

## British Art Show 9 Brings Eclecticism to a Pandemic-Stricken UK

Is contemporary art a reaction to social, political and local specificities or is it active in creating new utopic, progressive impulses? The BAS9 aspires to ask both



BY SEAN BURNS IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, UK REVIEWS | 12 JUL 21



In Aberdeen – on Scotland's east coast – the long-awaited British Art Show 9 (BAS9) opened at the Art Gallery & Museum on 10 July. 'Britishness' is a disputed identity in Scotland, and grouping artists together under such a rubric seems itself controversial in 2021. Shows with a broad remit invariably evoke questions with equally broad answers (and curatorial ambitions): is contemporary art a reaction to social, political and local specificities or is it active in creating new utopic, progressive impulses? The BAS9 aspires to ask both. It's a five-yearly snapshot of artistic production among 47 artists in Britain and a touring exhibition (curated by Irene Aristizábal and Hammad Nasar) that feeds into the communities – first Aberdeen, and later Wolverhampton, Manchester and Plymouth – in which it lands. Its success lies not only in how it appears in the pristine galleries of Aberdeen's newly refurbished museum but also in the schools and streets that the programme seeks to reach.



We exist in a very diligent age of artistic production in which depravity – and sometimes personality – are less favoured than thoroughly researched social intervention or archivally substantiated case studies. But there are mavericks in the BAS9 for whom self-expression isn't a dirty word. Standout pieces come in the shape of Marianna Simnett's difficult-to-watch film *The Needle and the Larynx* (2016) – in which she receives a Botox injection directly into her throat to lower the tone of her voice – and a suite of refreshingly angry gouache and Indian ink cartoons by Hardeep Pandhal. I'm drawn to the directness of these works because, rather than explaining what they're doing, they simply do it. Pandhal's grotesque caricatures, like *Viking King's Depression* (2020), create a necessary sense of balance in a show containing several investigative works – with moments of brilliance and bemusement.

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Maeve Brennan's film installation *The Goods* (2021) takes a fascinating look at the illicit international trade in stolen and pillaged antiquities in the Middle East. This vast industry implicates museums, dealers and auction houses across the world. In contrast, Kathrin Böhm's wall-mounted tape diagrams, flow charts and messages on architectural theory feel inaccessible. There are also instances where the display underrepresents incredible artists – particularly Celia Hempton and Marguerite Humeau – which may change in further BAS9 iterations.



Margaret Salmon, *I you me we us*, 2018, installation view. Courtesy: © the artist and Dundee Contemporary Arts; photograph: Ruth Clark



Margaret Salmon's *I you me we us* (2018) – initially commissioned for her show at nearby Dundee Contemporary Arts – is unpretentious and quietly confident in its execution. Two stacked monitors display 16mm images of intricate hand gestures, lovers embracing and quivering potted plants. And her delicate Karl Blossfeldt-esque series of medium-format flower photographs *Lockdown Flowers* (2020) points to how the limitations of COVID-19 confinement have forced artists to be economical in their materials and subject matter. Salmon's works hold space in the exhibition precisely because they don't beg for attention; there's a tenderness about the texture of the film and the framing. Elsewhere, in Patrick Goddard's brilliant film *Animal Antics* (2021), a judgemental, talking bichon frise called Whoopsie guides its owner around a dystopian zoo. And a sighting of Michael Armitage's exquisite lithographs feels like a rare privilege (*Ewaso Niro*, 2016–17).

BAS9 is an energy event that the curators and Hayward Gallery Touring – which commissioned the show – have gone to extraordinary lengths to stage in a pandemic. It will open in cities (hopefully) while the UK begins to lift restrictions. Emblazoned across Pandhal's *Descending Selkie's Staircase (Psychologically)* (2020) appear the prophetic words 'conclusion comes first then then I make up the method'. Aristizábal and Nasar built this exhibition without a preconceived framework or 'conclusion'; they met 230 artists and let the work guide their decision-making. One artwork will enter the respective museum's collection in each city – in Aberdeen, that's Florence Peak's *CRUDE CARE* (2021) – and artists like Alberta Whittle will add to their installation in each new location.

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Hardeep Pandhal, *Spectral Scripts Reluctantly Festoon Tantric Dungeon*, 2020. Courtesy: © the artist; photograph: Patrick Jameson

This no-size-fits-all approach is a strength of the show. And, thankfully, BAS9 doesn't come close to the M25. But, for its minor foibles and broad strokes, there's no undermining its ambition. In Aberdeen alone, the museum has appointed paid ambassadors to entice communities to the galleries, and Grace Ndiritu will form a local ecological activist collective, *Plant Theatre for Plant People* (2021). The consideration of the two curators – who had never met before embarking on this mammoth undertaking – shines through on an eclectic and compassionate show that will hopefully leave a lasting influence on cities in need of some excitement after the seemingly never-ending drag of COVID-19.