

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Gabriel Coxhead, "Sarah Lucas," *Modern Painters*, February 2014.

LONDON

Sarah Lucas

Whitechapel Gallery // October 2–December 15, 2013

SINCE COMING TO prominence as part of the YBA generation in the early '90s, Lucas has always divided opinion. Admirers claim that her work has an unsettling, puerile directness—a sort of "so stupid it's clever" vibe. Detractors, meanwhile, think her work is just stupid. The fascinating thing about this retrospective is that it confirms both positions at once, the first half of the show being quite remarkable, the second utterly execrable.

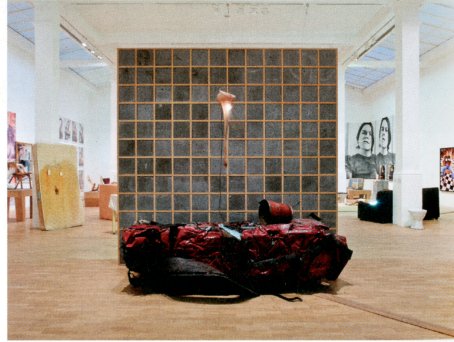
To be sure, her work is crude and confrontational. It asserts a basic, palpable truth, which is that our relationship to our bodies, to our sexuality, to the fleshy, physical stuff of existence, is desperately fraught and problematic, and inevitably mediated by culture—and then proceeds to repeat this basic truth as many times and in as many different ways as possible.

Hence, in the main gallery, the numerous surrogates for bodies and sexual organs that recur throughout her sculptures and photographs: fried eggs or lightbulbs suggesting breasts, splayed across a table or jammed into the wire mesh of a sofa bed; a neon tube phallically penetrating a sofa cushion or a cigar stub wilting on a toilet-bowl rim; the reeking kipper that's British slang for vagina. Hence, too, the obsession with the transgressive or scatological that characterizes her kinetically masturbating armature, her images of defecation, her cigarettes

clutched in concrete fists. And although she's extremely adept at transforming everyday materials into uncanny objects, she tends to use the same technique over and over—particularly her stuffed, tan-colored tights, horribly suggestive of pallid skin, which she stretches across chairs

to form parodic bunny figures in pieces from the '90s and later on knots into endless variations of abstract intestinal tangles or ballooning tit clusters.

In short, as individual pieces, her work too often seems blatant or repetitious. But here her works aren't displayed as individual pieces. Instead, viewers have to carefully thread themselves through a vast, immersive environment in which works from different periods are mixed together. The result, it has to be said, is completely revelatory—a debauched, carnivalesque mise-en-scène, a cacophony of perspectives that continually interrupt each other. Sculptures rise lewdly from the floor or hang sordidly from the ceiling, enlarged newspaper stories scream obscenities, and self-portrait photographs are mounted over penis-themed wallpapers.



Other pieces, tall cinderblock walls and sharp concrete benches, lend a note of control and repression, yet the overwhelming sense is of being adrift and unmoored. Objects bleed into images, and images into words—a sort of free-floating, libidinous, polymorphous state, where fixations upon singular works are only ever temporary.

In the upstairs gallery, however, the show totally goes to pot. It doesn't help that her weakest, glibbest pieces are here: her portraits made from glued cigarettes. But beyond that, with her newest works consisting of more stuffed-tights objects cast rather pointlessly into bronze, as well as some teetering, giant penis obelisks, all presented singly, the show immediately reverts to appearing atomized and obvious, clunkingly familiar.

—Gabriel Coxhead

Sarah Lucas
Installation
view of
"Situation
Absolute
Beach Man
Rubble," 2013.

FROM TOP: ADAM CHOIZKO AND MARLBOROUGH CONTEMPORARY; STEPHEN WHITE