

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Sophie Hastings, *"Kicking against the Pricks,"* GQ, November 11, 2013.

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By Sophie Hastings 11 November 13



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"There's a subtle tradition of women with phalluses," says Iwona Blazwick, director of London's Whitechapel Gallery. "Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois and other feminist artists all tap into a sub-motif of phalluses being reclaimed. Sarah Lucas is part of that. She empties out macho -gestures, uses them as confrontation, and plays between taking that power and making it monumental." Blazwick starts to laugh. "There's a photograph of Sarah in Aldeburgh sitting on an enormous [sculpture of a] penis; it's a Chaucerian riposte to the endless -reclining female nudes in art history."

Lucas' 2008 exhibition, *Penetralia*, consisted entirely of plaster casts of her boyfriend's penis, but more often food and objects stand in for body parts in her work. As part of June's Snap art festival, Lucas placed two huge concrete marrows in the grounds of Suffolk's Snape Maltings, in spitting distance of the permanent abstract sculpture by Henry Moore, which is so beloved by the cultural establishment, undoubtedly cocking a snook at our deification of the male artist

Meanwhile, Lucas' photograph "Self-Portrait With Fried Eggs" (1996) was voted by the British public as one of 57 artworks displayed across the country in August on thousands of poster and billboard sites for the public art project Art Everywhere.

Somehow, Lucas has been absorbed into our national psyche, despite never, until now, having had a major solo exhibition in London. Blazwick considers Lucas to be "one of the most important living artists in the UK", and is presenting two decades of her installation, photography and sculpture at the Whitechapel this autumn. Inspired by Lucas' recent year-long project, *Situation*, an evolving series of installations in a former office building, Blazwick says she was reminded of "the YBA days of *Freeze* and City Racing, when artists made their own *mise-en-scènes*. Sarah created environments, juxtaposing old work with new in a way that showed what a rich, protean repertoire she has. I felt it was time to take stock."

In the early work, says Blazwick, "you get the abrasive, confrontational representation of how the sexual body is demeaned by the media, especially the tabloids; the reductive gaze". With her British working-class visual lexicon of fags, tabloids, food, telly, sport and sexual stereotypes, Lucas confronts the baggage of class and gender she felt obliged to carry through life, starting

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with her childhood in a council flat off London's Holloway Road, where her father was a milkman and mother a cleaner.

Discouraged from doing homework by her mum, who said spending all week at school was enough, Lucas left school at 16 and drifted until a friend suggested she take an art class at the Working Men's College. This led to a foundation course at the London College of Printing and a fine arts degree at Goldsmiths, where she met her YBA cohort Damien Hirst, Anya Gallaccio, Gary Hume, Abigail Lane et al. One of the hardest partiers of the Groucho/Colony Room scene, Lucas ran a shop with Tracey Emin, where they sold art including T-shirts with slogans such as "Have You W***ed Over Me Yet"; she was bought by Charles Saatchi, participated in his 1997 *Sensation* show at the Royal Academy, and inspired her gallerist, Sadie Coles, to run her own space.

But Lucas was uninterested in "the emphasis on the personality of the artist", says Blazwick. "Like Cindy Sherman, the image she presents to the world is controlled - look at the photograph "Got A Salmon On #3" [Lucas standing outside a public toilet, a huge fish resting from her shoulder to below her waist, a pun on the idea of a female erection] and the endless smoking. Cigarettes have it all: they are death and phallic symbols."

Lucas showed extensively abroad and built up a serious following in France where, suggests Blazwick, the French may be responding to similarities between Lucas and Picasso. "He always puts the erogenous zones up front, as does she."

Or possibly, it's the fact that her work is as existential as it is physical. "I've noticed that none of her bodies have heads and the only face we see is hers," she says. "Sarah is the omnipotent, creative goddess, confronting our gaze, an androgynous figure. Her self-portrait on the toilet with a skull between her feet is a Hamlet moment, as is her toilet bowl daubed with the words 'Is Suicide Genetic?'"

According to Blazwick, since moving from London to Suffolk "Lucas' representations of sexuality are now replaced by personal experiences." She cites a new sculpture, "Galaxia", as

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exemplifying this more rural mind-set. A torso of interlocking breeze blocks sits on a plinth, with a sheep's skull and knotted tights on top. "It can look like a vagina," says Blazwick, starting to laugh again. "But it's a vagina dentata - every man's nightmare."

Situation by Sarah Lucas is at Whitechapel Gallery, London E1, supported by Louis Vuitton, 2 October to 15 December 2013.whitechapelgallery.org

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