

REVIEWS

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‘British Baroque: Power and Illusion’, Tate Britain, London, 5 February – 19 April 2020. Catalogue: Ed. Tabitha Barber, Tate Publishing, London, 2020, 176 pages, softback, ISBN 9781849766814, £25.00.

Nicholas Babbington

The variety and quality of the works brought together in Tate Britain’s ‘British Baroque’ exhibition constitutes a valiant attempt to highlight an often neglected period of Britain’s art history. Unfortunately, the exhibition itself is more dazzling than it is substantive. The promised contemplation of questions of power and illusion disappears without ever being properly defined within a survey-like structure that encompasses numerous digressions across a 54-year span.

Problematically, the curators do not address the reasons for the ongoing cultural amnesia concerning the Restoration and its aftermath. The complexities and ambiguities of a period recovering from protracted internecine conflicts are ignored whilst the exhibition offers a deterministic historicism that organises its exhibits under reductive rubrics. ‘Baroque’ here acts as a historical signifier of a ‘baroque age’ rather than denoting any coherent category of stylistic, thematic or iconographic practices. ‘British’ is an anachronistic reference to a non-existent

political or cultural entity. Furthermore, there is a lingering question as to what makes this art ‘British’ at all. Out of approximately 64 artists with some presence here, only around 17 have ‘British’ origins, and many of those studied abroad. Questions of how patrons and viewers engaged with foreign artists and their art, what role this period had in the development of conceptions of uniquely ‘British’ art in following centuries and what we can learn about the ongoing significance of nationalistic appropriations of art are left unbroached by the exhibition. Its objective seems only to unearth concealed fossils of historical art, presenting petrified specimens of patronage desire and artistic intent.

Instead of confronting nuanced contexts and attempting to provide balanced accounts of varieties of visual culture, the exhibition troublingly regresses into old-fashioned historical reductionism and a single framing narrative – that of the persistent centrality of the social hierarchy – encompasses all. The opportunity to raise and explore the ‘counter memories’ of marginalised and excluded groups is passed over.¹ The arbitrary fixation of periodisation upon the reign of the restored Stuart dynasty, framed explicitly as an ‘age of hierarchy’, makes the exhibition feel more like the canonisation of a ‘forgotten’ period of art history than it does a historical exploration and analysis of ‘the association between art and power’ as the catalogue claims.²

However, the major problems of the exhibition are the digressions that weaken the clarity of its own ideological position and make it a disorientating experience. The 10 rooms struggle to maintain the thrust of a compelling discourse. This issue is exemplified by the transition from the first three rooms, where we find some interesting considerations of courtly portraiture alongside a discussion of the politics of religious display, to room four in which we are accosted by, according to the wall text, 'highly fashionable' *trompe l'oeil* paintings. This shift from the sacred to the profane, from Jacob Huysmans's *Crucifixion* (c.1663) via the illustration of a magnified flea in Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665) to Edward Collier's *Trompe l'oeil Letter Rack* (c.1700) of nearly four decades later, leaves the visitor perplexed about curatorial intentions. Does the exhibition merely mean to touch on the diversity of visual culture produced during this period? Is there an underlying theory as to why illusionistic images functioned as fashionable luxury items? Such questions arise haphazardly and remain unconsidered.

Augmenting the feeling of distraction and disorientation is the sensation that one is having the kitchen sink thrown at them. This exhibition supplements its illustration of the relationship between power and illusion through examples of, among other things: a chandelier, scientific illustrations of flowers, lacquered cabinets, Chinese porcelain and architectural diagrams. This fidgeting eclecticism dilutes any coherent experience.

As space is limited I will outline two further issues that hamper 'British Baroque'. The first is the elision of the deposition and replacement of James II by William and Mary in 1688. This happens somewhere between rooms eight and nine for, as we enter the

latter, the transformation known as the 'Glorious Revolution' is presented as a *fait accompli* and the exhibition turns, instead, to the spectacle of war.

This avoidance of what appeared to contemporary observers as, variously, a *coup-d'état*, foreign invasion or political revolution, in an exhibition explicitly claiming to explore power's exploitation of art, is surprising. The capacity of the exhibition to establish its engagement with the period is compromised by this puzzling omission. The lack of inquiry into this ambiguous revolution seems to support the feeling that the intent behind 'British Baroque' was more inclined to raise up monolithic historical monuments than to venture to chart the dark and dangerous waters of our collective history.

Finally, a word must be said about Bendetto Gennari's portrait of *Hortense Mancini* (c.1684), which depicts her attended by four black slaves. It is troubling that the curators felt comfortable with a token gesture towards Britain's slave-trading past by pointing out the problematic content of black children fettered with silver collars, 'a highly uncomfortable element for viewers now' as the catalogue helpfully notes.³ It is astonishing to find no further engagement with race in the catalogue. Tate has a responsibility to challenge its visitors, not flatter their enlightened sensibilities. To pose, like a question, such an intrinsically racialised image in the context of Britain's courtly society and then fail to engage with it – not seeking to explore its production, reception and history – is a failing which sums up this exhibition. Fundamentally, while 'British Baroque' succeeds in generating many questions, its engagement with them is only ever partial and superficial.

1 Christopher K. Coffman, 'Towards a Structural Stylistics of Exhibition: Space, Rhetoric, and

- Institutional Legitimation' in *JAC*, vol. 32, no.1, 2012, pp. 251–278.
- 2 Tabitha Barber, 'Introduction', in Tabitha Barber (ed.), *British Baroque: Power and Illusion*, exh. cat., London, 2020, p. 11.
 - 3 David A.H.B. Taylor, 'The Restoration Court', in Tabitha Barber (ed.), *British Baroque: Power and Illusion*, exh. cat., London, 2020, p. 45.

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'Climate in Crisis: Environmental Change in the Indigenous Americas', The Brooklyn Museum, New York, 14 February 2020 – 20 June 2021.

Edward Christie

Scientists now widely agree that humanity's impact on the Earth has become so profound that it has driven the planet into a new geological epoch — the Anthropocene. Although the date on which this period of history began continues to be debated, it is clear that the colonisation of the Americas by Europeans in the late fifteenth-century had impacts that were significant on a planetary scale. One estimate maintains that the introduction of diseases and relentless conquests resulted in the deaths of at least 45 million Indigenous people, or 90% of the pre-contact population. This led to the collapse of farmlands across a continent which were replaced by forests, resulting in the removal of around 13 billion tonnes of carbon from the atmosphere, and triggering the coldest

part of the Little Ice Age.¹ Beyond these physical effects, Indigenous belief systems, which maintain that humanity is coexistent with nature, were eclipsed by the European, dualistic conception of the environment as an external resource to be exploited to fuel so-called modern 'progress', which conversely drove climate change.

'Climate in Crisis' takes this history as its starting point to frame more than 60 works by Indigenous artists that span 2,800 years and form part of the Brooklyn Museum's 'Arts of the Americas' collection. The curation illuminates how Indigenous communities of the Americas have been affected by environmental destruction driven by colonialism, and promotes Indigenous perspectives to inform more sustainable relationships with the natural world.

By taking this postcolonial stance, the exhibition associates itself with a wave of art historians who are working to extend the temporal, spatial and socio-political boundaries of ecocritical art history, which generally privileges contemporary art produced in affluent hubs of the art world. A key protagonist of this movement is T. J. Demos, whose recent research has endeavoured to 'decolonise nature' by championing contemporary artists — many of whom are based in the Global South — who imagine new ways of conceiving of ourselves and the environment that challenge the destructiveness of modern ways of being, which continue to be dominant today.² Comparably, Sugata Ray's recent writing has explored the impact that eco-catastrophes had on South Asian creative practices during the Little Ice Age, between 1550–1850.³ These art-historical developments resonate with the environmental movement's increasing commitment to diversity. This