

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Alison Rowley, "Sarah Lucas's Venice Biennale recognition is long overdue,"
The Conversation, March 31, 2014.

Sarah Lucas's Venice Biennale recognition is long overdue



Physical and cerebral. Johnny Green/PA

The only surprising thing about the news that Sarah Lucas has been chosen to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale in 2015 is that it has taken so long to happen.

Immediate media response to the British Council's announcement has been a predictable repetition of all the well-worn tags habitually attached to Lucas's work in art journalism: it is "**laddish, cocky and confrontational, frank and fearless**", "**ballsy and argumentative**" whilst being honest, straight-talking, and witty about sex and death. All this is true enough, although reductive.

But the statement by BBC arts editor Will Gompertz that Sarah Lucas's art is "**physical not cerebral**" must be challenged for two reasons. It misunderstands the ways in which materials matter in Lucas's art-making, centrally their role in the artist's punning way with language. For example, in probably her best known work, **Two Fried Eggs and A Kebab** (1992) Lucas makes literal the colloquial linguistic metaphor for the sexualized female body with actual objects, thus robbing it of its power to demean using humour as critique.

Also, to write that Lucas's work is "physical not cerebral" reinstates the age-old social and sexual symbolic hierarchy in which woman is equated with nature and matter, man with culture and the intellect. We know that Sarah Lucas has always been aware of a history of feminist activism and scholarship, so I'd say that Gompertz's statement reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of her work.

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Sarah Lucas, 'Au Naturel!'. Myung Jung Kim/PA

Her intelligent and incisive use of materials brought her interest in psychoanalysis brilliantly to life at the Freud museum in 2000. When interviewed in 1995 about her approach to materials

Lucas said:

I'll use anything I can, I depend on the idea that art can't be taken away from me by financial or material limitations... On the other hand the choice of materials is crucial to what the final piece is.

At the Freud Museum both senses of economy, financial and formal, combined in **The Pleasure Principle**, a sculpture in which Lucas combined Freud's dining room furniture with underwear, a glowing neon strip and light bulbs to create a hilarious primal scene. Her idiom brought the lower orders crashing into view centre stage. We see the servants whose labour haunts Freud's case-studies and who transmitted knowledge of sexuality to their bourgeois infant and adolescent charges.

Intelligent and blasphemously at home at Freud's one-time house, Lucas's installation disrupted the museum's usual atmosphere of reverential propriety, reintroducing a liberating sense of the living, and once socially outrageous, nature of Freud's theories of sexuality. For my money, Sarah Lucas was ready to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale there and then.

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What is also notable in the early responses to the British Council's announcement has been the tendency to insinuate that the value of Lucas's work; its "raw and rowdy", "coarse" vernacular is in danger of being compromised by growing establishment recognition. Such an attitude regards the artist's development in other directions, something that is inevitable over a long professional career, as a falling away from the gutsy flair of the early years. It also fails to recognise her self-awareness.

This is something we particularly saw in the exhibition **Ordinary Things** at the Henry Moore Institute in 2012. It attended to "the sculptural rather than the sensational" in Lucas's art. The exhibition included sculptures from Lucas's Penetrabilia series of 2008, in which she engaged with British sculpture of the 1930s – specifically Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore – affirming historically her longtime allegiance to Moore's dictum of "truth to materials". This recognition of Lucas's place in the history of British sculpture was long overdue.

And then just over a year later, in November 2013, the Whitechapel Gallery held **a full-blown installation** of all aspects of the history and development of a practice spanning 25 years. In spirit, the exhibition evoked **Supersensible** (1995), the black-and-white photograph of Lucas in an armchair, relaxed and at home amongst secondhand furniture piled high on the pavement of a London street. A reminder, perhaps, of the roots of her art in working-class culture and the ordinary things of everyday life. This is one of the most important things that the British Council's appointment of Sarah Lucas will represent for Britain at the Venice Biennale.

What the critics fail to recognise in their habitual recourse to crude and reductive descriptions of individual works by Sarah Lucas is the ongoing development of her practice as a whole in which context always matters. So roll on Venice 2015.