

SECRET EUROPEAN STUDIO

London's art scene benefits from an international outlook, much of which comes from the presence of European artists. Yet that's doubly threatened: first, by the troubling referendum outcome, which risks reducing artists' ease of access; and second by the increasing difficulty of finding living and studio space in the capital – a problem, of course, for all artists. 'Secret European Studio' celebrates, somewhat mournfully, the current diversity of the London art scene by focusing on what's being made by artists who come from EU countries, but live here. Carlos Noronha Feio (Portugal) makes paintings which seek abstract equivalents for power structures, and also sets the show's soundscape as he reflects on what 'Universism' might be; Alzbeta Jaresova (Czech Republic) puts her figures into tense psychological relationships with transparent yet unfathomable versions of London's infrastructure; Simona Brinkmann (Italy) uses metal and foam-padded leather to form half-fetishistic, half-architectural objects which suggest shifting boundaries between private and public; Willem Weismann (Netherlands) seems to mock both dystopia in general and the putative death of painting in particular in his colourful cartoon-tinged tableaux; Franco-German collective Troika bring sublimity to trauma as they draw intricate webs of lightning, and run a smoke bomb through a labyrinthine maze; and Nadege Meriau (France) lets snails and mushrooms impose their own dark logics on her photographic underworld. The works emerging from these Secret European Studios cohere in a darkly intelligent overview of where we are now – and we wouldn't want to be without them... The vote to leave is a serious concern in that and other respects. Let's hope we use our supposed increase in freedom to make it easier for artists to find the space to tell us how they see the Brexit world.

Carlos Noronha Feio - Uk / Portugal

ON LONDON AND EUROPE: I believe that nationhood, citizenship, race, ethnicity, are all constructs designed to allow for a better division of the peoples of the world into manageable assets. The EU is, for me, an interesting experiment on transnationalism and its freedom of trade, and more importantly the freedom to move and settle outside one's place of birth with minimum bureaucracy —is something that I cherish.

Carlos Noronha Feio is a multi-disciplinary artist known for film, performance, rugs and collage as well as the three strands of his practice sampled here. The fluctuating letters which Feio chants in the stairwell bring doubt into the idea of 'universism'. Just as, Feio has reflected, he isn't easily slotted into the category 'Portuguese', being blonde, with an Angolan lineage, and with relatives throughout Europe, Feio says that 'universism is one word that says that nothing is unquestionable and that everything can change'. Linked investigations of national stereotyping feature in many of the objects collected by Feio as an adjunct to and stimulator for his practice: here he selects musket bullets, a roman ring used to make seals with a lion relief and a small propaganda token with the sentence 'am I not a man and a brother' surrounding a praying black man. They in turn face two paintings which seek abstract equivalents for the power structures implicit in colonialist world views. The first is one of a series using the photographic background of images representing the different 'native peoples' inhabiting the Pacific Ocean area during World War II. Feio's work has previously associated such images with the nuclear testing programme. Here he layers abstract marks onto that ground and – as is always sociologically critical – its framing. He talks of fighting to stop the background from influencing the manner in which he paints the foreground –

and losing that fight. The second painting is from a more recent series in which the abstract 'response' has floated free of the context it was fighting against. We're left with a rather beautiful painting haunted by history at several removes.

ON STUDIO LIFE: I constantly travel between three countries. I hold studios in Portugal and the UK, and would love to be able to establish a studio in Russia. Yet the different visas, the permissions to work, the overall feeling of transgression on another's space — something I have not felt in the EU — makes Moscow the most difficult of my 'homes'.

Alzbeta Jaresova – Uk / Czech Republic

The mixing of ideas, talent and cultures is what has kept me and thousands of other artists here. Its diversity and openness spearheads progress in the artistic community.

Two traditions of architectural geometry and their psychological impacts feed into Alzbeta Jaresova's combinations of plan-like models with figures in drawings and paintings: on the one hand, the blocky pre-fab concrete building of the Soviet era housing in which she grew up, on the other the airy modernism of London's expanding skyline. In both cases she explores the interface between impersonal and potentially depersonalising structures and the way in which individuals experience themselves within the resulting spaces. You might call the resulting tableaux an exploration of the phenomenology of habitation. The mock-ups combine an implicit critique of utopian thinking in the architectural realm with a parallel window onto social isolation in what Jaresova sees as 'the aggressive technological era in which we live'. Here the drawn hands act in spaces topologically analogous to the models. Moreover, the precise delineation of bodily elements comes out of a technique which build in its own constraints: Jaresova limits her gestures, as if in her own equivalent of architectural construction, to horizontal and vertical lines.

Since moving here to study in 2011, Peckham has become an important part of my identity as a London-based artist, and I am part of a larger artistic community, which has seen my work develop. I'm in the Bussey Building, originally a Victorian sporting goods factory, which was built to allow for maximum natural light and has a bustling nature which seems ingrown.

Simona Brinkmann – Uk / Italy

I have lived in the UK for over 25 years and am a firm believer that any jeopardisation of the European project from a national perspective could only ever be a big backwards jump. Ideologically, I have a deep attachment to the principle of internationalism. The fewer borders, the better - more so because the abolition of borders demands greater equality as the basic precondition for its workability.

Simona Brinkmann is a sculptor whose work deals with power structures. She addresses spatial borders and boundaries, and politics of movement control and enclosure in ways which can be seen to relate to issues involved in free movement between nations. Perhaps constraint is intrinsic to the logic of all architecture. Brinkmann goes so far as to suggest that the built environment 'often seems to articulate an inherent violence', and that 'one could talk about a fundamental power relation that is at play in its very nature'. The work selected here fuses the languages of architecture with that of fetishisation, suggesting a

parallel between the way built environments control the body through material processes of exclusion/inclusion and how master/servant relations can operate to similar or related ends. This feeds into a sleek aesthetic which puts the tropes of minimalism slightly out of whack by potentially sexualising them and building in contrasts of hard and soft, erect and fallen, shiny and matt. The barrier-like sculpture 'Checkpoint' features foam-padded leather; the floor-bound 'Bridges Become Doors' uses steel and graphite paste. All of which can be read across to the classic philosophical question: if we don't want anarchy, how many restrictions should we accept?

At a time when neoliberalism is hell-bent on exterminating any sort of activity whose primary logic is not to generate a profit, it is crucial to hold on to these sorts of spaces... particularly in London, where art and artists are gradually being stamped out. So to stand our ground on studio provision means resisting the gradual extinction of creativity for creativity's sake. It becomes a very urgent thing.

Willem Weismann – Uk / Netherlands

In London you can meet anyone from anywhere. Everyone brings something unique, and it creates a sort of equal footing in my mind as no one is completely at home. It greatly relativizes your own viewpoint as you engage with different perspectives from all over the world.

Willem Weismann conjures a self-contained world from his East End studio: he imagines weird scenarios, often apocalyptic but communicated in a jauntily upbeat style, and leaves the evidence of his whole process on view by using the painting itself as his palette – you can see where the colours have been tested. *Convention* is part of a series of paintings where human figures appear as fragments, like broken statues. Weismann says he was interested in making human and object of equal importance, so that 'there seems to be a mutual understanding between them, as they are having a discussion, making plans for the future'. An object edges toward the human in *Status Quo*, as it seems a pillar is wearing a tie, bolstering one symbol of authority with another and what could be the light of a revelation. 'I don't like simplification and reduction', says Weismann, 'real life is always more complex, chaotic and dirty than people generally would like to see it'. It's tempting to apply that as a corrective to the Leave camp's crude arguments for how Britain will be freer and better off out of the EU. Either way, *Leftover Geometry* has squeezed the whole of a complex still life painting into a column which compacts it like trash: that, too, could be read as a caustic comment on misguided attempts to corral the world into an overly straightforward template.

I like being in London for its unceasing activity and hecticness. The relentless flow of everything coming at you is both nauseating and exhilarating and this is an important subject of my work.

Troika – Uk / France / Germany

We have worked together, in London, as a collective for the past 10 years. The three of us have varied academic as well as cultural backgrounds. These differences in combination with a shared interest to make sense of a complex, often contradictory world is what draws us together.

Troika (Eva Rucki, Conny Freyer and Sebastien Noel) occupies a railway arch near Hoxton which is effectively a laboratory, for the collective operates at the interface of art and science, often through large scale installations. *Cartography of Control* is made by what they have called 'invisible lightning': the application of 15,000 volts of electrical charge to burn irregular and unpredictable bronchial patterns into wet paper as the current tries out various paths of least resistance. The series *Alternate Pasts* results from setting off one or more coloured smoke bombs in a labyrinthic wooden structure (which is also displayed here). The structure is removed and only made visible on the paper by ghostly traces of soot, so that in Troika's words we see 'two colours/textures, two timelines that occupy the same narrow space and remind us of an architecture of sorts that is only defined by the way it is used over time, by the sum of all events that have taken place in it'. Both works illustrate a constant loop between control and the inherently uncontrollable, typical of the synthesis of apparent opposites in Troika's work: a demonstration of how to bring differences together such as, the Brexit vote showed, was sadly lost on the majority of the British people.

Our work involves an active cooperation between many different people that work with us in and outside of the studio, thus needs a space to make this happen. We believe in the importance of the studio, not just as a functional space for making our work but also as a site for exchange and dialogue.

Nadege Meriau – Uk / France

As an artist in London there is a feeling of being at the forefront of what is happening in the art world and in other realms too. I often get ideas while travelling on the tube. There is something liberating and inspiring about moving anonymously amongst a sea of people who come from all over the world.

Nadege Meriau spins a varied practice from a photographic core which frequently sees new systems emerge from the conjunction of natural and human, as in many works touching on the world of the bee. The lightboxes of *Petites Morts* and the small Daguerreotype-like prints on metal of *The Fall* stem from an ongoing collaboration with mushrooms and snails. Meriau gathers mushrooms from her local woods, positions them face down on the glass surface of her flatbed scanner – led by aesthetic instinct, not scientific investigation – and then leaves the fungi to do their work through touch, movement and the release of oxygen. Their intimate encounters with the photographic device climax as they propel their reproductive spores overnight. The 'little deaths' so recorded do indeed have a ghostly air as well as evoking the contrasting mysteries of sexual attraction and asexual reproduction. We might also be reminded of the chance processes introduced into many approaches to abstract painting, and of the frequency with which Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'the rhizome' is invoked in explaining contemporary art.

My studio is at home, where lack of space fits with using the flatbed scanner and my computer as a studio and darkroom in which I can explore, experiment and make a mess... Sometimes this creates tension with other members of my family...

TEXT: Paul Carey-Kent with quotes from the artists