



THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY | 4 JULY 2004

Cream of the crop

Foetuses, dead animals, unmade beds, bloody torsos – been there, done that, Saatchi bought the lot. So what new shocks does British art have up its sleeve? How about a spot of painting and drawing? *Charlotte Edwards* trawled the London art schools for the next big thing

If Robert Hughes is to be believed, slow art is the province of old men. In his address to a Royal Academy dinner earlier this summer, the redoubtable critic declared that art today – by implication, art made by young people – was too “fast”, predominantly concerned with the quick fix, the instant sensation, the easy solution. What’s more, he said, in his 45 years writing criticism he’d witnessed “a tragic depreciation in the traditional skills of painting and drawing, the nuts and bolts of the profession”. Less than a week later and just next door to the Royal Academy, an exhibition opened as though in reply: Here was painstaking attention to detail, astonishing skill, a preoccupation with process and technique, and 12 out of 17 of the exhibiting artists were painters. But this survey of slow art was not made by old boys for old boys on Cork Street, but by the final-year MA students of the Royal Academy Schools, where they obviously still go in for the nuts and bolts.

Hughes might have made a very different speech if he’d accompanied the editors of *ArtReview* magazine around London’s most prestigious art colleges this spring. Visiting the final-year postgraduate students in their studios at the RA Schools, the Royal College of Art, Chelsea, the Slade and Goldsmiths, we discovered artists absorbed in making three-metre drawings in pencil and ink, carving stalks of cow-parsley out

of polystyrene, and painting delicate miniatures or glossy, textured landscapes. They talked about how they realised their ideas, not just the ideas themselves; they described extensive research, weeks of careful experimentation, countless discarded projects; and over half of them were working with paint. Books on Cranach, Vuillard and Philip Guston were piled on tables; nobody mentioned the YBAs.

Sir Christopher Frayling, Rector of the Royal College of Art, senses that this year’s graduates “are fed up with being rude. There’s less of two-fingers-up-at-the-world in art and more ruminative, open, questioning approach.” It was student pressure, he points out, that reinstated the drawing studio at the Royal College; over the past two years, they have even demanded more lectures on aesthetics. “They want to achieve the re-enchantment of art, to put the magic back that was lost in the cynicism of the 1990s. They want their work to have a charge that isn’t just sensation.”

Choosing 25 London MA graduates for this month’s *ArtReview* and then narrowing the list down to the 11 featured here proved very difficult. From time to time, a particular art college produces a vintage year – such as the Royal College’s class of 1962, the vanguard of Pop art in Britain – but rarely have we come across so many promising artists evenly distributed among the leading schools (and *ArtReview* has been monitoring the art world

for 55 years – 10 more than Robert Hughes, in fact). There are certainly many more to be discovered at Central Saint Martin’s, where the MA programme doesn’t finish until September, and at the excellent art colleges around the UK, from Glasgow to Falmouth, that we aren’t able to visit.

These findings might surprise the general public, to whom London art schools have long ceased to be the hotbeds of broad cultural change that they were in the 1960s. Even then, of course, art students were often considered to be more interested in rabble-rousing and carousing than engaged in the business of making art; further back still, G K Chesterton, who attended the Slade in the late 1890s, observed that “an art school is a place where about three people work with feverish energy and everybody else idles to a degree that I should have conceived unattainable by human nature”. Since the early 1960s, art schools have tended to enter the public eye as the birthplace of bands, fashion designers and filmmakers rather than artists. The exception, of course, is Goldsmiths, which has achieved retrospective notoriety as the late-1980s alma mater of YBAs. The public conception of contemporary art is still so tightly bound up with these artists that, more than a decade after Damien Hirst graduated from Goldsmiths, art schools have struggled to shrug off their image as factories of what the former ICA chairman

Ivan Massow once described as “pretentious, self-indulgent, craftless tat”.

Sir Christopher Frayling admits that the legacy of the YBAs is a mixed one. “The star scene – the headlong rush to be a celebrity – should never be confused with education,” he says. “On the other hand, all the glitter makes it hard to encourage a slow-burn approach.” But what today’s students have inherited from Hirst et al, who curated their own exhibitions long before they were courted by galleries, is a dogged determination to get results, a talent for working the system and attending to practicalities: essential survival skills in the difficult post-college years.

Terry New, Head of Fine Art at the RA Schools, thinks that this new generation of artists will resist easy labelling, partly because of their diverse backgrounds (students now come to London from all over the world). But more importantly, young artists are making choices that suit them, rather than embracing an idea or a medium for the sake of it. “You used to get groups of students who were all tapped into the Zeitgeist,” he says. “Now, we have a climate where it’s not about what the art media thinks or what the staff think: each student is trying to find his or her voice. We’re not developing movements; we’re developing individuals.”

Charlotte Edwards is Deputy Editor of 'ArtReview'. 'London's Top 25 New Artists' is free with the July/August edition, price £4.25



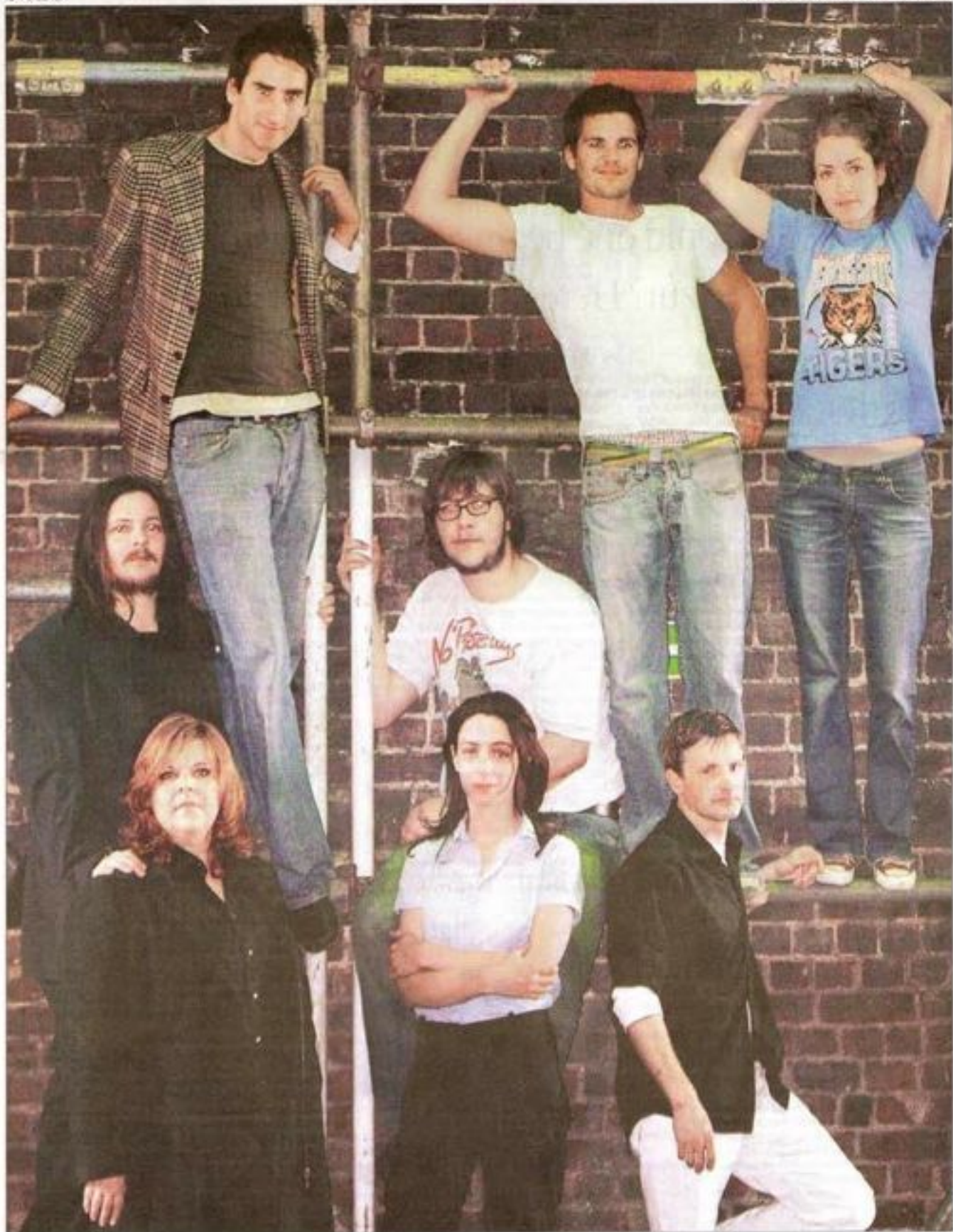
Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard

Goldsmiths

Forget the rock critics; you won’t find more penetrative insights into music culture than in the work of Goldsmiths graduates Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard. Both 31, and from Manchester and Newcastle respectively, Forsyth and Pollard have been collaborators since 1994, when they met on the BA course at Goldsmiths; their first exhibition was the now legendary “Hanging Picnic” organised by maverick curator Joshua Compston,

for which artists simply strapped their work to the railings of Hoxton Square. Since then, they’ve made numerous film, sound and web-based projects and developed a series of live art events at the ICA, including *The Smiths is Dead* (1997), which staged the last ever performance of a Smiths tribute band on the 10th anniversary of the band’s real break-up, and *A Rock’n’Roll Suicide* (1998), which recreated David Bowie’s last gig as Ziggy Stardust. In

2003, Forsyth and Pollard returned to the ICA for *File Under Sacred Music* (pictured), a re-enactment of a bootleg video tape that showed The Cramps performing for patients at Napa State Mental Institute in 1978. By insisting on the possibility of repeating the “live” event and reclaiming vanished cultural icons, Forsyth and Pollard’s work is, they say, “less about then than now”. It certainly feels more real than *Stars in their Eyes*.



Faces to watch: our list of hotly-tipped post-grad artists - photographed at the Royal Academy Schools - includes (back row, left to right) Idris Khan, Michael Saltstorfer, Alison Moffett; (centre row, left to right) Iain Forsyth, Gary McDonald; (front row, left to right) Jane Pollard, Varda Colvino and Paul Jackson. Selected artists not pictured: Pearl Huhung, Daniel Sinsel and Lali Chetwynd