

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Kaitlin Phillips, "Sarah Lucas at New Museum," *Artforum*, December 2018

ARTFORUM

Sarah Lucas

NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK

Kaitlin Phillips

THE TWO MOST FAMOUS works by the most famous women of the Young British Artists (YBAs) use as their springboard low-rent mattresses artfully composed—I mean that—to signify postcoital tristesse: *Au Naturel*, 1994, by Sarah Lucas, and Tracey Emin's *My Bed*, 1998. A lot of art in the 1990s was about being disappointed, but they made malaise look and feel as dynamic and complex as it must have been to them in 1993, when they were two young art-school grads who felt like renting a studio was for wanks, so instead opened "The Shop." The first T-shirts they sold said I'M SO FUCKY (Lucas's idea) and HAVE YOU WANKED OVER ME YET? (Emin's). Where you can see Lucas is already equal parts aloofly brazen and jokey, Emin redirects the attention toward her own life, with a devil-may-care recipe of fuck-you vulnerability.

Their insouciant attitude feeds their work in different ways. Emin's disheveled bed, with trash and empty vodka bottles lapping at its frame, reads as personal, diaristic, and confessional, and therefore poignantly debauched. It's sentimental. Lucas was more interested in being clever and having a laugh, positioning herself as a female artist getting her rocks off as a tits-and-ass man. For *Au Naturel*, a yellowing mattress literally slumps against a wall, with slits to accommodate two melons and a bucket (her), and two oranges nestled at the base of a cucumber (him). The genius of this psychosexual iconography lay in its bawdy simplicity; sex can be as banal as a fruit basket. Lucas would continue to deftly boil the human form down to its

sex organs, rendered in fruits, vegetables, and found objects, emphasizing compositionally the slouch and slump. This can often be very beautiful, the preoccupation with lumps and legs. Her 2009–"NUD" series, biomorphic nylon creations curled into the fetal position, gets at the stranger side of sex. Might we say its magical reduction of feeling. It's like sculptural ASMR. Few of her works fit within the rocky landscape of contemporary feminist ideology: neither the floppy agencyless nylon-and-cotton female creatures in her enchanting "Bunny Gets Snookered" series, 1997, nor her more recent (boring) sculptures made from sticks and plaster that reference her boyfriend's dick. I think she's just pointing at gender, again and again, acknowledging its hegemony.

The sheer prevalence of dicks (made of plaster, bandages, wood, soda cans, cigarettes, cigars, wire, matches) and toilets, and the thematic preoccupation with heterosexual sex, make her hypermasculine aesthetics difficult to ignore. Yet her "Muses" series from 2015—featuring torso-free plaster legs cast from friends' bodies and left unpainted, with cigarettes jammed in their assholes—underscores where she'd like to be situated in this historical tradition. The critic Quinn Latimer correctly referred to this as Lucas's impulse to "ventriloquize masculinity," but there's a thin line between this brand of feminism and that of the classic game girl, intent on beating the boys at their own game. Anyway, she calls herself a classic perv! We don't easily acknowledge this perviness as an aesthetic choice, but that's a rare benefit of being a woman artist. She can crack up eating a sausage and a banana, as in *Sausage Film*, 1990—and then fall back into the mock seriousness and composure a different artist would have chosen for the entire film.

Anyone walking through the first American survey of Lucas's work at the New Museum—organized by Massimiliano Gioni and Margot Norton and titled after the iconic anthropomorphic mattress above—will find themselves thinking, *I love Sarah Lucas*. Or at least I did,

which in retrospect was surprising, though the feeling holds. This hagiography was by curatorial design. The first thing I saw upon entering the exhibition was half a Jaguar meticulously lined with Marlboro Reds, the other half of the car burnt to a crisp, and other parts crushed by a large white plaster dick. A life-size rendition of Jesus Christ—crafted out of Marlboro Lights and nailed to the wall—looked down on this car crash. But so too did the artist herself, no bra, looming large as wallpaper, legs splayed open in jeans and work boots. She was like lighter fluid on an already kindled bonfire of masculine agitprop sparked by religious blasphemy. Nihilistic paraphernalia and male fetish objects (cars, cigarettes) were rendered cool and sexy by their dickless puppet master making time to take a big patriarchal piss—not to be confused with pissing on the patriarchy, which requires more contortion.

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Blown-up photographs of the artist, both hung on the wall as framed portraits and as wallpaper, have a funny way of highlighting the single strand of DNA shared by the hodgepodge cumulated beneath the YBA umbrella. It was the YBAs who updated Warhol's ideas of the "artistic persona" for the '80s and '90s (and the market), and Lucas's willingness to wholesale manufacture it for herself now, in America, ties her back to the YBAs retroactively, after we'd pretty much freed her from their market-riven stain. □

"Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel" is on view through January 20, 2019.

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Left: View of "Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel," 2018. Foreground: Works from the series "Bunny Gets Snookered," 1997. Photo: Maris Hutchinson. Below: Sarah Lucas, *Margot*, 2015, plaster, cigarette, freezer, 45 1/2 x 79 1/2 x 34 1/2". From the series "Muses," 2015. Right: Sarah Lucas, *Sausage Film*, 1990, video, color, sound, 9 minutes 20 seconds.



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