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'Best of British?'

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The fact that Beck's Futures 2 is such a feeble exhibition saddens me deeply. It means that I join a long list of the disappointed. The energetic Beck's beer company can't be pleased, either. For many years Beck's has been giving British modern art decent financial support, and now British modern art thanks them by presenting them with this heavy-weight turkey. Nor will the ICA be satisfied. Having long since squandered most of its once excellent reputation as a significant art venue, the ICA must have hoped that Beck's Futures would put it back on Britain's cultural map.

Instead, the new display manages to make the ICA look pokier and sillier than ever. The art-lovers of Edinburgh and Liverpool will be mortified, too. Because, after it has bored and irritated the inhabitants of the capital, Beck's Futures 2 is heading off on a British tour. It's even going to New York, where it will at least bring some comfort to the locals by proving that there is an art tradition across the Atlantic that is just as bankrupt as their own.

Beck's Futures set out last year to be a rival for the Turner prize — to perform the hugely valuable function of annually sampling emerging art in the hope of keeping us abreast of the latest aesthetics and of discov-

ering the cultural players of the future. This was and is an excellent set of ambitions. And the first Beck's Futures was lively and provocative enough to be encouraging. What a shame that the second should be so inadequate.

However, there is one concerned group that won't be disappointed with the latest instalment of Beck's Futures: the artists in the show. Not only do they get to feature their work at a central venue in the capital long before they are ready to do so, but one of them is going to win £24,000, the largest of all new art prizes. Whoever ends up pocketing the cheque will not deserve it. Nobody in this contemporary doze-in deserves it.

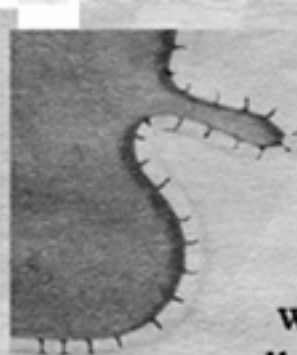
Among the artists who deserve it least are the two who open the proceedings. For some reason, there is a distinct Jackson Pollock flavour to Beck's Futures 2. I can only imagine that the judges thought they had spotted a trend. Splats and dribbles are in, and both David Burrows and DJ Simpson pay ironic homage to Jack the Dripper.

I should quickly add that neither of them is a painter. So calm down out there. Painting is not back.



Simpson gouges abstract Pollock-esque squiggles into formica-covered plywood with entirely tedious results, while the marginally more interesting Burrows is a photographer of spaces that look as if Jackson Pollock has been throwing wild parties in them. Paint has been squirted on the walls, beer bottles scattered across the floor. Pizza has been ordered in and the cartons discarded. It turns out that the splashes and splats are actually made from easily transportable illusionistic cut-out foam. More of the portable splats cover the ICA floor. Although the fake splats strike you as spectacularly unconvincing in the flesh, they photograph well enough, and turn anywhere they are deposited into a scene of cartoon chaos. What remains unclear is why this should be considered a good thing.

Splats of a more serious nature feature in the work of Fabienne Audeoud and John Russell. Where Burrows has robbed the splat of its most productive quality — its unpredictability — by mass-producing comic, handmade wine stains that can be scattered artfully about the room, Audeoud and Russell are interested in the origins of the most violent and primitive of all splats: the blood splat. The two of them have made a



video in which they re-create the infamous incident in which William Burroughs shot his wife. In the video, Russell, as Burroughs, takes drunken aim at a cup that Audeoud, as the wife, is holding above her head. He misses. The huge splat of blood that appears on the wall behind her, while not convincing for long, does at least smuggle a moment of real passion into these relentlessly jokey proceedings. Indeed, to their credit, Audeoud and Russell make a reasonable fist of coming across as a pair of relentlessly angry revolutionary artists in that old-fashioned anti-establishment way that used to be so popular.

I never thought I would ever again see any contemporary British artists paying tribute to Herman Nitsch and Gunter Brus, the blood-splattered shock troops of the Austrian avant-garde of the 1970s, who used to cut themselves up for their art and paint Pollock-like splatter abstracts with the resulting blood; but Audeoud and Russell quote enthusiastically from Nitsch and Brus in entertainingly angry paintings that are the only highlight of this dreary show.

Hastily scrawled diatribes against order and politeness and common sense and rich people are combined with half-glimpsed scenes from art's recent past: apart from Brus and

Nitsch in action, I also recognised Joseph Beuys giving one of his spectacularly pointless lectures. The links between these images and the words scrawled crudely across them are stubbornly unclear. Not making much sense is obviously the main objective of the angry paintings.

“What kind of role can artists dream of for themselves in a system of managed literalism where CONTENT IS CAPITAL?” ask the fearsome pair, rather pathetically, in their catalogue text. “Where will our salvation come when corporations get so keen on contemporary art?”

It's a rather delicious irony that the only artists who come close to deserving the Beck's Futures first prize are the ones who are most juvenily enthusiastic about putting the boot into the Beck's corporation and its kind. If Beck's wants to hurt them back, it should force them to accept the money this Tuesday when the winner is announced.

Elsewhere, there are fewer artists than last time, and everyone has been given a space to themselves in which to fail to make an impact. The overall effect is certainly less chaotic than last time, which turns out to be a bad thing. Beck's Futures 1 suggested that there was some energy left in new British art. Beck's Futures 2 contradicts that claim. If this really were a representative sample of the best new art currently being made in Britain, then I, too, would be reaching for Herman Nitsch's wrist-slashing equipment.

But, of course, it isn't. It's an unconvincing selection by some unconvincing judges arranged around a set of exceptionally unconvincing spaces. □