

# The Stepford Summer Show

*He who resolves never to ransack any mind but his own, will be soon reduced, from mere barrenness, to the poorest of all imitations; he will be obliged to imitate himself, and to repeat what he has before often repeated.*

**I'VE ALWAYS SUSPECTED THAT ART**, like politics and religion, attracts the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Confirmation came recently when I watched a BBC4 programme, entitled 'The Private Life of The Royal Academy', a behind-the-scenes documentary promoting the Summer Show of 2018. I was reminded of the 1972 satirical thriller, *The Stepford Wives* (for those of you unfamiliar with the film, Stepford is a fictitious town in New England that appears to be in the grip of some creepy and malevolent cult with echoes of freemasonry). This was probably because some of the interviewees sounded like hostages in a ransom video.

I can't remember when I didn't have serious misgivings about the art world and its institutions including the Academy and I gave up going to see the Summer Show (let alone submitting work) years ago. I'm not alone in that. It's billed as a celebration of the arts but invariably turns out to be a rather depressing indictment – a display of the overly familiar and the self-satisfied. It appears to have drifted into self-parody.

I get the impression that many of the exhibiting artists make similar work year in, year out. Academicians are no exception and submit the same old stuff – some seem to have been making one painting for 40 or 50 years, symptomatic not of continuity but a lack of curiosity and courage. I assume that this is also because of the pressure exerted by commodification and product identity. The show has come to be regarded as another round in 'the season' like Wimbledon or The Goodwood Revival. Art as entertainment.

The lacklustre and predictable look of the show is exemplified by the hang, which has always reminded me of a village fête or a junior school open day. Last year (2017) the Independent newspaper likened it to a 'glorified car boot sale'. Why is it that the Summer Show is the only exhibition at the RA hung in this manner? And it really doesn't matter what colour you paint the walls.

Disturbingly, whilst writing this piece I visited the official RA website and noticed a worrying development, symptomatic of unbridled celebrity – several profoundly inept paintings of the selector. These were presumably chosen by the selector. It's hard to suppress suspicions of sycophancy and narcissism.

This got me thinking about the more disturbing aspects of art and its institutions, particularly their relationship with celebrity, the market and the media – a 'toxic triangle'. Most major institutions seem to have become hostage to this triumvirate. The market is without ethical or intellectual responsibility – and sets the agenda. All the more reason for institutions that have an educational component to challenge this dominant (and toxic) culture.

The destruction of the art schools, which began over 30 years ago with their unwarranted absorption into corporate parodies of universities now puts us in the grotesque position where property speculators and developers, using the academic institution as a fig leaf, are able to sell bogus degrees at exorbitant prices. The art world is now synonymous with the art market and it's an open secret that elements of the international art market are little more than thinly disguised money-laundering operations, like offshore banking, not only tolerated but embraced.

*The mind is but a barren soil – a soil which is soon exhausted, and will produce no crop, or only one, unless it be continually fertilised and enriched with foreign matter.*

Nostalgia Alert: I can remember when the visual arts – and particularly art schools – were hot beds of scepticism and dissent. That's no longer the case, the political class have put an end to that. Art and art schools are now mainstream and reflect many aspects of the 'nasty society' that dominates and polarises.

Institutions are generally characterised by their lack of vision and the RA is no exception. The Munnings-Picasso debacle of 1949 epitomises a smugness and insularity that still pervades. It's a false hope to expect institutions and academies to do anything other than endorse consensus and embrace intellectual orthodoxy but here's the 'upside' – the RA Schools, by virtue of their independence and resources, have the autonomy that could allow them to forge a different path, particularly when it comes to art education – something that no state sector university could now countenance. In fact, over the last 30 years there has been a seismic shift to the right in education, caused predominantly by the imposition by government of corporate management methodology and values. I witnessed this as a visiting lecturer at Goldsmiths during the 1980s where any discussion of art and ethics was rapidly shut down by senior tutors. YBA mythology lays claim to the ideas of Duchamp but in reality, Thatcher was much more influential. It's often overlooked that much conceptual art of the 1960s was anti-capitalist, challenging the dominance of the market and the commodification of the art object.

*There is no expedient to which man will not resort to avoid the real labour of thinking.*

The RA Schools reflect this problem. They've long had a reputation for tired leadership and an absence of intellectual rigour. The most positive and oft-repeated account by ex-students is that, 'It was a free studio in the middle of London for three years' – no mention of the educational experience, which by all accounts left much to be desired. In the past, women who've studied there have reported sexual harassment by staff – a problem that isn't unique to the RA, but socially ubiquitous. Recent reports also suggest that a creeping form of misandry goes unchecked.

Historically, students have had to organise their own study visits. Students also invited visiting artists into the schools, often without the approval or support of the staff. Some Academicians think that teaching postgraduate students drawing would turn the tide but the problem has to be addressed at undergraduate level – the idea of remedial teaching at postgraduate level is entirely inappropriate. This is symptomatic of a more profound problem. I don't believe that the Academy Schools deliver a postgraduate programme, students are taught at an undergraduate level. Their experience amounts to three further years of undergraduate study. The Academy needs to overhaul its teaching philosophy (if it has one) and abandon its reliance upon approval and disapproval – a method of teaching that is wrong-headed and utterly obsolete – at any level.

It's the issue of approval and disapproval – or patronage – that brings me back to the Summer Show. I've sat on numerous selection committees with established artists, some of whom were Academicians, and I've been constantly irritated by their method of selection – it relies entirely upon what they like or dislike. A misplaced sense of self-importance and complacency encourages the mistaken belief that taste, whim and prejudice can pass as criteria. Celebrity culture encourages this fallacy to flourish and some of the credit must go to Facebook with its faux-friendly, yet controlling use of the word, 'like'. Social media has a detrimental effect upon education when mixed with a sense of entitlement brought about by umpteen 'likes'. As a result, students are challenging tutorial guidance because they have 'followers'. 'How can you say that when I have 1014 likes on Instagram and 273 followers on Twitter?'

A greater breadth of knowledge and understanding, coupled with the ability to empathise, would make for a better learning experience across the board. Art schools (the RA included) should be offering the opportunity for alternative visions to flourish; the kinds that embrace empathy, generosity and curiosity.

*Nothing comes from nothing – invention strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory.*

You might be thinking that I'm critical of the Academy because I'm not an Academician. Nothing could be further from the truth – I'd rather open an artery! It's hard to imagine anything more dispiriting than spending what time I have left hanging around with artist impersonators. However, having said that, I do believe that the RA Schools may be the last bastion of the independent art school.

Art has the potential to alter consciousness – and occasionally, raise it – not simply to stuff mattresses. Instead we're saddled with a celebrity culture that demeans all of us and encourages artists to behave like house-trained zombies. This was confirmed by the ill-conceived BBC4 series, 'What Do Artists Do All Day?' Judging by the episode I watched, they goof around in architect-designed ivory towers whilst spouting risible and arbitrary observations that pass for insight – only a celebrity could get away with this. Celebrity culture should be regarded as a social virus, like racism or misogyny. I try to avoid it by spending Sunday afternoons at autojumbles.

Graham Crowley, 2018

All quotations are from Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Seven Discourses On Art*, 1778.