



Nushin Elahi's LONDON LETTER

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The art year in London has started with an explosion of new shows, at least two of which are proving unexpectedly popular. Anyone could have predicted that the Manet at the Royal Academy or the Lichtenstein at the Tate would draw the crowds, but no-one could have guessed there would be a sell-out for art from the Ice Age or a show in which artists use light as their medium.

Ice Age Art – arrival of the modern mind at the **British Museum** (until 26 May) places for the first time ever portable artworks from 40 000 years ago on the public stage – and people are enthralled. Most poignant are the female nudes on display, nudes which reveal images of women far removed from today's sex symbols, and instead focus on women for their fertility, with large breasts and wide hips. These carvings, many from mammoth tusk, but also stone and even pottery, are a celebration of femininity that inspired the likes of Picasso. The show opens with a figurine of 20 000 years ago, which prefigures

Cubism in its portrayal of the female figure. A couple of images from Matisse and Henry Moore draw the parallels to great modern masters and explain why this ancient work deserves the title art. Most of the objects, which include detailed carvings of animals, would fit snugly in the palm of your hand. Looking only fleetingly at cave drawings, which I believe would have made an impressive backdrop to these tiny sculptures, the landmark exhibition makes the point that even if we don't know who the artists were, these are not simply archaeological artefacts, but objects created by people with minds as intelligent and curious as our own.

From the ancient to the modern. **The Hayward Gallery**, which has become one of the most provocative London venues for showcasing art, presents **Light Show** (until 27 May), another 'returns only' ticket. Over twenty artists here use the electric light we take for granted to create magical sculptures that range from a single theatri-

cal spotlight to recycled lightboxes rescued from city streets and pulsating computer-controlled LEDs. Olafur Eliasson, who created a giant sun in the Tate some years ago, ends the show with his exquisite, but migraine-inducing, cascading fountains, lit by strobe lights that make each droplet look like a diamond. Other works recreate moonlight, or etch images in a mist that the viewer can walk through, or show how lighting can trick the eyes into seeing different colours on the walls. A telephone booth gives the sensation of standing on endlessly receding strip lighting, a round tower pulsates with inane tickertape, a room uses planes of light to create shadow and depth. The work is beautifully presented, allowing each piece to be viewed on its own, which is an enormous technical challenge in itself. This is a show that needs to be experienced as each exhibit will elicit a unique response in the viewer, some playful, wonder, awe, puzzlement and delight. Certainly, after that, the mere act of flicking a light switch will no longer go unnoticed.

Man Ray Portraits (until 27 May) at the **National Portrait Gallery** read like a who's who of the time. From his early days when he tried to establish a New York Dada, before moving with Marcel Duchamp to Paris in 1921, he photographed fellow artists, so the range of faces runs from Ernest Hemmingway, Jean Cocteau, Picasso and Salvador Dali to his later 'Hollywood' years when it included the likes of Ava Gardner, Wallis Simpson and Catherine Deneuve. Many of these vintage prints come from galleries like the Pompidou Centre, New York's Metropolitan Museum and Museum of Modern Art. It's hard to imagine whether they would have had the pulling power had they simply recorded a milkman and a shopgirl. They are small and surprisingly realistic recordings of people who were not necessarily famous at the time, and few of them have the sharp-edged modernity of the artist's paintings. An early 'self-portrait' with a handprint and an etched photographic plate is what one would expect from this whacky artist, while the later

self-portrait gives no clue how wild this man in the beret was. It is in the pictures of his lovers, particularly his enduring muse, the elfin-faced Lee Miller, that one sees the surrealist at work, experimenting with a process he called solarisation.

Portraits are also the focus of the **Royal Academy's Manet: Portraying Life** (until 14 April), but here there is more of a sense of an artist's own view of the life around him, although it is also a record of great names of the time. In fact, his detailed *Music in the Tuilleries Gardens* of 1862, which is owned by the National Gallery, reads as a who's who in itself. But Manet was not interested in simply capturing a likeness, he was looking for a medium to express modernity. Although he is associated with the Impressionists, he never exhibited with them, preferring not to be included in a group. Many of his iconic works reference great masters, but a painting such as *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, of which the Courtauld's study is seen here, is considered a watershed in the modern idiom. And even today, the forthright gaze of the naked woman, with her clothed companions, is still arresting. Among this work are many pieces that may seem unfinished and were never exhibited in his lifetime, but Manet would simply stop making any more marks when he felt he had said enough. Hanging side by side then are two large paintings of Madame Manet, a frequent subject of his, and in one, the Tate's, his interest dissolves the further from the face he goes. His brushwork is vigorous and with a quick sweep we have all we need to read a petticoat, a veil or a glove. In portraits like that of Emile Zola, one of Manet's champions, the detailed placing of visual references such as an Olympia with her head turned to the critic, make one understand that the artist left nothing to chance. These fifty paintings depict Manet's family and friends, especially his wife and stepson, powerful political figures like Georges Clemenceau and the models who posed for many paintings. They show an innovative artist who was determined to reflect his changing world.



Royal Academy's Manet: Portraying Life : Gare Saint-Lazare, Portrait of Berthe Morisot, Soap Bubbles