it was organized.

Lucas is a burlesque maker of double-entendre objects that mow down stereotypes, often around art and sexuality and glancing off the inescapable fact of death. (Don't miss her nifty human skull with a flashy set of gold teeth.) Her profile has been high ever since the so-called Young British Artists, or YBAs, began to be identified as a loose agglomeration determined to upend the placid London art scene in the early 1990s.

It appears that she had had enough of that establishment milieu — and of something in particular about its social and cultural underpinnings. The retrospective is titled "Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel" — natural or naked — and the titular work is emblematic.

The 1994 sculpture "Au Naturel" is composed from found objects. A tatty mattress is pushed up against the wall, one end curled up as if the bed were a slumped figure.

On one side of the bed, a pair of oranges resting at the base of an upright cucumber stands in for excited male genitals. On the other side, two big, ripe melons burst from slits cut into the mattress to form voluptuous breasts, while a tipped-over metal bucket lined up across from those male genitals offers a gaping female counterpart.

Sarah Lucas, "Au Naturel," 1994, mixed media. (UCLA Hammer Museum)

A Roman mythological theme like Cupid and Psyche, doomed but immortal love between a male god and a female human, gets a giant side-eye in Lucas' riotous sculpture. That couple's worldly hopelessness has been elegantly enshrined by countless artists; but an inexplicable poignancy arises from a tacky bunch of ordinary fruits and vegetable — plus that flabbergasting bucket — that enact a fraught and intimate scenario.

Broad physical comedy makes a fundamental, private act into a fearless image of public embarrassment. Yet, the humor also introduces an essential element of fun into the bedroom tableau. Pathos probably shouldn't happen in the face of it — but it does. Perhaps that's because Lucas injects the abashing scene with a submerged note of esteem.

The scrunched-up mattress cannot help but recall Minimalist sculptor Rachel Whiteread, Lucas' respected London colleague. Several mattresses are among her sober, widely admired sculptures of ordinary objects — plus the negative space around and within them — which Whiteread cast in resin, rubber, concrete and

other industrial materials. (Her “Untitled (Double Amber Bed)” was shown at the Hammer in 2010.) She snared Britain’s controversial, closely watched Turner Prize — the first woman to receive the decade-old award — just a year before Lucas made “Au Naturel.”

You might say that, in a marvelously slapstick sort of way, “Au Naturel” added the missing bodies to Whiteread’s somber mattresses, salvaged and transformed into art. Many Lucas works take aim at the gender dynamics of art’s history, landing sassy bull’s-eyes one after the other.

Sarah Lucas, "The Law," 1997, concrete. (Christopher Knight/Los Angeles Times)

“The Law” is a second Whiteread referent, this one a chunky concrete cast of a television monitor standing directly on the floor, as well-behaved Minimalist doctrine insists sculpture must do. “The Law” came a few years after the Turner Prize had been taken over by Channel 4 television. By then, the commercially driven network had whipped up a promotional media frenzy around the event, turning art into a kind of “Survivor” reality game show.

Lucas, who declined to participate in the competition, coughed up an inert, impenetrable block of concrete building material for her stodgy, gray, eminently un-telegenic sculpture. She laid down the law.

A raft of other artists catches Lucas' love-hate acknowledgment as well. Simultaneously admiring her forebears' genuine achievements while making them into occasions for a pratfall, nods go to Jasper Johns, Dan Flavin, John Chamberlain, Louise Bourgeois and Modern "old masters" Henry Moore and Constantin Brancusi, among others.

A pair of ordinary empty beer cans crushed into the interlocking shape of a penis and testicles infuses hints of gay sexuality into the backstory of Johns' famous sculpture of two bronze ale cans.

An upright fluorescent tube leaning against a wall, silently glowing between two work-boots of cast concrete on the floor and suddenly phallic, coaxes out the distinctly masculine, workingman ethos of Minimalism's first generation. (Its zinging title is "Unknown Soldier.")

A massive sculptural phallus resting atop a blocky pedestal of crushed automobile parts brings Bourgeois' psychologically charged hammer down on Chamberlain's smashed up, speed-racer aesthetic of classically minded sculptures made from crushed auto parts.

Perhaps the most eloquent examples are a roomful of coiled sculptures made from women's mesh tights stuffed with kapok. Some are cast in highly polished bronze. Lucas rests the erotically charged forms atop stacks of plain bricks, asserting sensuous organic sculpture's return from the wilderness of cold rectilinear geometry that characterizes Minimalist art.

Sarah Lucas, "NUD 18," 2004, mixed media. (UCLA Hammer Museum)

Sarah Lucas, "Skull," 2000, human skull with gold teeth. (UCLA Hammer Museum)

Also reminiscent of Bourgeois in their knotted, interlaced forms, they channel Brancusi at his "Mademoiselle Pogany" best. Voluptuous forms merge masculine and feminine in shapes that are often punctured with holes. Henry Moore wanted timeless nature to be seen through the signature holes in his monumental, semi-abstract odalisques, but in Lucas' sculptures enduring culture is what gets glimpsed.

The show is installed by affinity among groups of work, rather than chronologically, and the decision was a good one. (Hammer curators Anne Ellegood and Nika Chilewich supervised the installation.) For instance, a number of Lucas sculptures reflect the shape of a bathroom toilet — yes, potty humor evoking "the human form divine."

But the plumbing fixture is also an object with a venerable Modernist art history. It goes back to the beginning of the 20th century in the work of Marcel Duchamp, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Morton Schamberg and Edward Weston.

The wit — potty level or not — is essential. Good jokes elicit an involuntary response, turning a simple gag into an affable power play. The teller takes control of a situation that seems beyond reach. In today's troubled historical moment, that's the primary reason that comedians are currently seen as a powerful political force.

The Hammer show's earliest work grabs onto a couple of low-down clichés and won't let go. The 1990 self-portrait of the artist, photographed wearing a black leather jacket in classic three-quarter view, was shot in artistically "serious" black and white, rather than glossy color. It records her with her mouth wrapped around a peeled banana.

The unsubtle phallic joke ricochets around tropes of corrosive masculinity and feminine empowerment, establishing a leitmotif in the artist's career.

Two years later, she titled her first solo London gallery show "Penis Nailed to a Board." That's also the name of a collage whose subject she gleaned from the text of a scandalous news story about sex-games-gone-wrong among a randy group of white-collar businessmen.

Akin to Andy Warhol's Pop breakthrough in the 1960s, which knocked art's institutionalized status quo off its pedestal, a British tabloid sensibility is a mainstay of her work. In our accelerated media age, the machinery of endless repetition constructs recalcitrant social realities and makes changing them hard.

Pithy self-portrait photographs are among the most revealing works. “Smoking” is a favorite, its 6-foot-by-4-foot dimensions those of a confrontational painting.

Lucas shows herself reclining, head at the bottom of the frame. Cigarette smoke shoots upward, exhaled through her nose. Like a topsy-turvy human volcano ready to erupt, Lucas presents herself as a recumbent mix of smoldering sensuality and rising anger — Venus Vesuvius.

And like that photo, the show packs an unexpected punch. That’s because, in Los Angeles, Lucas is known mostly second-hand. This is her first solo exhibition in the city, according to the show’s catalog. Happily, it pulls out all the stops.