

Nushin Elahi's London Letter

Read more at <http://london-letter.com>

Photography is all the rage in London at the moment, with no fewer than six major shows focussed on it. The National Gallery presents its first photographic show, the Barbican tells the history of the 60s and 70s through photographs, Somerset House shows Luc-Bresson's work, the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich the great American landscape artist Ansel Adams', the V&A contemporary Middle Eastern photography and the Tate Modern has pitched the work of William Klein against that of Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama.

Seduced by Art: Photography Past and Present (until 20 Jan) is admittedly the **National Gallery's** first foray into this field, and it doesn't claim to be a history of the art form, but it feels very slight, despite the interesting premise: that paintings influenced photographers. Using iconic images like Gainsborough's Mr and Mrs Andrews alongside other minor paintings, it goes to intricate lengths to draw parallels that largely leave one feeling, 'So what?' Among the photographers that really stay with you are Julia Margaret Cameron and other early pioneers who were pushing the boundaries of this medium. Despite the large scale, there is little truly significant work from today, rather self-conscious modern interpretations of old masters. The fault for that, though, lies in the curatorial choices.

In sharp contrast to these few big blow-ups is the enormous range of small photographs at the **Barbican**, a simple presentation that allows the images to portray all the explosive power of those tumultuous decades, the Sixties and Seventies. **Everything Was Moving** (until 13 Jan) presents photographs from across the globe that captured these changes, including, of course, in South Africa, represented by David Goldblatt and Drum photographer Ernest Cole. Alongside familiar images from Soweto, the struggle for civil rights in America's Deep South, in Mao's China, in India and the Ukraine make this a fascinating view of the tidal wave of social revolution that affected the world then.

American photographer William Klein's images will be recognised by many who may not know his name. By contrasting him with Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama in **William Klein + Daido Moriyama** (until 13 Jan) the **Tate Modern** introduces us to an Oriental counterpart who also explored the gritty side of urban life both in Tokyo and later in New York. This enormous collection of work features Klein's fashion photography, his films and his urban portraits, counterpoised by the probing close-ups of Moriyama, all blown up huge and packed in blocks to suggest central role of the photo-book for both artists. The fact that the images are mainly in black and white renders them timeless.

South African artist **William Kentridge** (20 Jan) is featured in a touring show from the **Hayward Gallery**, which travels across the UK but also in what seems to me the first really successful use of the circular walls of the **Tate Modern's Tanks: I am not Me, the Horse is not Mine**. In Kentridge's distinctive almost monochromatic style he offers a series of eight simultaneous films. The cavernous darkened space gives one an almost surround cinematic view of disjointed images which constantly form and reform to create an immersive experience which will be unique to each viewer. The images have a flavour of Russia, some of them based on his drawings for the Shostakovich opera for the New York Met, *The Nose*, which was based on a Gogol story. With expert assurance, the films mesmerize one in their absurdist interplay as Kentridge draws African imagery through shapes and figures that tantalise with a bizarre historical narrative. This is performance art with a theatricality that challenges and entertains rather than demands artistic indulgence.

Tate Britain promises a radical new interpretation of the Pre-Raphaelites with their exhibition **Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde** (until 13 Jan), but judging by the throngs of viewers no such review is needed. The public obviously adores them anyway, but I have to admit to being one of the cynics who finds them often little more than Victorian pin-ups, sticky, sweet and syrupy, their women lionesses with rather masculine jaws and rugged shoulders, the colour bordering on crude, the subjects twee and the morality irritating. However, this is a massive show and one which explores the full trajectory of the movement, from its roots to the final swansong from Holman Hunt, his psychedelic *The Lady of Shalott* 1886-1905 which has been coaxed from an American museum for this occasion. I challenge anyone not to find at least one ravishingly beautiful painting among this enormous array. For me it was an evocative October landscape of a lake, owned by Andrew Lloyd-Weber, who apparently has a large collection of works. Among the range of exhibits are textiles, stained glass and furniture, showing their influence on the Arts and Crafts movement and William Morris. It's a sumptuously rich show, proving the popularity of a movement that pursued beauty for its own sake, among a public that perhaps finds a sad lack of it today.

It's hard to fathom why **Zeng Fanzhi** is hailed as one of China's superstar artists when you see his enormous paintings at **Gagosian's Britannia Street** gallery. Nine may be a lucky number, but it leaves the walls looking quite bare in what is his first showing in the West. True, the three works that greet you dwarf any viewer, but there is nothing particularly Oriental about them. He has taken iconic Western art images – Durer's hare and praying hands, and an old man's head by Rembrandt, blown them up and then placed a lattice-work of tangled thorns over them, one that is not very visible in reproduction. The colours are bold and, certainly in the landscapes, rather unsubtle, but there is a glow to them and the technique of overpainting the thorns without smudging the basic image shows great skill. It's only when paging through catalogues that you begin to understand how subversive and challenging this artist is, with his shocking depictions of people hiding behind masks. And to understand that perhaps he too felt the need of one when coming to the West.

Seduced by Art: Photography Past and Present Show: National Gallery
 Maisie Maud Broadhead: *Keep Them Sweet*, 2010, C-type print,
 Jeff Wall: *The Destroyed Room*, 1978, printed 1987, Julia Margaret Cameron, Kate Keown, about 1866, Gregg Wilson, Wilson Centre for Photography

Barbican, Everything Was Moving Show: David Goldblatt: *Saturday morning at the Hypermarket: Semi-final of the Miss Lovely Legs Competition*. 1979-1980,
 Bruce Davidson (b. 1933) *Black Americans, New York City*. From the series 'New York (Life)' From New York, 1961-65 C Bruce Davidson / Magnum Photos
 Kentridge: *Haywood Gallery: Ubu Tells the Truth* (1996-97) Image Courtesy David Krut Fine Art, New York and London.

Tate Modern: William Klein + Daido Moriyama :
 Daido Moriyama, *Another Country In New York*, 1971, Boris Mikhailov: *Yesterday's Sandwich / Superimpositions*, Late 1960s - late 1970s.

Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde :
 Ford Madox Brown: *The Pretty Baa-Lams* 1851-1859

Gagosian Gallery: Zeng Fanzhi – Chinese artist

(Below) William Kentridge *Portage* [detail] (2000)
 Image Courtesy David Krut Fine Art, New York and London.

