

GLADSTONE GALLERY



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THE
NEW YORK
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Design
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THE REVIVAL OF EVERYTHING

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Hippie Architecture at Its Finest
The Sexy '70s and Oddly Charming Po-Mo '80s
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Above: the reading room of the art director Sam Shahid's New York City apartment, with a custom table, a Poul Kjaerholm chair and a drawing by Richard Prince. Bottom left: the artist Sarah Lucas with assistants in her temporary London workspace.

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NO FILTER Lucas, who prefers to work "on the fly" rather than in a permanent studio, at her temporary workspace in London, where she is preparing for the British Council's commission at the Venice Biennale in May of this year.

Art Market

How to Be Both

Vulgar and restrained, loud and retiring, straight-up and mysterious. On the undiminished charisma of Sarah Lucas, the former rude girl of British art.

BY OLIVIA LAING PORTRAIT BY JUERGEN TELLER

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DRIVING TO Sarah Lucas's house in Hackney, East London, it struck me that the core elements of her sculpture could be gleaned right here, from the notably ungentrified scattering of greengrocers and kebab shops that line the nearby Essex Road. Lucas has made artwork from Marlboro Lights cigarettes, painstakingly gluing them over toilets, garden gnomes and wrecked cars. She has stuffed pairs of women's tights to create limp and leggy figures she calls "Bunnies." But she is best known for the bleakly humorous assemblages she made in the 1990s, partly inspired by her reading of the work of the American feminist Andrea Dworkin, and constructed from furniture, fruit and vegetables or bits of dried and rotting meat. For "Bitch," in 1995, she stretched a white T-shirt over a table in a simulacrum of a bending body, two melons sagging from where its chest would be. At the business end, a vacuum-packed kipper dangles from a nail. Melons and fish: a crude synecdoche of a woman reduced to her sexual organs, yes, but also an exercise in minimalism, an experiment in how little you need to ignite the whole grim psychodrama of gender and sexuality.

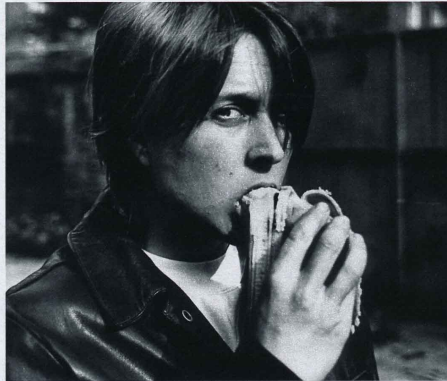
Like many of Lucas's works, "Bitch" possesses a visceral intelligence vastly greater than the sum of its parts. It is difficult to say why one artist and not another should be able to imbue a form or collection of objects with his or her own singular energy. Lucas herself is not sure how it happens — knowing only that some combinations have a simplicity and elegance about them. Daring

Damien Hirst has called Lucas the greatest artist he knows, comparing her talent for putting everyday things together with Picasso's. 'She's the opposite to me in the way she makes art, and I envy that.'



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SIMPLE INGREDIENTS

Clockwise from left: Lucas's self-portrait, "Eating a Banana," made in 1990, when the artist was a member of the group later known as the YBAs; "Bitch," 1995, a physical pun on the female form; "Au Naturel," 1994, made from near-at-hand components, including an old bucket salvaged from the street.

must come into it too, as must a kind of transference of power from artist to material and an ability to snap the familiar out of context. In Lucas's

famous self-portraits of the 1990s, she is accompanied by quotidian objects and looks androgynous, uncompromising, hard: biting into a banana; sprawled unsmiling in a chair with two fried eggs slapped casually over her breasts; crouching on a toilet seat with no knickers on, a cigarette in her right hand. It is impossible to look at those images and not wonder who she is; how she learned to charge such base materials, and herself, with power.

At the time of those portraits, Lucas was arguably the linchpin of the Young British Artists, or YBAs — a tight-knit group of predominantly working-class friends that included Gary Hume, the late Angus Fairhurst, Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. The group had a reputation for provocation and wildness, but Lucas, according to her friend the writer Gordon Burn, was "the most unabashedly all-balls-out, rock 'n' roll of the YBAs," outdrinking everyone at the Groucho Club in her tatty jacket and trainers. She was thrilling to watch, with her disregard for social convention; loved for her infectious freedom. She dated Hume and Fairhurst, and her friendship with Emin was famously intense.

Twenty-five years on, at 52, Lucas is warmer than her swaggering self-portraits suggest, dressed in an oatmeal sweater and grapefruit-colored Pumas, her socks tugged up over her jeans. There is nothing mannish about her look, but neither are there any of the customary adornments of femininity. She's wearing no makeup, there's a cut on her nose, her hair is unbrushed; and yet she is attractive in the most fundamental sense of the word. "There's no pretension; there's no masking," the gallerist Sadie Coles, who has represented Lucas since 1997, had warned me. "And that actually is extremely refreshing and sometimes quite shocking. You are confronted with her straight on." Charisma is hard to articulate, to parse into its constituent parts, but hours later, when I finally left Lucas's house, I had the insistent thought that this must be what it's like to meet a cult leader. This is not to



IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTISTS/ROBERT COOKE

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say that there's anything manipulative about Lucas, but rather that the force of her personality is so intense as to be almost frightening.

EIGHT YEARS AGO, Lucas moved to Suffolk in East Anglia to live in the former home of the composer Benjamin Britten. She is now in London only temporarily, to begin her work, in a borrowed studio, on the prestigious commission for the British pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale, which opens in May. (Lucas has never had a formal studio, preferring to work "on the fly.") The renovation on her London home had gone over schedule, and so, when we met, it too was radiating the raw glamour of the unadorned — the carpets covered in plastic, the air full of dust. We settled upstairs, in a book-lined room, for a conversation punctuated by the pouring of wine, the click of her cigarette lighter and the sound of passing traffic in the soupy London dark.

Moving to Suffolk in 2007 was a risk, in that it took Lucas away not only from the urban materials from which her minimalist work has been composed, but also from the scene that has buoyed her fame. The move underlines how little she feels a need to perform for an audience. Despite the potency of her own presence, Lucas doesn't use her work to reinforce her ego or mythologize her life story, as both Hirst and Emin seem to do, but rather treats it as a place she can periodically vanish into. In the

spring of 2008, Lucas and her partner, the artist and composer Julian Simmons, "decided to give up the outside world" for Lent, swearing off computers and telephones. It was during this "magical time" that Lucas began to make "Penetralia": plaster casts of phalluses of varying sizes, sometimes emerging from, morphing into or coexisting with natural forms, like wands or trunks or flints. Other recent pieces are similarly ambiguous. A chair made of hundreds of breasts, each one formed from stuffed tights in shades of pink and brown; snaking and skinlike tubes and coils she calls "nuds," which look like sausage meat, like mottled legs — you want to fondle them, but also to give them a wide berth. There are comparisons to be made, of course, with Louise Bourgeois or Yayoi Kusama, but Lucas doesn't seem to be pursuing historical art currents. While her early works around sexual

organs were assumed to be motivated by a desire to shock, these new pieces, which feel like ritual objects disinterred from a deeper, stranger England, suggest that her interest all along has been to create containers for energy.

It's characteristic of Lucas's approach that she both needs and has the confidence to take periodic retreats from the main stage in order to preserve her own enjoyment in art making, rather than feeling hobbled by obligation. Sitting in the darkening room, she



PERSONAL MAGNETISM

Near left: "Nahuiolin," 2013. Lucas's cast bronze sculpture of the phallic forms she has also made from stuffed women's tights. Bottom left: Lucas, at left, with the artist Tracey Emin at "The Shop" in East London, the short-lived gallery-happening where the two friends sold items, including printed T-shirts and rabbits made out of cigarette packs.

tells me that this is something she learned soon after graduating Goldsmiths in 1987, when she found that, of all her art school contemporaries, it was the men, Hume and Hirst especially, who were ushered into success, while she felt herself stuck on the sidelines, irritated and resentful. "It was like all the blokes seemed to be the darling boys of London," she remembers. In response, she gave up art altogether, a decision that quickly restored her sense of freedom. Within a few months, she started making things again, this time for her own pleasure and amusement.

At the beginning of 1993, Lucas set up "The Shop" with Emin, a deliberately short-lived and anarchic studio-gallery-happening in a former doctor's office in East London's Bethnal Green. They sold their work at bargain-basement prices — homemade T-shirts saying "SHE'S KEBAB"; ashtrays with Damien Hirst's face at the bottom — and pursued intoxication with such commitment that she remembers once waking up on top of a mountain of empty bottles. Lucas and Emin, whose friendship had an "almost violent,

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mad energy," have since drifted apart. But, at the time, the project "brought so many people to us that it sort of expanded our world. ... We felt the tremendous power of it."

Power. The word keeps coming up. Lucas is aware that she possesses it herself, both as an artist and a person; she has a knack for making connections with strangers, even "just standing at a bus stop." Certain objects have it too — like the self-portrait with the banana. Hirst has called Lucas the greatest artist he knows, comparing her talent for putting everyday things together with Picasso's. "She's the opposite to me in the way she makes art, and I envy that," he has said. "She does it so seemingly effortlessly, and I always put big, expensive boxes around things."

Making the most of the materials you are given is a principle that Lucas has consciously applied not just to her work, but also to her life. Her story has an almost alchemical quality — not the striving narrative with which the YBAs are normally associated, but a fairy



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tale of psychological transformation. She grew up in subsidized housing off Holloway Road in North London. Her parents were poor but creative, in a make-do-and-mend kind of way, and, she thinks now, haunted by their pasts. Her father, Donald, a milkman, had been a P.O.W. in Korea; she remembers him singing the Chinese national anthem



in his sleep. Lucas's mother, Irene Violet Gale, came from an impoverished family, who all lived in one room above a chip shop in London's Chapel Market. Irene's father drank and beat her mother, who had a history of mental illness. During the war, Irene was sent as an evacuee to a Cornish family who wanted to adopt her; her decision to return home caused what Lucas describes as "the great schism" of her mother's psyche.

Lucas herself didn't speak until she was three, and remained very quiet as a child. She now thinks that the turning point in her childhood came during her final year at primary school, when at the age of 10 she got into a fight with a bullying boy who tried to steal her pen. She knew that she didn't want to give in,

so she grabbed him by the hair and refused to let go, forcing him to his knees. After that, she remembers, her tongue was somehow miraculously unlocked. A social, sardonic self emerged, bent on freedom. It's hard to think of a more immediate shorthand for the right to self-expression than this childish struggle for a pen.

Lucas has never undergone therapy, but asks me at length about mine. For years, she says, she was worried that she would be doomed to re-enact her parents' unhappiness. It took a conversation with her friend and mentor, the curator Clarissa Dalrymple, to really shake her out of it. Dalrymple told her forcefully that she needn't repeat her mother's life. And she hasn't.

THROUGHOUT OUR conversation, Lucas kept returning to the question of how exactly she should use what she repeatedly and frankly calls her power, by which she means her personal magnetism as well as her ability to make art. She doesn't know exactly what it is or what

POWER PLAY Clockwise from above: a work of the bulbous forms Lucas calls "nuds" from 2011; in the same year, Lucas, her partner Julian Simmons (wearing a pair of "nud" sculptures) and the Vienna-based art collective Gelatin, with whom she collaborated on a show in Austria; the artist's provocative "Self-Portrait With Fried Eggs," 1996; "Nud Cycladic 6," 2010, made in Suffolk, East Anglia, where she now lives.



it's for. Making objects is not a compulsion for Lucas, though she does like the way her sculptures externalize ideas. What she's looking for, she thinks, are fertile environments, situations with potential. "Really," she says, "the point of art for me was that I wanted to carry on talking and thinking with other people."

Over the years, she's tried various experiments with collaboration, from making a gigantic masturbating arm as a prop for her friend

Michael Clark's 2001 ballet "Before and After: The Fall" to working with the Vienna-based collective Gelatin, with whom she had a joint exhibition inspired by Hieronymus Bosch, "In the Woods," at Kunsthalle Krems in Austria in 2011. Instead of shipping old works over, they spent the entire budget on making the show from scratch in the museum, a high-wire way of working that she's always loved. A group photograph suggests joyous chaos: four people in horse suits, a bare-chested Simmons with a pair of Lucas's nuds draped around his neck, Lucas buoyant in a creased sundress and shades, her arms aloft.

It only occurs to me after our meeting that Lucas is always looking for something, without ever knowing quite what it is, and that this lies at the core of her art, in which objects are always on the brink of transformation, neither crude nor mystical, ordinary or powerful, but somehow and impossibly both.

Her focus seems to be forever searching for an outlet, which makes conversation with her oddly electrifying.

Most people, she thinks, settle for such boring things: financial security, fame, material possessions. Happiness, I suggested, and she batted the thought away. "Happiness just comes and goes. ... Whereas I wanted to go somewhere quite mystical, I think, but I'm not sure, but I haven't been able to entirely invent this magical land for myself." She paused, her legs curled under her, fiddling with her roll-up cigarette. "So maybe they saw reality for what it was," she said, "whereas I thought it was elsewhere." ■



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