

Art: Next We Touch Earth – New Art Exchange, Gregory Boulevard, Nottingham

Friday, September 12, 2008

This is Nottingham

NEXT We Change Earth, we are told, is an anagram of New Art Exchange.

Samson Kambulu's piece *The New Art Exchange Creative Index* occupies a fair bit of wall space in the building's ground-floor gallery with its 200 anagrams running down the wall to a book containing 55,000 computer generated anagrams.

I, for one, felt a big yawning "so what?" at its almost endless, useless wordplay, variations of which seem to have been done a googillion times before by others. So, sorry to be negative early on, but things can only get better from here on in.

Kambulu, originally from Malawi, exhibited in Nottingham - including the former Art Exchange which the new venue replaced - before heading off to London a few years back. And this connection with Nottingham is what brings together the artists on show here. All of the 12 are contemporary artists who have lived, worked or studied in the city, or who continue to live and work here and have allowed the city to help define their artistic identity.

One of the latter is Michael Forbes, freelance curator of the NAE, whose black'n'day-glo remodelling of 18th-Century Staffordshire Figures has become almost the symbol of the exhibition - because the impact of the figures is immediate, and because they're on the posters. The "meaning" of the figures may be rather obvious - delicate reminders of Britain's white colonial past outrageously re-coloured to seize back black history - but they're violently effective nonetheless. Like Forbes, Said Adrus makes a two-part contribution to this show and his film upstairs, *Lost Pavilion*, about the sad fate of a Muslim cemetery in Surrey, makes sense of his photographs downstairs. It is deliberately sited next to Harjeet Kaur's photographic series titled *Remembrance of Things Past*. Rather than referring to Proust's novel, however, the images portray, in snapshots, an Asian child's time growing up in a British city with its terraced housing and pavement hopscotch games. But as in Proust's big book, this is a reconstructed, perhaps idealised, past. Back downstairs, Hetain Patel is another artist who has tied his flag to Nottingham, in part through his former residency at Lakeside Arts Centre. Here, in a video installation titled *It's Growing On Me* which has an element of durational art about it, the artist slowly grows a moustache. Same facial expression, same shirt, same haircut: only the appearance of the upper lip changes, transforming Hetain from clean-cut young bloke into serious, responsible Indian family man, and thus suggesting the cultural importance of facial hair to Indian manhood. Mention must also be made of Keith Piper's video triptych *Forest Fields*, a subtle meditation on the historical meaning of Forest

rec, and an "interactive sonic installation" titled *Dub Morphology* by Gary Stewart, Trevor Mathison and Obinna Nwosu. Part cave, part rap soundtrack, this walk-in piece also plays with that old chestnut about whether it's OK to use the word "blackboard" (social workers should skip this sentence) by employing an, er, blackboard scrawled with white chalk. It was only upon reading the programme that I learned this was all about the murders of teenagers by teenagers - thus tying in with Nottingham's lovely acquired reputation as Stab City.

Like the exhibition as a whole, the finished impact is bigger than its parts. This first NAE event is smoothly professional, but perhaps suffers from a thematic looseness due to its intent to showcase where Nottingham's black and Asian art stands in 2008. Yet only professional curators will be annoyed by that. For the rest of us the exhibition is visually and intellectually busy enough to bear repeated visits.

Website

<http://www.thisisnottingham.co.uk/Art-Touch-Earth-8211-New-Art-Exchange-Gregory-Boulevard-Nottingham/story-12242505-detail/story.html>