

GLADSTONE GALLERY

J.J. Charlesworth, "Sarah Lucas," *Art Review*, January and February 2013.



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Sarah Lucas

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Sarah Lucas

Last year Sarah Lucas turned fifty. And this year marks what you might call the 25th anniversary of the beginning of Lucas's career as an artist – it was back in 1988 that she, and a group of other young artists just out of Goldsmiths College,

participated in an ambitious DIY exhibition called *Freeze*, hustled together by classmate Damien Hirst. And although nothing at that point was certain, and a few years of doubt and hiatus had to click through those artists' lives, it is still astonishing how quickly the Young British Artists blazed into view and

made their mark – raucous, down-to-earth, affecting a punk, cheerful cynicism, which came to define British art in the latter half of the 1990s. The rest, as they always say, is history.

But becoming art history comes with its own troubles. How to have a history without becoming historical? How to stop being a Young British Artist in order to carry on being, well, just an artist – maybe a good one, and one who means to

stick around? These questions hover at the back of my mind as I stand in the audience that has turned up to listen to Lucas talk, at the launch of *Sarah Lucas – After 2005, Before 2012*, a new catalogue of her work since 2005, in an improvised gallery space upstairs from Lucas's London gallery, Sadie Coles, which has played host to a series of shows by Lucas for the

last 12 months, all but one under the headline title *Situation* (which is also the name of the space).

That title might hint at the process of taking stock as an artist, as each instalment remixed and recombined new and recent works with works from the distant past. What might Lucas's situation be today? It's an important moment: *Ordinary Things*, on show at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds last summer, was the first big retrospective for the artist in the UK, trailing Damien Hirst's panned Tate Modern summer blowout and Tracey Emin's 2011 retrospective at the Hayward Gallery. This year, the artist has her first big solo show in a London public gallery, at the Whitechapel Gallery in October. With *Ordinary Things*, Lucas's own act of retrospection was both more modest and more complicated than those of her contemporaries. In fact, *Ordinary Things* wasn't quite a 'retrospective' in the normal sense of the word. Highly edited, it concentrated exclusively on Lucas's

sculpture, and admitted only three works from the 1990s, including the iconic *Au Naturel* (1994; the slumped mattress that harbours a cucumber-and-melons scenario of sexual hilarity) but not the work that remains emblematic of the artist's YBA heyday – *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992), the table adorned with foodstuffs that stand in for breasts and genitals. And if *Ordinary Things* emphasised the idea of Lucas's work as sculpture, it's interesting to note that what this excluded was what *Two Fried Eggs* includes – the use of the photographic image.

Materiality and its image are tense partners in Lucas's work. In the cluttered space of the current *Situation* – this one titled with typical Lucas-ey humour *Situation Classic Pervy* – that tension is almost ecstatically played out: while the show comprises objects, they're bracketed by one wall of billboard-size photographs of older works – a reproduction of an ancient Lucas photocollage, *Soup* (1989), in which the tips of penises, peeping from their foreskins, are superimposed like weird monochromatic meatballs in a lurid field of what looks like tinned vegetable soup; and a blowup of one of Lucas's 1990s *Self-Portraits*, the one of her reclining, the image taken from behind and above her, turning her upside down, while cigarette smoke drifts upwards from her mouth.

It strikes me that this rift is important in the evolution of Lucas's work, which, in the iconography of the YBAs, stood out for the uncompromising simplicity and clarity of its use of imagery, and its distilled, purified grasp of visual contradiction. Sex and death might have been the common thread of so much YBA art, but it was Lucas who managed to make it both personal and universal, by homing in on a demotic, commonly understood culture – that of gender trouble and sexual conflict. And it was, in those early works, through objects containing

From YBA to classic pervy – making the ordinary extraordinary

By J.J. Charlesworth
Portraits by Juergen Teller

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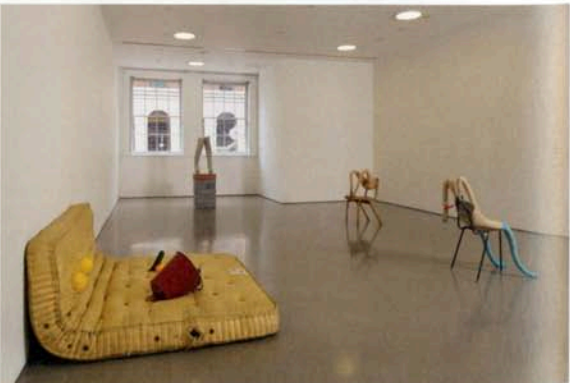
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this page, clockwise from right:
Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab, 1992, table, fried eggs, kebab, photograph, 151 x 90 x 102 cm;
Soup, 2012, digitally printed wallpaper, dimensions variable;
Ordinary Things (installation view, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2012); *Hysterical Attack (Mouths)*, 1999, papier mâché, chair, 75 x 82 x 78 cm; *Situation Classic Pervy* (installation view, Situation, London, 2012)



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images and images containing objects, that Lucas's work played among the ruined, everyday language of street and tabloid newspaper, the joking double entendres of cheap porn and fast food: Lucas, looking warily to camera, chomping on a big banana in her self-portrait *Eating a Banana* (1990); or the stunned, punning visual tautology of *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab*; or a naked man holding an exploding beer can in front of his own crotch in *Got a Salmon On (Prawn)* (1994). Lucas's imagery and objects of the 1990s didn't go in for subtlety or artful complexity, yet their apparent vulgarity was their sophistication, smuggling what appeared to be the artlessness of ordinary life into the white cube of the gallery while presenting a wider public with the enigma of art that turned the ordinary into something complicated, uneasy and enigmatic.

Image and materiality might sound like a dry, analytical binary, well suited to talk of sculpture. But image is never neutral when it comes to images of selves, or of self-image, something that continues to preoccupy Lucas. Chatting with the artist for a moment in the crowd, after the formal conversation, I'm surprised at what you might call her lack of image: shorter than one might guess from pictures, with an inquisitive, sideways-slanting gaze and a broad grin harbouring more teeth than seems necessary, Lucas somehow dodges the usual conventions of appearance, style, mannerism, gender. It makes her opaque, inscrutable in a sense. Though having said that, perhaps it's an effect enhanced by the gigantic silver-fox fur coat she's wearing. Or which seems to be wearing her.

A few days later, I'm turning over a line from *After 2005...*, where, replying to a question from model Lily Cole about the 'commodification of women', Lucas remarks, 'I look around and see women all trying to look like the same stupid doll.' I email Lucas some questions – she's back in the depths of Suffolk, well away from London – and ask her about the references she often makes in interviews to her early reading of feminist theory, particularly the writing of Andrea Dworkin, and how it might have framed her sense of male and female, of personal and social relationships. I've never quite bought the idea that her work was some kind of outright feminist critique. "We're all thrown in somewhere," she replies. "In other words, born. Can't really blame anyone for that. I was very close to my dad as a child and I'm still fond of blokeyness. I didn't dwell much then on being a woman myself. Later, when I had that kind of a look around, through Dworkin's eyes, I was a bit shocked."

I explain that I've always found that her work might in some way be about reconciling with men – about how absurd they are, or what their predicament is, and that there's a kind of tragicomedy in sexual difference. I wonder if it's 'forgiving', in a way. "I think we should realise



that we play a significant part in constructing our own reality," she writes. "Have a think about what we do to ourselves. Also what we think we're saying. I think 'with' my appearance – most of us do, and even if we don't, we're still saying something. The early self-portraits were about that – having a look at myself. Subjectively I had some idea what I didn't want to be saying. Having a look was sitting on the fence a bit. Not having to reason out or entirely justify. More of a 'what about this?'"

That question mark above the nature of appearance might lead one back, in stages, to the big shift in Lucas's work over the last decade: the steady disappearance of Lucas-as-image, and the growing assertion of a more overtly sculptural approach. It was never

that clear that Lucas's earlier work presented the aggressive, in-your-face posturing as a straightforward rebuff to sexist stereotypes or misogynist culture – though in the media-hyped atmosphere that came to surround the YBAs, and with the influence of gender theory in art-critical debates, it was easier to see it that way. Rather, Lucas's work seemed to present a kind of absurd 'what if': a 'what if' the image of woman could fail completely to support any of the usual signs that stand in for women, by throwing matter and metaphor into a kind of self-destructive blender – breasts-as-fried-eggs-as-breasts? And not just women, men too. A penis-becomes-a-cucumber-becomes-a-penis. A comedy of broken stereotypes, objects as bathetic stand-ins for realities they nevertheless fail to represent.

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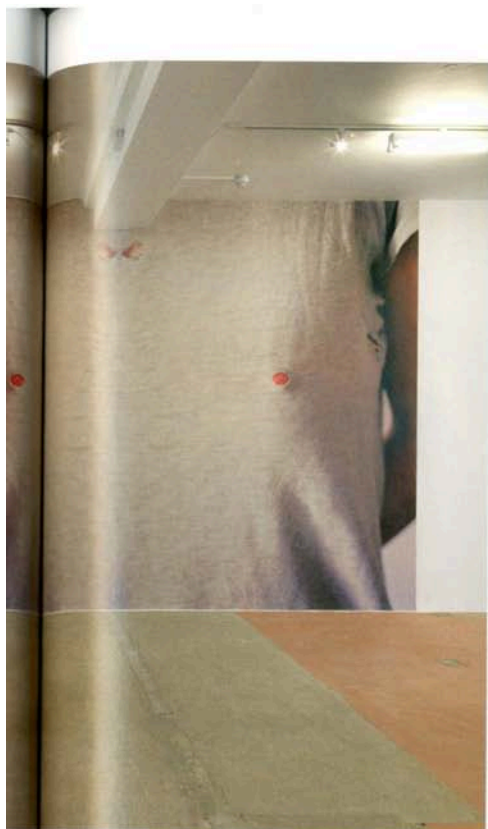
this and facing pages, clockwise from lower right: *Dayo*, 2008, plaster, steel wire, wood, 42 x 20 x 20 cm; *Nud 27*, 2012, tights, kapok, wire, linen string, 35 x 31 x 29 cm; *Swan*, 2008, plaster, steel wire, wood, 38 x 40 x 10 cm; *Miss Jumbo Savalby* (installation view, Situation, London, 2012); *Dr. Atl*, 2012 (installation view, Museo Diego Rivera-Anahuacalli, Mexico City), tights, fluff, wire, adobe bricks, 63 x 46 x 44 cm

All images: © the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London



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But recently, it's as if Lucas's sculptures have shed this surface of malfunctioning images, which reaches a sort of literal crisis in 1999's *Hysterical Attack (Mouths)*, two slumped legs morphing from the backrest of a chair, the legs covered in a collage of magazine images of women's mouths, a smiling set of teeth in place of genitals. So in the ongoing *Nuds* series, the fashioning of fleshy bodylike members that Lucas first essayed with her *Bunny* figures (1997-) made from women's tights stuffed with wire and fluff, the human body becomes a kind of raw material, abstracted and genderless, with loops of limbs turning intestinal, twisting, caressing and enfolding themselves. They're more human for being inhuman, their slow contortions invoking a sense of human gestures with uncanny echoes of classical statuary - but they remain resolutely quiet, focused inwards, as if turning their backs to the onlooker.

This isn't to say that Lucas's work has forsaken the power of the image, only that it's as if she's now searching for authenticity, rather than inauthenticity, in the appearance of things. After all, it's not as if there aren't lots of tits and massive cocks in her recent work too. But the tone has changed. Rather than just pairs of breasts, there are now exuberant, excessive masses of tits, as in *Nice Tits* (2011). In Lucas's 2008 *Penetrabilia* sculptures, direct casts of penises fuse with the rough texture of wood and bone, suggesting magical artefacts or archaeological remnants.

There's a pagan, vitalist energy in these and in the *Nuds*, as if Lucas was looking for a counterpoint to the image-loaded world of contemporary culture, and calling up the echo of the primitive and ancient to do so. Maybe it's what prompted her to exhibit work in the Aztec-inspired architecture of the Museo Diego Rivera-Anahuacalli in Mexico City in 2012. And maybe it has just as much to do with Lucas having moved her residence away from London, setting up permanently with her partner in a place (formerly home to the composer Benjamin Britten) in a secluded corner of Suffolk. "I just think there's too much short-termism about, disposable stuff," Lucas writes about these atavistic forms. "I wanted to take a longer view. It seems to me that a lot of ancient and tribal art still exerts a lot of power. And that it does in spite of us not understanding what it's really about. Why is that? A tree exerts that power. The wind... I want to respond intuitively to things. To feel something. We all do it, but we hardly know we do it."

To say that Lucas's works work more as sculpture than ever before is to invoke an idea of sculptural value that opposes itself to the unreliable and deceptive world of images. Unlike her friend Franz West, the artist who did most to knock down highmindedness and good taste in sculpture in favour of the absurd and the abject (and to whom Lucas dedicated one of the *Situation* shows following his death), Lucas appears to be searching for the moment

when dumb, everyday stuff is redeemed by its ability to provoke unlooked-for fusions of representation and metaphor. For Lucas, this turn to how matter and materials might connect to a truer sense of bodies and of being - sidestepping cliché and refusing the accessible language of stereotype that only conceals what it pretends to communicate - comes back to an austere commitment to the simplicity of materials and unembellished form: things that refuse to be other than they are, and in which the artistic intervention is what transforms them into something more than mundane, the 'magic' that Lucas often refers to, where a thing and its image provoke something more than the already known, or the already misunderstood. "It's a matter of good quality," writes Lucas finally. "Of fine feeling. Of delivering what's been promised, delivering more than that even. The thing being greater than the sum of its parts. The reality of charisma - transcendence. The power of an image. Otherwise it's just tacky. Same as all the other cheap bullshit that's produced."

Art should be "fine", she continues. "That doesn't mean it should be wrought in gold filigree. A glance at a high street jeweller should dispel that myth. Perhaps it's the thought that should be fine. And clear like the truth. A lot of manufactured objects alert my lewd detector. Like makeup on a pretty face.":

Sarah Lucas's Situation series continues at Sadie Coles, London, until February