

FINANCIAL TIMES

Exhibitions

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British pavilion: Sarah Lucas

Caroline Roux

Once famous for her toilets and phalluses, the artist is now more mature — but still provocative



Sarah Lucas's installation at Tramway in Glasgow in 2014

Even those not much invested in contemporary art have probably heard about the artist who once put two fried eggs and a kebab on a table top to represent a woman's body. But despite Sarah Lucas's noisy, guffaw- and shock-inducing work, she has managed to maintain a healthy artistic profile while staying, these days, a little apart from the art-world fray.

After building a reputation in her twenties as one of the most unabashed of the Young British Artists, whose hard-drinking persona seemed as much a part of the art as the work itself, she is now likely to turn down most invitations, even from leading institutions. "I've had a lot of offers, but oh, the rigmarole, the stuff that goes with it, I can't bear it," she says.

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The Venice Biennale, though, is another thing. “I thought, it’s a once-in-a-lifetime gig, isn’t it?” she muses, as we settle down in the Groucho Club, the Soho establishment where she carouses rather less since moving to rural Suffolk eight years ago. “Venice is something special.” Indeed, the exhibition, which is unveiled in the British pavilion on May 6, is both a national honour and a significant international exposure for any artist. (But she still couldn’t be coerced into taking part in a BBC documentary about the run-up to the show.)

Lucas’s directness, both in her conversation and in her art, has got her a long way. Her raging and ribald manifestations of gender politics in the early 1990s — her delight in depicting sexual objectification, then not telling you whether to laugh or find it ugly — was a good way to get off the starting block. Her continual toilet references (a mucky bowl inscribed with the words “Is Suicide Genetic?”, for example) tied her to Duchamp while being contemporarily British: dirty and witty and disturbingly dark.

Her series of insouciantly boyish self-portraits depicted a new breed of female, unrestricted by the norms of femininity: unwilling to use sexuality, or even so much as a smile, to play the game. But was she possibly just a flash in the pan, only as good as the last “fnarr fnarr” cucumber she had positioned protruding from a mucky old mattress?

As recent exhibitions have proved, that’s not the case at all. A show at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds in 2012 called *Ordinary Things* marked her out as a worthy successor to the centre’s founding father. There were plenty of vegetables on show, including two majestic two-metre-long concrete marrows that welcomed visitors at the gallery’s entrance, but they were joined by a new series of work: “Nuds”, which suggested a seriousness of form that matched or surpassed that of Moore or Barbara Hepworth. The “Nuds” — still stocking-stuffed with kapok (like the “Bunnies” that went before them, those unsettling skinny legs emerging from chairs) — were fluid entanglements of limbs that in their complex intertwining whispered and yelped about love, sex, anxiety, delight and the sheer slipperiness of human interactions.

By the time of her important Whitechapel Gallery show in London in 2013, the “Nuds” had been cast in bronze. Where Lucas’s work had always been permeable and full of the possibility of decay — the fabric, the fruit, the cigarette butts, the old furniture — here it was suddenly rendered in valuable stasis, in expensive metal, shiny and beautifully liquid. Sarah Lucas, these pieces seemed to say, is no longer in question.



‘Hysterical Attack (Mouths)’ (1999)

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The bronze “Nuds” came about two years ago through an invitation to be part of the curated exhibition of international artists that sits at the centre of each edition of the Venice Biennale. In 2013, it was brought together by Massimiliano Gioni, who gave Lucas the courtyard of the central pavilion to play with. “I’d always thought about bronze,” says Lucas, “and here suddenly was a reason to do it, because the work had to be outdoors. Simple as that.”

This year, though, Lucas’s journey wasn’t quite so straightforward. “When I said ‘yes’ to doing the British pavilion, I thought, ‘I’ll have some fun with it,’” she says, measuring out tobacco into a liquorice cigarette paper. “And then a couple of weeks later I felt very unfunny about it. I thought, ‘What am I supposed to do? Do I have to make a grand gesture, because I’m not a grand gesture type of person. It could end up being ostentatious or silly.’ I went into a terrible fear.”



The artist

The best advice came via her gallerist Sadie Coles, from an American artist. “I think it was Ugo Rondinone, who said: ‘Just do a Sarah Lucas show.’ And I started thinking, ‘What is a Sarah Lucas show?’ At the beginning, it was about taking a strong feminist stance. Now it’s about a more evolved sense of femininity — still feminist but feminine.”



‘Nice Tits’ (2011)

Lucas has moved on since she used to spend hours in this club, necking wine and being argumentative. Eight years ago, she started seeing a fellow artist Julian Simmons, and the relationship has been transformative. “My dream . . . has always been to live and work with someone, because I never wanted life and art to be separate,” she says. Previous relationships, with artists Gary Hume and Angus Fairhurst, were rather more complicated. “In the old days, I was the chippy one,” she says, as we stand outside so that she can smoke.

“And we used to do stupid things. I remember phoning Gilbert and George in the middle of the night once with Gary Hume, after we

found their number in the phone book. Gilbert answered, totally in his rollers.” Now

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she's the Gilbert and George figure, she says. "Not that people recognise me in the street, but I get picked on by drunken students at art events. People get very chippy. It's resulted in some of my better phrases: 'Go away and get a knob, then come back and we'll talk about it.'"

It could be the title of her Venice exhibition. I can tell you it's not, but that's about it. The contents of the Venice pavilions are closely guarded until their big reveal. But what we know from Sarah Lucas's recent shows — the Henry Moore and the Whitechapel, as well as a series called "Situation", where for a year from February 2012 Lucas put her own work, and other people's, into a project space especially hired by Coles for the purpose — is that it will



Her installation at the 2013 Venice Biennale

be a spatially savvy, three-dimensional narrative with no lack of genitalia. Iwona Blazwick, the Whitechapel Gallery's director, says of Lucas: "What I learned was how well she understands the relationship of one thing to another. She treated the show as a giant stage set, where she laid out a series of encounters as if you were going from one room to another but without walls. There'd be a new breeze-block piece with a mobile hanging above, like her floating over you. It was jarring and powerful, aggressive, funny."

Sadie Coles, who spent several days with Lucas in Venice as the exhibition was being installed, also sidestepped the issue of its contents. "I think Venice builds on the abstracted figure but also reintroduces the visceral and bawdy body from a much earlier period," she wrote in an email. "There is an elegant fluency and control that comes from maturity but Sarah's energetic irreverence is undimmed."

I think that means there will exquisite bronzes. But there will still be penises. And marrows. There will surely be fried eggs.

Sarah Lucas's British Council commission at Venice Biennale runs May 9-November 22. britishcouncil.org/visualarts

Photographs: Keith Hunter; Gate Studios; Juergen Teller/CLM