

Nushin Elahi's LONDON LETTER

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There's more to Marcel Duchamp than urinals. How much more, is explored in a ground-breaking exhibition at the Barbican this spring – an exhibition that weaves together many art forms, allowing the viewer to understand the present through the prism of the past. It is an exciting inter-disciplinary show that only a major arts institution could present. The Barbican deserves full marks for doing so. Using Duchamp and his influence on four modern American artists as the central theme, it includes not only the visual arts, but dance, music, film, theatre and discussion.

The Bride and the Bachelors: Duchamp with Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Johns, (until 9 June) looks at how Duchamp influenced another generation of artists: composer John Cage, choreographer Merce Cunningham and visual artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. It is orchestrated by contemporary artist Philippe Parreno (whose work can be seen on the Hayward's Light Show). The sound loop of three hours includes Cage's famous composition, 4'33" – and the silence that the audience hears are the random sounds from the tunnel outside the Barbican. Cunningham, who died in 2009, is represented by students trained by a former Cunningham dancer, with performances on Thursdays and at weekends. At other times the recorded footfall of performers echoes through the galleries to make the dance a constant and active part of the whole. It is the most integrated inter-disciplinary programming imaginable, showing how art forms cross fertilise each other across the generations. Hugely entertaining, it also functions as a fascinating slice of contemporary history and for this reason alone is worth a visit.

Duchamp may be considered the most important modern artist, but he isn't one we see very often. His most seminal works are housed in Philadelphia, and they are not loaned out frequently. He is credited with being the man who started conceptual art when in 1917 he signed a urinal R. Mutt and displayed it as a work of art. His revolutionary influence is still felt today – some would say he spawned a monster that cast aside the skill of an artist with his use of readymade objects. Certainly he challenged the definition of art with his use of humour and the manner in which he explored the element of chance, as all these four later artists did too.

Among the work on show is Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (No 2) from 1912, various 'readymades' including the bicycle wheel mounted

(Top) Marcel Duchamp: Fountain, 1950 (replica of 1917 original) Philadelphia Museum of Art, 125th DAGP/Paris, DACS/London

(Opp. Right Top) Duchamp's Large Glass - installation view , Cunningham dancers in action

(Opp) Roy Lichtenstein: Oh Jeff I Love You Too But. (Opp. Right) Marcel Duchamp : Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2),1912 Philadelphia Museum of Art, ADAGP/Paris, DACS/London

on a stool and the iconic and enigmatic *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*), a replica of the 1915-23 original. Alongside this are major works by Johns and Rauschenberg, some of which are homage to Duchamp. The upstairs galleries are themed around the use of chance, as well as that of chess. Duchamp embraced the ephemeral, and appeared to abandon art and devote himself to chess from 1923. The interplay between his ideas and those he influenced, both in person and artistically, is an intriguing and ongoing dialogue, and seeing this show, you understand why Duchamp regarded the spectator a vital element in the creative act.

The **Tate Modern** hosts the first major retrospective of Pop artist **Roy Lichtenstein** in twenty years (until 27 May), one which has been seen in Chicago and Washington and travels on to the Pompidou Centre. It was a smash hit in America, and will no doubt draw the crowds in London.

Roy Lichtenstein's comic book heroes still look remarkably modern for work that dates from the early Sixties. His iconic painting of a fighter jet, *Whaam!*, made at the time of the Vietnam war and part of the Tate's permanent collection, at once celebrates a comic culture and acts as a powerful comment on the reality of war.

There are few artists whose images are so much part of the collective consciousness as Lichtenstein's cartoon heroes. They are reproduced endlessly, whether it is in primary school art classes or on advertising billboards: the Barbie-doll girls with a teardrop glistening on the cheek, the chiselled features of a gorgeous hunk with the speech bubbles capturing all the angst of young love.

It comes as something of a shock to realise that these well-loved images that took their inspiration from comic strips only covered a period of around seven years of the artist's long life. The Tate presents them in a huge room entitled *War and Romance*, and almost every image is familiar. En masse, their energy, humour and style and the explosive drama of their content is a delight to behold. This is the Lichtenstein that people know and love, and this room, above all the others, will be what enthralls them.

It isn't all there is though. Having found his unique style by codifying popular culture, the artist went on to explore this vision. He saw all images as existing on the level of mass production – the element that has made his work so popular. He turned to other artists, like Picasso, whom he admired immensely, and translated their work into his idiom, with his trademark Benday dots, sharp outlines and cartoon style. The result is interesting – a definitely Lichtenstein version of the artist to whom he pays homage.

The curators see Lichtenstein as an artist who continues to innovate, who remains true to his ideals, and not someone who had one good idea he mined for all he was worth. The further one ventures through this retrospective though, the more difficult this is to see. His later series involved revisiting the Barbie-doll figures of his youth and turning them into nudes, while the dots have gone viral, making some of them look like they have a bad case of measles. He then returned to the colourful expressionism with which he began his career and finally turned to traditional Chinese landscape, giving it his signature dots. The bland and banal result has neither the peaceful calm of landscape nor the sizzling power of cartoon culture.

I have no doubt that *Lichtenstein: A Retrospective* will be a blockbuster, but my guess is that viewers will enjoy the shock of recognition with the early work, and leave wondering whether the artist continued a great idea far too long. Perhaps he should have followed Duchamp's lead and taken up chess in later life.

