SAATCHI'S NEWSPEAK

What difference does Charles Saatchi's patronage make to a young artist?
(The Sunday Times, Magazine, 2010)

For many art lovers, the *Sensation* exhibition of 1997 was a cultural disaster akin to the sack of Rome. The Royal Academy, home for 200 years to the nation's most accomplished painters and sculptors, was given up to the shock troops of BritArt, with Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and Marcus Harvey to the fore. Chief of the Visigoths was Charles Saatchi, the man whose collection made up the show – to some a fearless champion of contemporary taste, to others its arch villain.

Twelve years may be a blink of an eye in the history of art, but for those at its cutting edge it is a lifetime. The enfants terribles have become elder statesmen complaining of 50 per cent tax rates; collectors who jumped on the Saatchi bandwagon lie sprawling in the economic mire. Saatchi himself has suffered the indignity of being demoted to number 72 in *ArtReview* magazine's annual 'power 100' list. The question, as he prepares for the first group show of British art at his new Chelsea gallery, is whether he retains the ability he once had to shock the public, shape the market and change artists' lives.

The aim of *Newspeak: British Art Now* is – according to Saatchi's official press release – to demonstrate that a new generation of artists is 'expanding and multiplying' the media used in this country. The show, which opens at the Hermitage in St Petersburg on 25th October before transferring to London next summer, includes sculpture, painting, photography and installations; there are wood and fibreglass dummies, busts with artificial hair, and a polystyrene wave decorated with cigarette ends. Two dozen artists will be involved, including one chosen through the BBC series *School Of Saatchi* (to be shown later this year), in which six candidates are put through their paces by famous tutors.

‘The YBAs represented a singular moment for British art, rather like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Sex Pistols created break-throughs for British music,’ says Charles Saatchi. ‘*Newspeak* doesn’t have the coarseness or brutality of much of the work from the *Sensation* period, but there are quite a few good artists coming out of Britain right now, so I hope we produce a round-up that will finally stop people asking if British Art has been sat in a lay-by since the YBAs.’

Despite the variety of art forms being shown, it is the painters – six of whom are interviewed on the following pages – that are likely to claim the most attention, as their chosen medium begins to come in from the cold. Saatchi has been accused of encouraging the blind contempt for painting shown by many art schools, but protests that this is unfair: the medium, he says, is one that he loves, and curators are the villains responsible for its decline.

Will *Newspeak* produce new Hirsts and Emins? Possibly, though none of the artists interviewed here seem to be holding their breath. They recognise the world as a colder place, in which the extraordinary prices paid for the YBAs’ work is unlikely to be matched in the near future. ‘As long as I can have a studio and work, I’m happy,’ says one. ‘I’m not wanting to drive a Ferrari or own a yacht – though one day it might be nice.’

RYAN MOSLEY

Five years ago, Ryan Mosley’s chances of becoming an internationally exhibited artist looked slim. At 24 he had an unfashionable degree in drawing and painting, had twice been turned down by the Royal College of Art, and was working as a home-delivery driver for a Sheffield supermarket to meet the cost of his £20-a-week studio. ‘The job was really badly paid,’ he says, ‘but it had its advantages: I used the van to move my paintings around, and I also worked on the delicatessen counter, where I could buy a chicken for 10p when

it reached its sell-by date.' The highlight of his year was a group show at the city's most established gallery: 'Three people came to the opening night.'

Shortly afterwards Mosley moved to London and things began to look up: the Royal College finally accepted him, and he found more congenial work as a security guard at the National Gallery. Then, at his degree show in 2007, his surreal, carnival-inspired paintings caught the eye of Charles Saatchi: 'He spent quite a lot of time looking at them but didn't buy anything – so I thought, "He either likes your work or he doesn't." But eight months later I was in a group exhibition in Bethnal Green and he bought three large-scale paintings.'

It was, says Mosley, 'a skin-pinching moment'. As a 17-year-old in Huddersfield he had missed out on a college expedition to *Sensation*, but had been infected by his fellow students' excitement: 'Just thumbing through the catalogue opened my eyes to all kind of possibilities. But I still thought, "This could never happen to me." '

Saatchi bought two more of Mosley's paintings from a solo show in Vienna in 2008 ('He didn't come to it, but he sent his director Philly Adams out: I think she knew the work already, and he went on her yea or nay'); then another two at last year's Concrete and Glass Festival in London. This had, Mosley says, 'a domino effect' on the art world: 'When those pictures went live on his website, I started getting emails and phone calls every day, particularly from collectors in Italy and New York – and that's continued ever since. If Saatchi's got faith in something, and carries on buying, it definitely encourages others. It isn't a guarantee that the work will do well, but it makes it less of a risk for them.'

It would be wrong to imagine that being taken up by Saatchi involves an invitation to shoot the breeze and feast on Nigella's hotpot at the court of King Charles: like most of the artists interviewed here, Mosley has never met his patron. Nor does it mean instant riches: though his paintings fetch considerably more than they did two years ago – £12,000 each, as opposed to

the £3,000 Saatchi paid for a group of three – he is doubtful that he can afford the trip to St Petersburg. Curiously, the two works being shown there have a strong Russian flavour, with figures and patterns reminiscent of Bakst and Gonchorova's designs for the Ballets Russes.

For Mosley the greatest benefit of his success is a roomy studio in West London for which he pays £500 a month. 'I'm a realist,' he says. 'All this happened very quickly, and could end tomorrow. Finding a gallery in London and having seven pictures in a major collection has given me buoyancy, but what happens if people stop investing in art? Everyone in this exhibition just has to hope it will open more doors.'

JONATHAN WATERIDGE

Jonathan Wateridge's studio in Hackney is a schoolboy's idea of heaven. There are scale models of a space capsule and a *Thunderbirds*-style house; there are knightly costumes to dress up in and flintlocks to brandish. But for Wateridge, aged 37, these are props rather than toys, essential to the creation of his large-scale, filmic paintings.

Although Wateridge describes painting as his first love, he has only felt able to pursue it in the last five years. As a student at Glasgow School of Art in the early Nineties, he was persuaded that it was obsolete; instead, he tried 'a million other ways of making art', including film and melting wax on glass, while earning a living as an illustrator (for the *Sunday Times Magazine* among others): 'But in the end I realised I was always circling around painting.'

It was paintings done on multiple layers of Perspex that first brought Charles Saatchi into his life. 'They were all fantastical cinematic visions of disasters and extreme landscapes,' says Wateridge. 'I was looking at a lot of eighteenth-century Romantic painters, which became mixed with the adventure of B movies.' Saatchi was keen to buy from an exhibition at the

David Risley Gallery in 2006, but found it sold out; fortunately, Wateridge happened to stop by and was able to invite him to his studio:

'Over the next year he came to see the work four or five times. I was moving on from the Perspex paintings, and when I did a four-metre landscape of plane wreckage in a jungle and my first figure painting, of a group of Sandanistas, he said, "Right, I'll take those." '

Orchestrating tableaux with multiple sitters is an important part of Wateridge's procedure. For a recent painting he mocked up a television studio with actors filming a murder scene: 'I basically do a photo shoot where anything can happen – I might take 2,000 pictures to find the moment I'm after.' The sets are also made in miniature, complete with working lights: 'I enjoy the *Blue Peter* aspect to what we do.'

Wateridge took an instant liking to Saatchi: 'There's nothing pretentious about him, and he says what he thinks. We had a great afternoon in the studio where he talked about why he started his collection; it was at the beginning of the nervousness in the financial and art markets, but he didn't seem perturbed – he said it would bring art back to the people who love really collecting. He talked about other collectors who had inspired him, and suggested galleries I should be working with. It was fascinating, since he obviously has vast, vast experience of it all.'

He admits, however, that Saatchi's patronage can have drawbacks. 'As an emerging artist I think you have to be careful, because a lot of people in the art world have strong opinions about him, and not always positive.' This stems in part from the damage done to the Italian painter and sculptor Sandro Chia when Saatchi first bought and then sold his work en masse. But, says Wateridge, 'Artists have woken up to the fact that he was given too much power and that you don't want to sell to him – or anybody – wholesale. You still have to respect him for going to see everything, making time to check out all the little East End galleries. And if it wasn't for him, Nicholas Serota and

Damien Hirst – whatever you think of their agenda – people like me wouldn't even be starting to have careers.'

SIGRID HOLMWOOD

Sigrid Holmwood, 30, is another artist who has wrestled with the accusation that painting is irrelevant to modern life. To her, however, the medium's antiquity is one of the best reasons for using it: 'When you've got a problem, you can look at any point in art history and see how they tackled it. In a way I feel like an experimental archaeologist.'

She certainly takes historical research further than most. Visitors to the Compton Verney gallery in Warwickshire, where she has recreated her studio as part of a current exhibition, will find her using traditional methods to make her own paint from scratch: 'You learn so much about how it works – each pigment has its own character, which gives you ideas you could never get from buying it in tubes.' She even paints as part of a group devoted to reconstructing sixteenth-century life: 'We sleep on straw mattresses in Tudor buildings wearing linen nightdresses. It's all very serious.'

Her work, though, is not entirely retrospective. The paintings in *Newspeak* portray vanished scenes from peasant life, but are executed in startling dayglo colours: fluorescent paints, she remarks, have many similarities to ancient vegetable dyes such as madder.

Though brought up in Scotland, Holmwood is half Swedish, and found inspiration for her first solo show in the Darlaner region, famous for its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century arts and crafts. 'Charles Saatchi bought six of my paintings and wanted more, but they were sold out, so he took some I'd done with the Tudor group instead. I also do landscapes, which people find much easier to like, but he was definitely drawn to the figures, which can be quite bizarre.'

Her paintings now sell for between £4,000 and £15,000: how far has Saatchi's interest helped her saleability? 'That's a very difficult question,' says David Juda of Annely Juda, the gallery that mounted her solo show last year. 'There is a benefit, but it's not as enormous as is perceived. There was a very good reaction to Sigrid's work even before Charles Saatchi bought, and if he decided not to purchase any more, it wouldn't be disastrous.'

She herself is ambivalent about Saatchi's patronage. 'Being bought by him is great, but he's associated with a certain kind of art, and you don't want people's perceptions of your work to be changed by that powerful brand. When I was at art school it was what everyone hoped for; when you're older and wiser you think, "This is great, but in a few years' time he'll be buying a whole lot of younger artists." ''

She would be surprised if *Newspeak* provokes the same reactions as *Sensation*. 'I don't think anyone's going to be throwing ink at our work. Everything's become a lot subtler: there's much more emphasis on the materials and craft. It isn't as bombastic and shocking.'

CARAGH THURING

After leaving art school in 1995, Caragh Thuring spent eight years trying to avoid her destiny. 'I did loads of things – wardrobe for GMTV, photographer's assistant – and then ran a gallery; but in the end I thought, "I'm on the wrong side of this – I want to try and make art, even if I only ever get to have one exhibition." And actually all those other things have contributed in some funny way.'

Art is in Thuring's blood: her Scottish-Irish mother is also a painter, and her Dutch father is a photographer, gilder and carver – who, strangely enough, has been consulted on the restoration of the Hermitage. She grew up partly on the west coast of Scotland ('I went to a school with 25 pupils, occasionally swelled by gypsies who camped on the beach in summer') and partly in

Sussex; at 15 she was taken to a Frank Stella show at the Pompidou Centre in Paris which was to have a lasting impact: ‘I told myself that I had to be involved in this somehow.’

Her own paintings are very different from Stella’s: graceful constructions of geometric lines and sparingly applied bright colours, often focussing on urban landscapes. Her current show in New York consists of reinterpretations of Manet’s *Le Déjeuner Sur L’Herbe* – like Jonathan Wateridge, she names Manet, Goya and Velázquez as three of her favourite artists, and like him she settled on painting only after exploring many other media. Whatever else comes to the fore, she believes, ‘Painting will always exist and people will always want to look at it.’

Thuring met Charles Saatchi three years ago while dismantling a joint exhibition in Dalston; he bought one of her paintings, and subsequently another seven from her studio. ‘I think he’s an amusing character,’ she says. ‘I appreciate his passion, and directness. He knows what he’s looking at and engages with the work in a way that not many people do. He also takes risks. His Boundary Road gallery was the most beautiful space, and he had incredible exhibitions there.’

How far has the Saatchi effect helped her career? ‘I can’t say exactly. But interest in art has grown exponentially in Britain, and of course he’s been a part of that, which in turn makes it possible to earn a living doing what you want with your life.’

CARLA BUSSUTIL

Although Charles Saatchi bought all thirteen of Carla Bussutil’s paintings at her degree show last year, it was only through the grapevine that she heard of her inclusion in *Newspeak*: ‘Some friends mentioned it, and then a month later the Saatchi Gallery asked for my biography. They don’t tell you very much about what’s going on.’

The pictures are naïve paintings based on magazine photographs of politicians. ‘I’ve always been interested in themes of power and politics,’ she says – not surprisingly, since she was brought up in South Africa and studied at Witwatersrand University under tutors who had seen the full horror of apartheid. In 2005, aged 23, she moved to London to study at the Royal Academy, and was surprised to find her fellow students much less attuned to current affairs: ‘Politics in this country seems to be viewed with a lot of suspicion. I struggled with that a bit, because I was always having to explain myself.’

Descended from Armenian refugees, she is now working on a series of paintings of the genocide witnessed by her family at the beginning of the last century. She recently gave up her studio in Deptford in order to move to Berlin – partly because it is a city she loves, and partly as an economy measure: ‘The prices are half what they are in London, so you can afford a much bigger place to work in.’

As a teenager in Johannesburg, she had been only vaguely aware of the *Sensation* exhibition; but to have her work bought by Saatchi has been an enormous thrill: ‘It took a while to get my head round what was happening. It only dawned on me much later what it might mean.’ Shortly afterwards, unaware of Saatchi’s purchase, the West End gallery Gimpel Fils offered her a solo show: ‘I had to tell them all of the pictures were gone and I needed to paint some more. Everything’s happened so incredibly quickly.’

PABLO BRONSTEIN

If there is one artist who believes he has no need of exposure in *Newspeak*, it is 32-year-old Pablo Bronstein. Although three of his architecturally inspired pen-and-ink drawings are included, he claims that he hasn’t given the exhibition a second thought: ‘I’ve just been so busy with other projects. But

I'm very happy that it's at the Hermitage. What a place to tell yourself you've had work in!'

Bronstein's list of other projects is certainly impressive. He is working with the architects Caruso St John to create a room in the new Nottingham Contemporary gallery; doing the stage design and choreography for a ballet in Turin; creating a one-day 'flash installation' at the Chisenhale Gallery in London; preparing pieces for biennials in Romania and Spain; contributing to a show of art and dance at the Hayward Gallery; designing a garden for Tate Britain's Sculpture Court; planning a performance with the Scottish Ballet. This is not to mention two books and a recently opened exhibition of his work at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. So does he consider himself a Renaissance man?

'I would if my interests were varied,' he says, 'but I don't think they are – I'm very interested in architecture, which is a very, very narrow subject, and I'm just exploring it from different angles.'

It was at the age of seven that Bronstein decided he wanted to be an architect. But when the time came to begin training, he was horribly disappointed: 'I didn't realise it was all about building regulations. I stuck it for three weeks.'

Instead, he went to Central St Martins to do a foundation course, followed by the Slade. 'I did shitty odd jobs for a year or two – mind-numbingly boring – and then went to Goldsmith's, where I started playing with different mediums: I made films, posters, installations.' His interest in dance began with a series of installations commissioned by the Tate's curator of performance: 'They turned out to be very interactive and theatrical, making the viewer into a performer.'

Charles Saatchi appeared on the scene at Bronstein's first solo exhibition: 'He bought one or two pieces then, and has been buying fairly regularly ever since – he has about seven now.' But it is to another heavy hitter, the New

York art consultant Thea Westrich, that Bronstein feels most indebted: ‘She bought all the major pieces from my first show before it even opened. That was my real breakthrough.’

He concedes that Saatchi’s purchases include one of his key pieces. The drawing is what he calls a ‘mythical dramatisation’ of an extraordinary architectural project, in which a giant arch is pulled into position on rollers by scores of horses. It is a work which captures the excitement of architecture while sidestepping its frustrations: ‘The truth is that I don’t know a single architect who’s happy and doing what he wants to do.’

There is a strong possibility that the artists being shown in *Newspeak* will be bracketed together in the public mind just as the *Sensation* artists were. Does Bronstein object to this? No, he says: ‘Charles Saatchi buys the work he likes and he’s allowed to arrange it any way he wants.’ But having made it to the Metropolitan Museum on his own, Bronstein sees his future very much as a solo venture: ‘To be interviewed about a group show when I’ve got my name on a 50-foot banner on Fifth Avenue is actually rather strange.’