

Inside the hammer house of squalor

Hidden lives: mountains of old white goods and a bleak desk imply a recycling plant staffed by immigrants in Christoph Büchel's *Simply Botiful*

MATT LIPPIATT feels like a guilty intruder in the seedy and alarming installation by Christoph Büchel inside an East London warehouse

At 25,000 sq ft, it is one of the largest indoor contemporary artworks in London today, rivalled only by the Tate Modern's helter-skelter slides — although, hidden in an East London warehouse, *Simply Botiful* is no funfair. A sprawling and wildly ambitious installation by the Swiss-born Christoph Büchel, it is a huge, physical, interactive work of art.

Since its opening in October, the show has become a word-of-mouth hit. Week-on-week increases have brought the current visitor total to almost 7,000, with three months still left to run. So what's all the fuss about?

First I had to find it. Having paced up and down Cheshire Street three times, I wandered into a shabby-looking hotel to ask for directions to the exhibition, only to be told that I was already inside it. The set-dressing is faultless, creating a cheesy entrance lobby that is not at all out of place in this part of town. Leaving my bag at reception, I absent-mindedly signed a form. I later learned that was a personal injury disclaimer.

Upstairs is a horribly cramped corridor with dishevelled, slept-in beds half-blocking doorways into tiny bedrooms cluttered with personal belongings. A scruffy communal kitchen and bathroom complete the impression of a thoroughly sub-standard hostel.

More jarring is a study with a desk covered with bones and ancient artefacts. A burst of laughter from behind caused me to turn and see two other visitors emerging from coats hanging in a cupboard against the wall. Sure enough, there is a hole in the back of the cupboard just large enough to crawl through, leading to a room without doors or windows, booming with intimidating thrash metal. A glass case contains a burnt-out motorcycle.

In the main warehouse mountains of used fridges and electronic appliances surround worktops strewn with parts. Perhaps our "hotel" provides sleeping quarters for the unfortunate workers of this illicit and dangerous



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recycling depot. Further exploration uncovers dreary living and eating areas, including two particularly dystopic caravans almost buried in broken-down stereos. The squalor is blackly funny, and there is something of the Universal Studios fun factor in such a massive simulation. The enjoyment, however, is under-

cut by the knowledge that, for some, these circumstances are an inescapable reality.

Further in, things get physical. Clambering into the back of an open truck, and squeezing through bunk beds, it occurs to me that this art form requires a relatively able-bodied audience. In the floor a trapdoor leads down into an

underground chamber furnished with rugs and office chairs, with overtones of nuclear bunker. The Page 3 girls decorating the walls presumably serve as a wretched relief for the inhabitants. But this is nothing compared with the second tunnel.

A chest freezer is open and empty in the corner of a container cell. The freezer has a hole in the bottom accessing a very narrow 8ft vertical tunnel. Climbing down is claustrophobic and tricky, as is the longer crawl-passage that follows, taking you through layers of building foundations until you drop out into a deep groove. The pay-off is a pair of mammoth tusks protruding from an enormous block of earth in what is presumably a secret excavation.

The gallery's director, Gregor Muir, agrees there is too much to sum up in one "meaning", but hazards a guess of his own. "I see a twist on global warming, with the frozen mammoth and the fridges." It's a good point, but then there are the torn-up Koran pages re-assembled in a makeshift office, and the commemorative rugs patterned with a design celebrating 9/11 (Büchel didn't make these; they're available to buy in the Middle East). Perhaps it is this complexity that brings many visitors back.

Unlike the Tate's Turbine Hall commissions, the cost of this project is not met by corporate sponsorship or government funding but by private collectors. Every part of the installation is documented photographically and will be made available to buy from Hauser & Wirth. This may explain the freedom that Büchel has been given to create such an uncompromisingly political and physically demanding exhibition.

It remains to be seen whether works like this will find their way into museum collections. For better or worse, *Simply Botiful* says more about the world we live in today than a giant chrome slide, and, in its own dark way, it is just as much fun.

Simply Botiful by Christoph Büchel is at Hauser & Wirth Coppermill, 92-108 Cheshire Street, London E2 (www.ghw.ch 020-7287 2300) until March 18

