

ARTS

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New model army

Colin Powell argues for war, Picasso argues against, and a bunch of mannequins invade - **Adrian Searle** surrenders to the new Whitechapel gallery

A bronze bust of Romilly John, infant son of the bohemian painter Augustus John, stands in absolute stillness on a plinth in the centre of a room, beneath white globe lamps, catching the filtered daylight coming in from Whitechapel High Street. Behind Jacob Epstein's 1907 sculpture of Romilly hang early works by David Bomberg, Mark Gertler and other East End Jewish artists. This upstairs gallery, which occupies what was until recently the run-down local library, is part of the newly expanded Whitechapel gallery. I hesitate to say that this small space is beautiful, but it is: it feels filled with thoughts, stalled time and memory.

Although this display is a self-contained show, it encourages connections with the other exhibitions here. On another plinth in a large new gallery downstairs, there is a vaguely cubistic head-and-shoulders sculpture of former US Secretary of State Colin



Wild confections ...
a work by Isa Genzken

« Powell. He seems to have a brick on his shoulder, and to be fighting his way out of rubble. The light falls vertically on him, sucked through an angled shaft cut into the building by Belgian architects Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem. Powell gesticulates, a phial of anthrax in his hand. The sculpture is based on a photograph taken when Powell addressed the UN in 2003, making the case for war, and is part of recent Turner prize contender Goshka Macuga's exhibition here, *The Nature of the Beast*.

Macuga's installation fills a new ground-floor gallery, whose centrepiece is a large glass-topped conference table.

Reflected in the table, one sees the life-sized tapestry copy of Picasso's *Guernica* that hangs at the end of the room. Macuga's *Nature of the Beast* is like the eye of a storm. In the tapestry, the blacks and precisely graduated greys and blank whites of Picasso's original painting have been rendered in soft tans and browns; but the image hits you all the same. In January 1939, the painting came to the Whitechapel. Clement Attlee stood before it and gave a speech; 15,000 visitors came in the opening week and paid a penny each to see a painting one local newspaper described, rightly, as "one of the most advanced and provocative of modern times". Those pennies bought boots for Republican fighters in Spain, and contributed to Stepney Trades Council's campaign to ship food to the Spanish populace. The painting commemorated the bombing of the Basque historic capital by 28 German aircraft in 1937. It wouldn't be long before the bombers devastated east London, too.



This tapestry has hung in the Security Council chamber at the UN since 1985. When Powell made his case for invasion to the Security Council, the tapestry was shrouded; it was felt that Picasso's image of death and terror was not a helpful backdrop. The later bombing of Falluja in central Iraq has since been compared to the German bombing of *Guernica*.

Macuga has produced a free newspaper to go with her installation, documenting the history of Picasso's painting, and contrasting this archival material with the text of Powell's infamous and misguided speech. She also invites people to hold their own meetings here, at that glass-topped table.

Out in the lobby, a photograph of David Hockney shows the painter smoking indolently, his feet up in his stuffy Bridlington sitting room, in a portrait by Juergen Teller. There's little sign that Hockney was ever the hip young artist, living in LA: his clothes are sprinkled with cigarette ash, his trousers shiny with wear. This is just the first of a series of portraits Teller will be hanging in the Whitechapel lobby, and everyone he shows will have a connection either with the gallery or the East End. He is even threatening to show a picture he took of me.

There are portraits and presences everywhere one goes. In another new gallery we find Sarah Lucas, with her fried-egg breasts, and a Lucian Freud of a young woman holding a flower. Both are in an exhibition of works from the British Council, selected by Michael Craig-Martin.

In the main exhibition space stands a group of towers by the German artist Isa Genzken - shiny aluminium, moiré-patterned grilles, marble-effect Formica and flatly painted colour. They look sharp and stoic, natty and imperious. One might not have



thought Genzken an ideal candidate for the Whitechapel's opening show: her art is wayward and increasingly impenetrable, and she has held two shows in London since 2006 already. The French critic Yve-Alain Bois has called Genzken a kind of artistic bag lady: her borrowings and bricolage of materials and manners, idioms and styles creates a wilful and bewildering confusion. But the confusion is part of the deal.

Genzken's exhibition begins with lumps of plaster and model troglodyte dwellings, window-like objects framing emptiness, and a number of sleek, highly crafted things: pointed, aerodynamic-looking forms that thrust this way and that on the floor. These somewhat extruded-looking sculptures resemble the artefacts of an alien technology. Even their titles disconcert:



Black Hyperboloid "Small Nut", Yellow Ellipsoid, Zwilling. These homeless, unidentifiable objects give way to beach shelters and grandiose buildings made from cardboard packaging, sweet wrappers and rubbish. Blank blocks of concrete sprout telescopic radio aerials; these are called World Receivers. Other hunks of cement are pierced with holes, like Henry Moore stand-ins for loudspeakers. It is as if the material could speak - which of course it does, in the hands of Genzken. It yabbers and crackles, sighs and shrieks.

Genzken goes from dour cement greys to zinging electric colour, from shimmering glass towers (like flamboyant takes on Richard Serra) to funky abstract panels. It gets crazier. But there's crazy and there's crazy. At its best, Genzken's art has a wonderfully lively quality; but you can't always grasp what she means, even at its most articulate and spare.

In the final part of Genzken's show, the world is taken over by silver-sprayed mannequins. One wears a British army bearskin and Dolce & Gabbana shades; its trousers are half down, and there are breasts and various other Brit-themed accoutrements. Other mannequins look like the victims of ad-hoc experiments and rites. There's a lot of off-the-shelf industrial paraphernalia, spurts of colour, wild confections of materials and private symbolism.

Genzken is a troubling - not to say troubled - artist. Born in 1948, she made art that grew out of a kind of

European, pragmatic interrogation of form. Now, it revels in a superabundance of heterogenous stuff - mutilated dolls, mannequins, wheelchairs, glassware. The one insurmountable fact is that Genzken suffers from prolonged periods of mental ill-health. This fact and the art she makes are indissoluble - though, at the same time, the art is the art, and Genzken is Genzken. Sometimes the work looks silly, and at other times it has real bite. At a certain point, one must give up looking for explanations and go with the flow.

What strange encounters these all are. Even after losing myself at the Whitechapel, going from gallery to gallery, show to show, I still don't feel I've got the measure of this latest incarnation. Everything feels vital, and everywhere there are surprises.

The gallery is now a colony of interconnected spaces of varying sizes and very different atmospheres, which the exhibitions in the rolling programme will match. Where many art galleries flatten out the differences between artists, and between one work and the next, the new Whitechapel highlights these contradictions. It is a gallery to linger in, which could accommodate almost any kind of art one can think of. The art of the past lives in the present, and the present is a much more heterodox and varied place than we imagine. There is no mainstream. The Whitechapel is just the place to reflect this.

The **Whitechapel Gallery**, London E1, is open from Sunday. Details: www.whitechapelgallery.org

Terror past and present . . .
(clockwise from top left) **tapestry copy of Picasso's Guernica (detail); sculpture of Colin Powell holding a phial of anthrax, part of Goshka Macuga's installation; an Isa Genzken mannequin (detail)**

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