



LONDON LETTER

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

October is the month for art fairs in London, while at the same time the galleries open their autumn shows. This year the emphasis falls on countries beyond Europe and America, with three Latin American artists showing at major galleries and a new art fair of contemporary African art, 1:54, setting up in Somerset House to complement the decade-old Frieze Art Fair in Regents Park.

There are 54 African states, and many of them are represented here, although mainly by European galleries. This was a fantastic chance to recognise the work of artists who are now to be seen in the British Museum's extensive African collections, or given showings at the Tate, as British institutions seek to broaden their horizons: Rachid Koraichi's signature metal figures, Owusu-Ankomah's Chinese looking glyphs and Ablade Glover's stunningly colourful almost abstract market scene. Best of all, though, was Romauld Hazoumé's giant ball made out of petrol cans. Some of the South Africans represented were Karel Nel mapping the cosmos, Esther Mahlangu's traditional Ndebele image and a large black and white drawing by Cameron Platter. The themes were as numerous as the states, ranging from decorative photography and a woven sax to an oil of the final judgement in the political world.

A decade on and the Frieze is firmly entrenched, with major galleries now to be seen in both sections, Frieze Art and Frieze Masters, which started last year. There was a sense that not only were the big guys in town, but smaller galleries were showing new names. A Brazilian gallery paired British and Brazilian artists, and there were more Latin American and African galleries showing than ever before. Many galleries opted for solo shows of artists such as De Kooning, Matisse drawings and Victor Pasmore, and a newly discovered Breughel was on show. A naked statue of a pregnant artist had room for an adult to curl up in the hollow womb, while Jeff Koons had security guards around his trio of Tweeties and a gift-wrapped heart. Eventually, it all gets too much, and then the sculpture park offers a bit of calm, with work such as the giant bronze head or a kite-shaped African cloth to catch the eye.

Looking at the early and late work by Brazilian artist **Mira Schendel (Tate Modern until 19 January 2014)** one would have no idea that they were by the same person. An Italian who had to flee the Nazi's because of her Jewish background, Schendel became one of her adopted homeland's top artists, representing it at the 1968 Venice Biennale. The early works are strong, earthy coloured oils with solid blocks of pigment, reminiscent of Klee (whose work is showing upstairs). The Biennale piece is a huge installation with hanging boards inscribed with writing. Another piece features a constellation of almost a hundred delicate graphic objects, highlighting the themes of transparency and language that would occupy most of her mature work.

The **Serpentine Gallery** recently opened a second space just across the river designed by Zaha Hadid in an old gun powder store. The Sackler Gallery houses an installation by the Argentinian sculptor Adrián Villar Rojas entitled **Today We Reboot the Planet** (until Nov 10). The loose bricks clink as you walk round

the small space. A concrete elephant crumples under the weight of a concrete plinth copied from the exterior of the building. Inside huge concrete walls hide thousands of random concrete objects, with plants sprouting in unlikely spaces commenting on the unsustainability of our energy consumption on this planet. The birds do it, the bees do it, and now we know that octopuses do it too! I'm talking sex of course. And there I was thinking that Hokusai was best known for his Great Wave print, but among the cognoscenti, it's the picture of the octopus pleasuring the female diver that gets bandied about.

Put sex in the title, slap on an age restriction and you're sure to draw the crowds. That venerable institution, the **British Museum**, is offering the first comprehensive exhibition of **Shunga art, called Shunga: Sex and pleasure in Japanese art** (until 5 Jan 2014). It's got London whispering about it in the most unlikely places and even at Frieze Masters there was a complete set of coloured prints only shown in black and white at the BM.

While you can't get away from ample genitalia in the images, there is also an incredible sense of sensuous delight in all the paintings, done by some of Japan's greatest artists. There's mutual tenderness from illicit lovers, from teenagers, married couples and even nuns! Reading the captions adds hugely to understanding the humour in situations, like that of the old man with balls "like pumpkins" trying to entice his wife under the covers after being fired up by listening to the youngsters next door. The curator called it "a love letter to sex" and with the intertwining of limbs, the drapery of gorgeous kimonos and a shared sense of pleasure in the act, that's an accurate description.

There is more sex and lots of it in the **Whitechapel Gallery** retrospective (until 15 Dec) of YBA **Sarah Lucas**. It left me wondering about the difference in attitude between the East and West. There is nothing beautiful about this lot of huge concrete penises or little ice-cream pink ones melting on the counter or the shock tactics of enormous posters of naked men with slabs of meat or foaming cans of beer between their legs. The lower room is packed with furniture: stained mattresses and tables with symbolic genitalia on them, or how about a haunch of pork with trotters dressed in underpants?

Her trademark stuffed stocking figures, of which there are many draped over chairs and on toilets, she is now casting in bronze, and they work surprisingly well. It's a relentless assault on the senses though, that demeans both sexes, and sex. I'd always thought Lucas was the true artist, while Hirst chased money, but I'd rather have almost any of his work than these.

So if it's sex you want, go for the Shunga rather than the British variety.



Sara Lucas at Frieze Art 2013 / Argentinian sculptor Adrián Villar Rojas : *Elephant* / Sara Lucas at Frieze Art 2013 / Frieze Art 2013 / Installation at African art fair / Jeff Koons at Frieze 2013