

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Adrian Searle, "Sarah Lucas at the Whitechapel: more than the sum of her parts," *The Guardian*, September 30, 2013.

Sarah Lucas at the Whitechapel: more than the sum of her parts

Breasts, bums, blokes and their bits – Sarah Lucas's riotous new show lets it all hang out. And the result is strangely disturbing

Adrian Searle



'Enormously enjoyable and awful' ... Sarah Lucas's show *Situation: Absolute Beach Man Rubble*. Photograph: David Levene for the *Guardian*

Not long ago I received a postcard from a reader, complaining about my use of the word "penises" as a plural. The correct word, he opined, was penes. He also complained about the *Guardian's* ban on the word "comedienne". Once again, I shall annoy him.

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There are a lot of penises in Sarah Lucas's Whitechapel exhibition. Big dicks, little fag-end dicks and absolutely humongous members. Lucas is also something of a comedian, but that is to belittle a talent that is uncomfortable, uncompromising, and much broader and richer than that of a potty-mouthed standup. Cocks, tits, fags, bums, blokes and their blokeish parts and their blokey ways are all here, along with a giant hunk of Spam and a mobile of concrete pies. Then there are the readers' wives and human toilets. The show, visitors are advised, might not be suitable for children. The real problem is for adults, who might have to answer all the little blighters' questions.

Back to the penes. Droopy ones, vast Henry Mooreish ones: there's no escaping them. Why go to the trouble to depict the whole man when just the dong will do? Lucas objectifies women, too, as an agglomeration of body parts: melon breasts, fried-egg breasts, kippers, kebabs and raw chickens, thighs seen in a pair of Spanish hams conjoined with underpants and supine on a grease-stained mattress.

This is more than a mournful and depressing – not to say distressing – view of the human animal and its use-value. Looking at Lucas's partial figures, none of whom have heads, the ways in which they are gendered gets blurred. Are her sausagey, bulging Nuds male or female? They are simply, inescapably human.

Her recent cast bronze figures, which looked so beautiful in a courtyard at the Venice Biennale, and which are now upstairs at this London gallery, seem to morph between male and female, just as your eyes slither and slide over their highly polished surfaces. The contours reflect and dissolve, as you begin to meld with what you are looking at. This is a sexy feeling. I am wary of artists who go in for bronze. It can be like anointing and authorising what they make as "high art", through the associations

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and imprimatur of their classy material. But Lucas's really have a point, and need to glow as they do, just as her bunnies – those etiolated figures made from stuffed tights – need their vulnerable and slightly squalid dun-coloured surfaces and visual texture, as they writhe and flop about on their chairs. One wears tiny ballerina shoes, which is somehow very touching.



Slither and slide ... Sarah Lucas's *Situation: Absolute Beach Man Rubble*.
Photograph: David Levene for the *Guardian*

Lucas's range really comes to the fore and, if there is laughter here, it is hollow and bleak. Of course, when she used [Jimmy Savile](#) as the model for her Toby-mug figure of [Richard the Lionheart](#), before the extent of Savile's appalling behaviour became known, Lucas was aware that using the entertainer's face was bound to feel uneasy. Richard stands in the corner near the show's entrance. Nearby, an old red metal bucket lies on a crushed car, like a horrible, yawning invitation. It is all in the placement and relationships she sets up between sculptures. Artists can never know what meanings their work will accrue. Once out in the world, art is a hostage to fortune.

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Lucas's work is as much a play of forms as it is of masculine and feminine. Just like the American artist Roni Horn, Lucas works with her own androgyny, and on a kind of mental gendering. In English, objects are not gendered as they are in Romance languages, where the gender assigned to a noun is often at odds with its physical designation. Lucas exploits similar ambiguities.

Inventive, bawdy and abject, tender, violent, revolting and miserable, Lucas's art is as complicated as we are, with our drives and fantasies, our inexplicable needs. She also knows when to leave off, when to stop once things are just right. She can turn a bricolage into a visual mot, a pun or a conundrum. It was all there, right from the beginning, with her bover boots, her photographs of herself eating a banana, and the things she got her naked boyfriend of the time, the painter Gary Hume, to do with foaming tins of beer and a crate of fruit and veg.

Lucas's Whitechapel show is both enormously enjoyable and awful: awful because much of what she shows us about our relationship to the human body and our psyches is as grim as it is hilarious – the toilet as an extension of the human digestive tract, as receptical not just of waste but of parts of ourselves, dark thoughts as well as dark matter. She can bring us up short: a cigar and a couple of walnuts are balanced on the rim of a begrimed loo. I imagine the smell of the cigar and the taste of walnuts. It's stomach-churning.

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Perverse takes on the familiar ... Sarah Lucas's *Situation: Absolute Beach Man Rubble*. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

With all sorts of interesting groupings and juxtapositions, this show is a riot. Lucas's figures often confront one another in front of huge, blown-up photographs. Her self-portrait appears and reappears. At the top of the stairs, a photograph of the pensive artist, with a skull at her feet, is illuminated in the reddish glow of a neon coffin. Downstairs is a sort of orchestrated clutter of soft sculptures and concrete figures, abjection, meat, toilets and bawdiness, while the first upstairs space is a kind of wallpapered salon with a mattress **sculpture** as a centerpiece. The final, light-filled long space is airy and open: you move more freely, between a giant drawing of Trotsky, rendered in cigarettes, to statuesque figures in kinky boots, and on to bigger sculptures.

Lucas has also manufactured several chairs, benches and walls, using MDF and breezeblocks, some of which we can use, while others are occupied by her sculptures. I'd avoid sitting on her breezeblock plinths, though, unless you wish to be impaled by a rubbery, globular, dick-like object. Seated on the benches, you become part of the same world as her sculptures. You can't help thinking what leaky, bendy, absurd beings we are. I almost wanted to get my kit off.

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Lucas is one of those artists who have a great touch and a feel for materials: things that droop, dangle and stretch; things that poke and bulge. Sometimes, her figures are as isolated as bodies at a crime scene. I have written about her a lot and she can still surprise me. Lucas, the androgynous, shy, laddish girl from the Holloway housing estate, is now the respected sculptor living in a Suffolk village. She still deals in the perverse take on the familiar. She defamiliarises us with things we know, things we regard as beneath our attention. Dealing in the repressed, Lucas is irrepressible. I came out of this show not glad – but definitely alive.