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# Under the Pavement, the Id

By Josephine Berry Slater

Josephine Berry Slater gets to the bottom of Paul Noble's recent show at The Whitechapel Gallery

“‘What’s that?’” ... “‘It’s a pig’s dick on a stick’”; pinstripe-suited man fucking cow with huge dick; turd branding Macdonald’s golden arches onto cow; vets as assassins; dogs in hot-dog rolls.’

These are some of the lines I jotted down whilst looking at Egg (2004), a huge egg covered with doodles chronicling a world overrun with animal cruelty, which greets you on entering Paul Noble’s Whitechapel show. A sustained description of Noble’s polymorphically grotesque and fertile doodlings could escalate into a bout of Tourette’s. The tireless permutations of nightmarish buffoonery, sadistic romping, pornographic capery, infantile lewdness and fiendish activity defy recall let alone description. Noble’s outpourings are like a cargo load of cartoon history run through the paper shredder of the unconscious; The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers meets R. Crumb meets Hieronymous Bosch meets Ren and Stimpy meets a teenager’s doodle-smear exercise book. This steroidally pumped and very British slant on a ‘60s permissive pop culture gone to pot forms the base material – literally often the bricks and mortar – of a possibly sublime edifice which remains elusively out of view.

We view this edifice in greater and lesser degrees of magnification, production and decline, from its living mortar composed of turd people, to the grandeur of its necropolis (Ye Olde Ruin, 2004) and temple of consumption (Mall, 2001-02), to its deserted and devastated interior (Nobson Central, 1998-99). Noble describes it as an ‘exercise in self-portraiture via town planning’, and indeed it comes over like an enlightenment grid of rationality festooned with the irreducible fruits of the id. This tension between a voice of reason struggling to be heard against a pencilled sea of inchoate psychic warfare is underscored by Noble’s recurrent use of a three dimensional font, part Corbusian cityscape, part graphical script, which can only be intermittently deciphered. The city/subject is its own portraitist, its own chronicler, and as such is solipsistically incapable of gaining the distance required for coherent visual or textual representation. Like the human mind failing to map itself, this inhabitant of the urban and cultural environment cannot stand outside himself or indeed inside himself and look out; his selfhood is hopelessly dissolved into the surrounding social fabric and fiction.

After the myopic acrobatics of the the first room in which the visitor is first asked to remove their shoes so as not to scuff the pristine white floor, then to squat in front of Egg to examine it from every available angle, and then to squint up at the psychedelic mayhem of the more diminutive Huh Huh – the panoramic grandeur of the second (carpeted) room comes as a relief, at least for a while. Standing in the middle, it’s possible to survey each wall-sized pencil drawing in turn: the necropolis; the temple of consumption; the obliterated and desertified Nobson Central. But soon the lure of their highly worked detail and cryptic oddness pulls the eye and accompanying body back in, demanding a strangely helpless state of over-proximity. The payback is undoubtedly generous, but the possibility that careful extrapolation across all these details will finally erupt in some flash of synthesis is never realised.

Interestingly, the desertion of Nobson Central by all lifeforms is strangely soothing. In what looks like a city devastated by siege – reminiscent of shots of Ramallah after Israel’s ruthless attack – closer inspection reveals to be a grid-like arrangement of tarnished modernist shells offering no signs of life past or present. There are no personal effects, no furniture, no papers, no gardens, no food – just the odd pile of bagged and depersonalised rubbish. After the hysterical couplings of the first room, the cloying ‘individualisation’ of graves in the necropolis, the futile signification of illegible script

encrusting the mall, there comes a complete absence of life's productivity in this work. Life looks implausible from the start. And this in the drawing which comes closest to resembling an actual city – an overview of Nobson's centre.

As Surrealist chronicler Maurice Nadeau suggested: 'The important thing was to bring the unconscious of a city into unison with the unconscious of men'. Following this cue, we could speculate that Paul Noble's unconscious desire is the death of mankind, his cities and his desires (based on the balm of the desertified Nobson Central). Or are these epic tableaux evidence of an attempt to imagine a city built out of desires unbounded, in all their baseness and sublimity? The video work of an anus presented to us from Islamic prayer position that confronts us on leaving the show might support the latter theory. Although usually screened out, our spiritual supplication before the divine depends upon our fundamental ability to raise the arse skywards. a

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