

TURNER PRIZE AT TATE BRITAIN



Turner Prize installation shot, Duncan Campbell, 'It for Others', 2013, © the artist, courtesy Tate Photography

The night before my visit, the Turner Prize was awarded on British TV. And as luck would have it, my favorite contribution, Duncan Campbell, ac-

tually won. With artists presenting archives, paying homage and narrating stories, this exhibition strangely reminded me of last spring's Whitney Biennial. Both James Richards and Duncan Campbell unwittingly conjure Man Ray, Ciara Phillips pays tribute to Sister Corita and Tris Vonna-Michell honors sound poet Henri Chopin. Richards remembers Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe and Wolfgang Tillmans, while Campbell references Chris Marker, Sigmar Polke and Alan Resnais. By readily admitting their artistic references, this generation eschews appropriation altogether. Luckily, the Turner Prize format of four solo exhibitions is much easier to maneuver than the endless Whitney parade.

Richards' 'Rosebud' (2013), a black and white video comprised of several consecutive short videos, opens the show. Immersed in a dynamic soundtrack, this video features a handheld bird, bushes shot at night, an elderflower being brushed against body parts and published photographs by Man Ray and Mapplethorpe, whose genitalia have been scratched away. The latter scenes seem particularly violent as censored books, clamped to a photo-stand, sometimes also appear with a boot across their pages. Commemorating Haring's Latino lovers and international dealers from the 1980s, 'Untitled Merchandise (Lovers and Dealers)' (2007) consists of six blankets em-

blazoned with Haring selfies. 'The Screens' (2013) features four slide carousels projecting images of bodily wounds, bruises and freckles painted onto the skin by make-up artists. There's a longing for 80s-era leather-adventures in play.

Next up is Vonna-Michell, who also employs slide carousels, though to a much different effect. 'Postscript IV (Berlin)' (2014) presents dozens of slide imagery, supposedly shot in Berlin near where his mother grew up, set to a beautifully narrated story concerning her early years, when her father suddenly appeared after having been gone for five years. 'Finding Chopin: Dans l'Essex' (2014) combines a video of an Essex salt marsh, a video documenting his Montreal exhibition 'Finding Chopin' narrated by Chopin's sound poetry, and source imagery mounted on angled light boxes. Both Vonna-Michell and Richards seem bent on recovering stories that are in danger of being lost, as if memory failure is akin to species extinction.

LOSS

By contrast, Phillips' installation 'Things Shared' (2014) seems comparatively joyful with its brightly-colored prints. 'New Things to Discuss', a little sound installation featuring friends and strangers proposing fresh topics, proves prom-

ising. Although she apparently finds inspiration in the activist-nun Sister Corita's prints, there is little indication here of the activist nature of Phillips' practice. Even if much of Phillips' work is generated collectively, produced in workshop formats, or is the result of collaborative practices, it's difficult to imagine its activist applications. Printmaking has always been a collective practice, as artists have had to rely on printers' specialized skills. The way 'Things Shared' over-emphasizes the collective, one rather senses the profound loss of collective practices.

Given how spectacular Sigmar Polke's retrospective is (on view at Tate Modern through 8 February 2015), Campbell's inane animated film 'Sigmar' (2008) is a disgrace. It bizarrely reduces

Polke to a set of simple drawings accompanied by basic mumblings and grunts in German. I'm not sure how anyone wins here. By contrast, 'It for Others' (2013) links several complex stories, however much he's sourced them from others. Although I have no idea who to credit with the cinematography, its simplicity and construction are perfect. The narrated text is also wonderful, even if it is largely derived from Marker and Resnais' 1953 black and white film 'Les Statues meurent aussi' (Statues Also Die). What makes Campbell's film unusual and wonderful is the way he strings such seemingly unrelated topics together – the West's reducing African religious and ritualistic totems to museum objects, advertisements, image interpretation, contemporary

dance and today's art world. Michael Clark's choreographed dance, inspired by Marx and shot overhead, is especially fascinating. Most telling is the narrator's commanding artists to treat their percentage as a gift. This film's strength rests on its capacity to be as damning of the art world as Marker and Resnais were of colonial attitudes. UK critics seem to see only indifference here, yet I notice loss, yearning and desperate pleas for something more. Canceling the Turner Prize would only aggravate such unfulfilled desires.

Sue SPAID

Turner Prize until 4 January 2015 at Tate Britain, London, UK.