

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Britain's best 20th-century artist?

This knockout exhibition does full justice to Richard Hamilton, the father of British pop art



Mark Hudson

EXHIBITION

RICHARD HAMILTON

TATE MODERN

In 2011 two major British artists, both born in 1922, died within months of each other. On the one hand, Lucian Freud, sumptuous painter of posh bohemia, near universally acclaimed as Britain's greatest living artist. On the other, Richard Hamilton, the father of British pop art, whose passing, while certainly noted in the headlines, was considered principally of interest to fans of modern art.

Over the intervening two and a half years, those relative standings have been reversed. Freud looks increasingly a parochial figure, while interest in Hamilton has increased enormously. The first artist in this country to embrace conceptualism and digital technology, who paved the way for the YBAs three decades later, Hamilton may yet prove to have been the most significant British artist of the second half of the 20th century.

This exhibition provides our most extensive overview of Hamilton's career to date, and it begins in atmospheric fashion with reconstructions of two seminal exhibitions designed and co-devised by Hamilton at the ICA in the early Fifties, *Growth and Form* and *This is Tomorrow*. Railing against the cultural provincialism of post-war Britain, Hamilton and his peers in the Independent Group, a youthful offshoot of the ICA that also included Eduardo Paolozzi, sought to break down the barriers between art, technology, design and architecture.

This is Tomorrow, a phantasmagoria of film posters, advertising imagery, mirrors and revolving kaleidoscopes staged in 1955, announces the arrival of the Swinging Sixties a decade early. Hamilton's collage created for the exhibition, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*, featuring a muscle man in a collaged suburban sitting room, is now acknowledged as the first example of pop art on either side of the Atlantic.

Yet where younger pop artists



Powerful: Hamilton's 'Swinging London' depicts the arrest of Mick Jagger and art dealer Robert Fraser

such as Peter Blake and David Hockney were content merely to celebrate the popular imagery they enjoyed, Hamilton's approach was at once coolly jokey and severely, even anxiously analytical. He famously called for an art that was "sexy, glamorous, gimmicky and big business", but a letter from 1957 shows that rather than simply celebrating these qualities, he wanted to catalogue them in a "coded tabature". It's hard to imagine Hamilton's spiritual descendants, such as Tracey Emin, bothering to do that.

Hamilton's art is anti-romantic. Rather than evolving a single style to express his personality, he seems to have regarded each work as a separate intellectual problem, in the spirit of his great inspiration, Marcel Duchamp. This eclecticism has worked against easy popularity. It

has hitherto been difficult to see how signature works such as *Slip It To Me*, a monumental blow-up of an America badge, *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*, a painting of Bing Crosby in negative, and *She*, a collation of feminine curves and machined car parts, connect with each other.

This exhibition scores in bringing together substantial clusters of work that clearly chart his evolution. *She* is shown in a roomful of superb early-Sixties pieces demonstrating how Hamilton fused elements of cubism, academic realism, technical illustration and found advertising material to create a distinctively British approach to pop.

My Marilyn, from 1965, is at least as strong as Warhol's shinily vacant Monroe portraits, a collage of contact prints that Hamilton painted over, increasing our sense

of the actress's vulnerability.

Where Hamilton's work falls down is when it tells us too obviously what to think. A spoof advert for one of his artworks, made for the TV series *The Shock of the New*, is slightly clunky in its satire.

Swinging London, Hamilton's iconic response to the arrest of Mick Jagger and art dealer Robert Fraser on drugs charges, is powerful precisely because there is no obvious message. The two men raise their "cuffed" hands to shield themselves from the paparazzi in an image that is as cool and morally ambivalent as one of the Rolling Stones songs of the time.

As the euphoric Sixties give way to the uncertain Seventies, Hamilton becomes a more marginal figure. A series of prints and paintings equating advertising and the traditions of painting,

putting rolls of Andrex toilet paper and steaming faeces into Cezannesque still lifes, are downright feeble.

In *Treatment Room* from 1984 he confronts the decline of post-war utopianism and the rise of monetarist Britain in an installation comprising a grimly utilitarian hospital bedroom with a television playing a 1983 Conservative election broadcast showing Margaret Thatcher in a stately classical setting. That "reactionary" historical location represents a retreat from Hamilton's idea of progress. Yet his accompanying text asking "Is the vision of Mrs Thatcher patronising a victim of the health service part of that future we once thought so bright?" makes the point over-explicit.

Hamilton divided his final decades between complex examinations of domestic space that artfully merged the traditions of Western painting with advanced digital image-making, and overtly political works. His monumental Northern Irish triptych *The Citizen/The Subject/The State*, showing an H-Block prisoner on a "dirty protest" framed by an Orangeman and a British soldier has been criticised as naive and propagandist. Yet it's hard to think of another political painting of the Eighties and Nineties of remotely comparable ambition.

Octogenarian artists, when they're capable of working at all, tend to be content with sedately refining earlier ideas. But whatever else you may think of *Shock and Awe*, Hamilton's 2007 life-size computer-generated "painting" of Tony Blair as a Wild West gunslinger, it's hardly what you would have predicted him to be producing from the perspective of his early career. As a comment on Blair's Middle Eastern policy it's not exactly subtle, but to be taking on the government of the day at the age of 85, using the most advanced technology of your time, isn't a bad way to go out.

This is a knockout exhibition. Handsome, lucid and comprehensive, it does Hamilton proud. Whether he was ever Britain's "greatest artist" feels too banal a question to ask of so complex and avowedly tricky an artist. If his work is uneven, it's better to be flawed and interesting than consistent and boring, as I'm sure Hamilton would have said himself.

From Thurs to May 26. Tickets: 020 7887 8888; tate.org.uk

CRATING ★★★★★

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