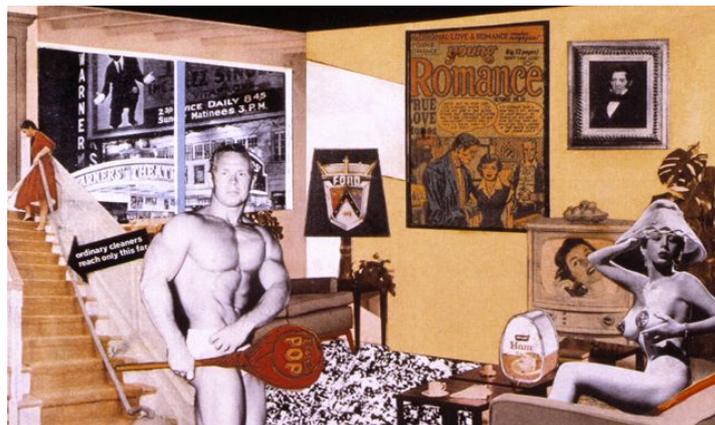


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Big Ideas: The Pioneering Work of Richard Hamilton

by Martin Gayford



*Richard Hamilton's "Just what was it that made yesterday's homes so different?" 1992.
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A lyric by the 1960s group Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band proclaimed that jazz was “delicious hot, disgusting cold.” The work of the late **Richard Hamilton** was the other way around: it became less appetizing the more he lost his cool. This process can be observed in the posthumous retrospective at Tate Modern (through May 26). Like Hamilton’s work, this exhibition is surprising, impressive, intellectually stimulating but visually a bit under-nourished. Until, that is, it heats up towards the end and becomes indigestible.

Hamilton (1922-2011) was one of the major figures of post-war British Art, but — unlike, say, **Bacon** or **Freud** — he did not often create powerfully memorable images. There aren’t too many of those in the show. Instead, Hamilton came up with ideas, among them some truly mould-breaking innovations.

The fresh angle in the Tate show is that he was a pioneer of installation art. It includes several reconstructed displays from the ’50s that were regarded at the time as mini-exhibitions, but

which are now reclassified — with the artist’s approval — as installation. Of these the most striking was the collaborative “This is Tomorrow!” (1956) — which has a good claim to have prefigured not just Pop Art but Op as well. It contained, among other ingredients, a pre-**Warhol Marilyn Monroe**, a juke box, and **Duchamp**’s revolving, dizzying “Rotoreliefs.” The recreation is certainly entertaining, though whether it adds up to a lasting piece of art is debateable.

It was for the catalog of “This is Tomorrow” that Hamilton made his celebrated collage “Just what is it makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?” (1956). A hilarious modern interior including a tennis racket-wielding body-builder and a nude woman with a lampshade on her head surrounded by must-have gadgets of the Eisenhower era, this was not a bad prophecy of contemporary life — let alone ’60s art.

This was well before Warhol, **Lichtenstein** et al. got going. But having invented the formula for Pop Art — which he presciently defined as “popular, transient, expendable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, and Big Business” — Hamilton did not actually make a huge amount of it.

The paintings he produced over the next couple of years, many in two series — titled “Hommage à Chrysler Corp” and “Towards a definitive statement on the coming trends in men’s wear and accessories” — often have the look of a blueprint for some more full-blooded picture.

The car in the Chrysler Corp paintings is reduced to one staring headlamp and bits of bumper and radiator. It has a slightly monstrous, surreally erotic presence (there was a lot of rather cerebral sex in Hamilton’s work). Hamilton came up with a number of original conceits over the next decade, including the still from a **Bing Crosby** movie, “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas,” rendered in an elegantly-painted version of a color negative, so that Crosby’s face is blue.

Other notions were less successful. His various attempts to make art out of the facade of **Frank Lloyd Wright**’s Guggenheim Museum — a set of low reliefs — and a modernist toaster produced results that were not so much cool as dull. But coming up with a sequence of one-off works that did not have much in common with each other, to look at, was part of his notion of himself as an artist.

Through musing on his idols, **James Joyce** and Marcel Duchamp, Hamilton had come early to the view that “art is all about thinking.” From meditating on those two austere avant-gardists, he concluded an artist does not need to have a signature style. And, it’s true Hamilton did not really have one; consequently each work was only as good as the new idea it embodied.

A wry observer of contemporary culture, Hamilton morphed into an angrier, more political artist after 1970. The results — such as “War Games” (1991), in which blood seeps out of a television showing an image from the First Gulf War, or “Treatment Room” (1983-4), in which a speech by **Margaret Thatcher** plays on a monitor above a National Health Service bed — express Hamilton’s liberal views; however as art, they were so obvious as to be banal. The computer-assisted painting/photographs of his last few years were technically innovatory, but their subjects — photo-derived female nudes collaged into interiors — verge on creepy.

I’d better be careful what I say, though. Hamilton’s retaliation against criticism was deadly. “The Critic Laughs” (1971-2) is a really good Duchampian joke: false teeth attached to an electric toothbrush, so that they oscillate in a horrible mimicry of humor.