


review

Duane Hanson (1925-96)

Saatchi Gallery, London April 1997

THE SECURITY GUARD in the gallery leans awkwardly against a wall. His eyes are not vigilant but distant, reflecting, perhaps, on the miserable existence which has led to his present state of being. Not far away, an American couple, kitted out in the garish colours of their Summer clothes gaze upwards to an exhibit, their faces belying no emotion other than boredom. To this extent they are like many tourists, force feeding themselves with culture for which they have no genuine interest but which they will enjoy talking about in retrospect in the comfort of their own home while passing the photos around. It's Sunday: it must be the Saatchi Gallery.

If you follow the tourists' line of vision, you will notice that there is no exhibit in front of them. They, like the Security guard, and 15 other life-size characters are the exhibits: sculptures made from varying combinations of polychromed bronze, polyvinyl, fibre-glass and everyday accessories. Duane Hanson's ordinary Americans are frighteningly realistic replications of people whose complacency with their own meaninglessness has bypassed angst to arrive at a condition of accepted pre-mortal purgatory.

The resemblance to real people is so acute that one feels uncomfortable looking at them closely, as though one is invading their personal space. Unlike most works of art which, when put in a gallery, are emphasised as being just that, Hanson's figures blend unobtrusively with the often unanimated visitors. The tourists, the guard and the cleaner fit into the environment very easily but even the sunbather, with her subtly reddening tan, is such a presence that it is easy to exclude the gallery environment from the overall effect. Most of the visitors - cultured types of course - ignored the stare of the flea-market vendor and peruse, from a do-not-touch distance, with fidgeting hands, the books on her table. This is quite different from the hyper-real parade of stars at Madame Tussauds. Static sculptures cannot be animated, so Hanson has overcome this obstacle to his pursuit of Realism by depicting people who have become, through the weariness of life, unanimated. For this reason, the baby in the stroller, too young to have lost her soul, is the least effective of the pieces.

Hanson's attention to detail was enabled by making full body casts of his subjects and extends to the tiny lined squares on the skin which we only notice on ourselves if we peer closely and, apparently, to the genitalia, although the most intimate glance I got was of Rita the waitress's breast and bra cup exposed by an undone button on her overalls.

Apart from admiring Hanson's extraordinary 'craftsmanship', we must question our intentions in visiting this exhibition and the unquestionable satisfaction in doing so. These ordinary people are not

unlike the ordinary people we have sat with on the tube and walked past on the street in order to come to the gallery and pay £3.50 to see more of the same. And, for the financially insane, a £15 catalogue to see photographs of models of people. One reason, after overcoming the initial embarrassment of offending an inanimate object, is that we can confront them at point-blank range and scrutinise them with the intensity of a philatelist as we have probably never done to a living (or dead) human being.

It is not the age-stretched elbow skin or the jogger's veined and freckled balding head which declare the humanity of the sculptures, but the forlorn expressions of people consumed by their mundane jobs and routines. Even the young shopper, laden with bags of new clothes, looks quite unmoved by her day out. The old couple on the bench sit quite apart, looking as though they left each other years ago. The jogger, who is keen on keeping his health and the only exhibit which is not overweight, is going bald, needs glasses, is about to become sunburnt and has had his run curtailed by a blister.

These are unheroic mortals who have been made immortal by being frozen in a moment of time, yet their expressions are unafraid, ready for death whenever it may arrive. If the sculptures were aware of their entrapment in this permanent moment one feels they would not care.

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