

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jo Applin, "Sarah Lucas," *Artforum*, February 2014.

## LONDON

### Sarah Lucas

WHITECHAPEL GALLERY

Not many shows manage to make you laugh, snort, wince, giggle, and blush in the space of a few minutes, nor do they convince and compel both wittily and emphatically. But Sarah Lucas's exhibition "SITUATION Absolute Beach Man Rubble"—a crammed, busy, and riotous affair from start to finish—managed all this and more. The nascent anger of Lucas's work, which picks away at the social, political, and economic fabric of lives lived in the dirty underbelly of Thatcher's Britain, was in stark and startling evidence throughout. Lucas's familiar references to postwar and contemporary British life dominated the galleries; iconic works on display included a Minimalist mobile of cast-concrete tinned meat pies (*Pie Mobile*, 2002), a toilet plunked atop a concrete cinder-block base (*Old In Out [saggy version]*, 1998), and an enormous, kitschy toby jug (*Richard*, 2004), which sat as a comic sentinel at the entrance to the show. Brilliantly curated by Whitechapel director Iwona Blazwick, this was Lucas's first major solo exhibition in London on a scale that allowed her work room to breathe, enabling her individual and idiosyncratic vision of Albion to come vividly into view.

The main gallery was transformed into one enormous domestic environment, lending it the appearance of a stage set for a farce. It included a range of Lucas's best-known and recent works, while the MDF and cinder-block furniture was combined with freestanding walls placed throughout the space (these partitions are part of

View of "Sarah Lucas," 2013.



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the "Modular Furniture" series, 2013–) to split the unwieldy arrangement of objects—everything from toilets, light bulbs, and mattresses to fried eggs and slabs of meat—into a series of run-down living rooms, bathrooms, and bedrooms. The eggs were cooked fresh every morning for Lucas's increasingly grubby sculpture *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab*, 1992, and the acrid smell, in combination with the scent of the store-bought kebabs, lingered throughout the day.

Patriarchy is a major target of Lucas's recent work; she lampoons, ridicules, and deflates the aggressive pomposity and power of the phallus as it is endlessly rehashed in popular culture. The last room of the show was dominated by two enormous, austere, cannon-like cocks and a series of phallic figures in the style of Henry Moore mounted on concrete bases. Lucas has a deliciously childish glee for all things bodily, mucky, and rude—"NUDS," 2009–, a recent series of bundled knots of stuffed-stocking sausages, being a perfect case in point. Elsewhere in the show, the pumping, pink, zeppelin-like arm of *Mechanical Wanker*, 1999, cranked away as a noisy sound track to Lucas's early, important work *Sod You Gits*, 1990—a blown-up double-page spread from low-rent porn-pop tabloid the *Sunday Sport* featuring a story about a female dwarf stripper. In another, more abstract though no less absurd register, a large sculpture with a multitude of stuffed-stocking "breasts" bunched together onto a mesh-wire frame was laugh-out-loud funny. Titled *Nice Tits*, 2011, after the stereotypical and dreaded street catcall, it is magisterial and goddess-like, a magnificent wall of bustling boobs towering above a pair of oversize silver disco boots. Feminism has always been part of Lucas's work, though at times it is more in focus than in others. Here, grabbing such stupid macho phrases by the balls, she shows us just how ridiculous they are.

Lucas wears her politics lightly, yet her scathing criticism of Thatcher's Conservative Britain of the 1980s is no less relevant today, in a time of increasing political and economic divisions. While the show reminds us of Lucas's enduring fondness for the saucy, seaside-postcard humor of postwar Britain, most important is what that popular, familiar language enables her to do and say. Lucas prefers a wink and a nod to polemical browbeating, and her witty commentary on contemporary life is more powerful for that.

—Jo Applin