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Made in Britain

By Chris Gordon
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A new exhibition of British contemporary art is now on view at the Hermitage. Part of the museum's 20/21 project, which aims to collect and display works of art by contemporary artists, the show heralds the second time that pieces from Charles Saatchi's collection have been displayed at the museum.

Lacking any overarching concept, the exhibition is called "Newspeak" in reference to the language George Orwell invented for his novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four." Defined by the author as "the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year," it is a rather inauspicious model with which to champion a new generation of British artists. It also seems especially chilling in a country like Russia, upon which, in part, Orwell modeled his dystopia.

The stated theme of the show, as far as there is one, is rebellion against the status quo. Yet the real theme is equivocation. All of the artists are, if one is to believe the catalogue, making work in reaction to prevailing cultural values and authenticity. There is nothing new in that. And as much as it wants to be seen as a political statement, casting a portrait of singer Cher as Che Guevara as the show's totemic image speaks more about the disappearance of politics in empty gesture.

In true focus-group style, it's all about packaging. It feels like "Newspeak" is just a hodge-podge of the collector's recent purchases and that the curators, faced with Saatchi's omnivorous collecting habits, simply scrambled to find a conceptual framework with which to justify the grouping. Which, truth be told, isn't at all necessary.

There is some first rate work on display and it would have been much better to have simply pointed the way and let the work speak for itself. "Stuff I Like" would have been a more honest and, frankly, more challenging title. Instead, the viewer is confronted with overly complex, buzzword filled didactic texts on the walls of the gallery that are more obfuscating than illuminating. Misdirection and sleight of hand win the day.

Among the highlights, and there are many, are a riff on a Bacon portrait painted by Hurvin Anderson and a Barry Regate painting that is like Philip Guston, George Condo and Paul McCarthy bashed into a Cuisinart. Saatchi still has a keen eye for good, new painting.

Sculpture is also well represented. Fergal Stapelton's "And a Door Opened 3" is a nearly opaque black Perspex box that is mysterious, elegant and impenetrable. It looks the least like capital "A" art of anything in the show, except perhaps for littlewhitehead's "It Happened in the Corner." A life-sized group of wax dummies dressed in all manner of street-gear huddles in a corner peering at something they conceal with their bodies. The



For The St. Petersburg Times

Hurvin Anderson's 'Peter's Sitters 3' (2009) is one of the works from London's Saatchi Gallery currently on display at the State Hermitage's Jordan Gallery.



Alexander Belenky / The St. Petersburg Times

littlewhitehead's 'It Happened in the Corner' lures in visitors curious to discover what really is in the corner.

work is so realistic and the posture so compelling that viewers join the back of the queue to try and get a peek at what's going on.

Despite serious misgivings about value creation masquerading as something important and thoughtful, the collector and the museum deserve credit for bringing to light things which otherwise would probably have taken a lot longer to be recognized. And while "Newspeak" is strangely hollow as an exhibition, and a far cry from the exuberance and open-ended possibilities that "Sensation" pointed to, there are some extremely handsome and fascinating works that resonate beyond the confines of the narrow context into which they have been forced.

As always, the best approach is to stroll in, have a look round and make up your own mind rather than taking too much notice of the white noise that supports and surrounds the exhibition. Patient looking is always rewarded, and the value of discovering something new for oneself is worth putting up with a bit of doublespeak.

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