

phallic energy is converted into fun graphics: lines of pink and purple bubbles that eventually mutate into what looks like pollen, then, possibly, an egg and, finally, a pagoda. Elsewhere, on a beach, a man is approached by a floating set of female ovaries and his hair reaches out to capture them. This action is accompanied by crashing sound effects similar to those used in video games, but his efforts result in frustration and failure. We have entered a world where sexuality and gender are matters of heroic intensity, and proceedings end up resembling a desperate carnival, complete with a tube train that zooms around like a literal emotional roller coaster.

Another artist revelling in the foregrounding, arrangement and meaning of colour is the Los Angeles-based artist Lauren Halsey, whose installation *We The Ones (blackgold)*, 2016, covers one entire wall with neatly arranged lines of synthetic hair extensions. The work (part of the series 'Kingdom Splurge') delights in the sheer intensity of colour combinations that collectively turn the wall into a vast palette. Halsey sees herself as an 'alternative archivist of utopic fantasies' and cites the influence of the 'funk operas' of George Clinton's Parliament and Funkadelic groups, which since the 1970s have been highly adventurous in their use of extravagant costumes and wigs, not to mention their ground-breaking music. And because this hair is anything but real, the installation makes it hyperreal. Without anyone to wear any of it, and also because visitors are welcome to touch it, the hair changes character, becoming voluminous, monumental, highly sensual and celebratory.

Near this tribute to the culture of African-American women there is a video work commenting on the culture of young African-American men. A series of principles are put forward by Jayson Musson's street-styled alter-ego, Henessy Youngman, in the video *ART THOUGHTZ: How To Be A Successful Black Artist*, 2010. And when the viewer laughs, it is at racial stereotyping that is frequently revealed to have a horrific backstory. The principle 'Be Angry', for instance, is followed by Youngman advising you to watch footage of pitbulls fighting or view a photograph of Emmett Till in his coffin. Then that image, of a black teenager from Chicago who was tortured and lynched in Mississippi in 1955, strongly influencing the subsequent Civil Rights movement, flashes on screen. It is still shocking today, and it cuts through Youngman's exaggerated male posturing and joking. Then we are back with Youngman's routine. He cites the 'Dogz Playing Poker Principle', whereby the artist should 'paint niggaz doing white shit'. And the ultimate: 'Slavery Y'all!' As an artwork, it is grounded in inescapable facts of history; as comedy, you want to trust your sense of humour but cannot.

For a female perspective on the same subject, turn to the adjacent group of paintings by New York-based Jordan Casteel depicting young black men, naked, seated and, especially in the case of *Derek 2*, 2015, looking vulnerable. Seated in a chair with his knees clasped under his chin, in the embryonic position but with his head tilted to one side, he gazes out at you with a look of total trust. He is lit in a glowing, warm, yellow light that casts his shadow against the window frame behind him and also shows on a table just to one side the framed photo of a woman who may well be his mother. In short, he is beautiful.

Another painting, *Kampala Suburb*, 2014, by the Kenyan-born, London-based artist Michael Armitage, also contains delicate imagery relating to gender and sexuality. Painted, like all his work, on Lubugo bark cloth, which is naturally coarse and can contain holes, his rendering of a couple's kiss, half in shadow, avoiding an embrace, is fleeting and fragile. The couple seem to be male (although the figure on the right may be

female) and the figure on the left is either blocking the advance of his companion or exploring the other's body. The image captures a moment of either rapture or rupture. As is the way with all melodrama, the emotions brought to bear make the moment pivotal: all or nothing. ■

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The Peculiar People

Focal Point Gallery Southend 16 April to 2 July

It has been widely accepted for quite some time that landscape isn't best understood as the unmediated experience of nature but rather as the confluence of thoroughly cultural elements such as place, politics, history and social practice. But how this understanding can be actualised within art, or indeed within everyday life, remains an open matter. Focal Point Gallery's 'The Peculiar People' provides some potentially intriguing lines of enquiry.

Organised as part of the Radical Essex project, the exhibition consists of three elements: firstly, postwar and contemporary artworks produced and often responding to Essex; secondly, contracts, history writings, architectural plans, newspaper reports and audio-visual recordings; and thirdly, an installation/library by artist Christian Nyampeta. Combined, these elements constitute an informative archival exhibition demonstrating an Essex significantly different from its longstanding reality as a Tory stronghold (typified by the Thatcher-era notion of 'Essex Man'), clichés regarding 'Essex Girls' or the superficiality of *The Only Way is Essex*. Instead, we are confronted with evidence of unorthodox communities in the countryside, quasi-utopian civic planning and the emergence of neo-avant-garde culture through figures such as the Lettrist Henri Chopin and Independent Group members Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson. An expansive picture emerges and it is unsurprising that the exhibition lists 45 sources for the archive material and 'many more'.

Another Essex, then, becomes strikingly visible through this exhibition. Because of its proximity to London, the county became a viable location for those searching for ways to escape the 'rat race' and define their own distinct position with society. Upon doing so, the escapees were faced with two choices: to disrupt the parochial atmosphere they discovered or to wilfully seek self-isolation through the establishment of non-conformist land-tilling communities. Both options amounted to experiments in living that critiqued quotidian experience in 20th-century society. The items collected in the exhibition reveal an extraordinary counter-history of nonconformity and avant-gardism. For example, they document the vegetarian-socialist colony in Stanford-le-Hope, the Orsea Temperance Society, the Hadleigh Farm Colony founded by General Booth, who also founded the Salvation Army – all attempts at society's improvement, with Essex acting as laboratory. Another kind of communal living is evidenced by groups such as The Peculiar People (active 1837-1956) and the still extant Othona Community at Bradwell-on-Sea, both possessing somewhat cultish qualities. When seen against this backcloth of comingled materialism and idealism, it is obvious why figures such as Chopin, Paolozzi, and Henderson show avant-garde potential in Essex. Essex's alterity is also picked up in later artworks, such as *Constable, can't you see my predicament* by Jeremy Deller, Alan Kane,

Dan Mitchell and Simon Perition, 1994, as well as in the film *Bata-ville* by Karen Guthrie and Nina Pope, 2005. The formerly anarchic plotlands may have been subsumed by sprawling new towns, and many of the living experiments have faded into barely remembered history, but the more recent works – as well as the exhibition – suggest a lingering inheritance.

If there is something potentially problematic about 'The Peculiar People', it is perhaps its hesitancy about discriminating critically between different social models or about suggesting how such differences are theoretically conceivable. Such a refusal, to be sure, may stem from a decision to avoid prescriptiveness or over-didacticism, yet the risk here is that the social models presented in the exhibition are treated more or less as equally tenable. For instance, the socio-urban planning that accompanied the Bata shoe factory indicates its dependence on Taylorist-Fordist production strategies – rendering it an Essex equivalent of Fordlândia. While these strategies evince a near-utopian hope that work and life can be balanced, it is hard to dodge the underlying suspicion that, as with Fordism, the intended work/life equilibrium is slanted towards work insofar as life is promoted for the purposes of increased manufacturing output and better profit margins. The function of this reimagined sociality is towards the continued preservation of capitalism rather than a thorough challenge to it. If one of the exhibition's themes is the movement from living experiments in Essex to the appearance of the UK's first credit card and the new towns, then were the seeds of flexible finance planted in places such as Bata? And what becomes of its radicalism? How does it compare with the curious socialist-Christian communities appearing earlier in the century in Essex or, further afield, places such as Bournville outside Birmingham?

It is necessary to seek clarification of these issues since the political stakes are important. How we judge the exhibition on this score may depend on whether we view these questions as being posed by the exhibition or prompted by it. However we evaluate that distinction, its significance highlights another critical opposition, namely whether 'The Peculiar People' is a genealogical exhibition nostalgically retracing a political 'dreamworld' for Essex that we have irrevocably woken from, or whether it maps an alternative prototype for collectivity that can be (re)actualised in contemporary society. Ultimately, insofar as the exhibition is a component of a wider undertaking, these matters need not be settled here, but hopefully they will be interrogated as Radical Essex continues.

Because all the artworks and ephemera testify to the interrelation between people and place, it hardly seems far-fetched to suggest that 'The Peculiar People' represents a re-examination of the landscape genre. Shown within the confines of the gallery space, it is perhaps hard to perceive the exhibition in those terms. In that regard, Matthew Butcher's *Flood House*, a Focal Point off-site project supported by Radical Essex, saliently reconnects social practice with landscape. A mobile floating structure tethered to the mudflats of the Thames estuary, *Flood House* conjoins modernist architecture with the living experiments analogous to those historicised in 'The Peculiar People'. Working/living with the landscape is thematised in this structure, and the social aspect is further suggested by the inclusion of a weathervane by Ruth Ewan, titled *All Distinctions Levelled*, which features the palindromic word 'LEVEL' on the east-west axis. The reference is to both rising and falling water levels that *Flood House* adroitly manages and to the radical Essex priest John Ball who called for the levelling of social hierarchies. These hierarchies remain 600 years after the



Peasants' Revolt, yet 'The Peculiar People' offers ample insight into what such levelling might look like. ■

MATTHEW BOWMAN lectures at Colchester School of Art and University Campus Suffolk.

installation view
of 'The Peculiar
People'

Matthew Butcher
Flood House 2016
Ruth Ewan
*All Distinctions
Levelled* 2016
weathervane

Helen Mirra and Allyson Strafella: Suchness

Large Glass London 15 April to 24 June

There is a quietness that rests easily between two people whose thoughts are so aligned that silence seems to speak. This delicate, sparse show emerges from that still pool of correspondence between two artists via conversations and artwork from a shared aesthetic and spirituality. Allyson Strafella uses a customised typewriter to make dense repetitions on paper, while in her abstract tapestries Helen Mirra draws with wool on linen. The show's title, 'Suchness', is taken from one of the key words in Buddhist philosophy, *tathata*, the Sanskrit term for 'thusness', the thing in itself when it has been stripped of the linguistic, cultural and social meanings we impose on it. As Stephen Bachelor, former monk and secular Buddhist, explained in a talk to open the show, if the mind is still, we can discern this 'unpindownable' quality in things and in ourselves.

There is everything Buddhist and at the same time nothing Buddhist about this exhibition. It sits firmly within a minimalist lineage with nods to artists like Richard Tuttle and others. The sensibility evokes a provisional lightness and spaciousness, despite the fact that Strafella's work is made from metal stamps