
Liverpool Biennial 2010

Art: Column



Hammer Projects: Ryan Trecartin, installation at the Hammer Museum Los Angeles, 2008 - Photo: Joshua White

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Dodging the Lib Dem conference, we run our eye over the Liverpool Biennial and finds it's politics as usual

Last week lucky Liverpool played host to one of the most important and provocative gatherings of talent on the UK calendar - no, not the Liberal Democrat Party Conference - the Liverpool Biennial, although both seemed beset by some degree of infighting. Every two years the citywide culturefest injects a hefty dose of international contemporary art to the 'Pool, centred around one curated exhibition, this year entitled 'Touched', which is shared between different venues and various public locations.

This is where the trouble starts. If the Biennial was a mirror of the coalition government, then Tate Liverpool would be David Cameron, quietly lording itself over proceedings, with other institutional cronies such as the A Foundation, Bluecoat and Fact galleries also toeing the party line (think George Osborne, Theresa May and William Hague). The real star of the show (standing in for self-styled Lib Dem lone wolf Nick Clegg) is the Biennial's invited curator, Italian upstart Lorenzo Fusi, whose off-site exhibitions and interventions take far more risks than the local Liverpool museums, even if he's occasionally drowned out by their conservative harrumphing. 'Touched' is a typically woolly biennial theme, a catchall term a bit like the Tory Manifesto slogan, 'We're All In This Together' (that's enough political parallels).

In some ways, Fusi is also a typical European biennial curator, in that he insists on splitting up the main thesis into nonsensical sub-sections, in this case called 'The Human Stain' and 'Re:Thinking Trade'. Yet it's when confronted by the least touchy-feely works in Fusi's selection - dealing with hard-hitting topics such as conflict, oil and the connection between fruit juice and slave labour - where biennial visitors are most likely to be touched by strong emotion.

A phalanx of colourful flags adorning one dilapidated building all appear to be on fire. Taken from numerous images of that most inflammatory of TV-centric gestures - the ritual burning of a flag - artist Will Kwan makes a succinct point about the pettiness and divisiveness of this act of national defacement. On the other side of the same disused warehouse, emblazoned with its former occupant's logo, 'Europeasure International Ltd', are numerous broken windows. Not odd, you might think, given decades of decline in industry and manufacture, except that Spanish artist Cristina Lucas has encouraged Liverpoolian unionists to hurl stones at this glasshouse, their native vandalism ironically wreaking only bittersweet revenge. Alongside this perfectly placed site-specific work is Alfredo Jaar's frightening film about the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which he accuses Bill Clinton (and by extension the Western world) of ignoring the plight of a million people. 'We Wish To Inform You That We Didn't Know' might not even be art if it wasn't displayed on split-screens, but that doesn't make it any less urgent or vital viewing.

The next best venue is a sprawling old hardware shop on Renshaw Street boasting the longest shop frontage in Britain. Inside, and along the facade, Fusi struggles to balance his intertwining 'Touched' themes, but again the toughest pieces stand out - none more so than young American Ryan Trecartin's three-channel video, 'Trill-ogy Comp', in the basement. Trill is the key word here, as this unholy trinity of homemade movies, each an unwatchable 40 minutes long, assaults every iota of brain power needed for intelligent art appreciation, making such a feat impossible. Even watching a Jeremy Kyle pixellated sex-cam special on fast-forward, to an AutoTuned R'n'B soundtrack, doesn't come close to describing the car-crash mash-up Trecartin presents. Yet, as nausea-inducing as it sounds, it's also a very knowing and logical conclusion to the imminent and total YouTubeification of culture.

This video interlude rides roughshod over the paintings upstairs but at least highlights uncompromising and ambitious works elsewhere, including a room by Rosa Barba that pipes in sounds emanating from tunnels beneath the river Mersey and a replica of a traditional Korean house by Do Ho Suh that has crash-landed uncomfortably in a gap in the street. There are, of course, many more worthy moments of the biennial trail at the various institutions and in the unofficial programme. However, the idea that any overarching curatorium or committee of venues can successfully carry a theme or one unified message is naive. Instead, let's call it a coalition of the unwilling but able.

[The Liverpool Biennial](#) continues at various venues in Liverpool until November 28 2010.
