

# Starr material

Giant pink brains and comic cat ceramics... it's ridiculous stuff, but Georgina Starr's new exhibition makes you awfully glad it exists

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**S**ometimes the grown-up art world just feels too clean, too sterile. Weeks of white-walled white cubes with perfect works in perfect vitrines can sometimes get you down. So it is an absolute joy to be able to report back from the artistic frontier that this week I've been looking at ceramic cats, saucy postcards and giant brains made from bubblegum.

The star at the centre of this rather peculiar constellation is one Georgina Starr, whose exhibition *Before Le Cerveau Affamé* (Before The Hungry Brain) has been tailor-made for the lovely Cooper Gallery at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee. I missed the performance with which Starr launched her show but I've caught up with the video footage. It turns out there is nothing quite like the silence of a hip art crowd struck dumb when a giant pink brain is carried ceremoniously into the room.

Starr, a second generation YBA who studied at the Slade, is a curious example of the art world's own peculiar logic. Starting out as a kind of fey conceptualist, her early breakthrough work, the video *Crying* (1993) featured the artist herself weeping copiously in a way that felt ludicrous, strangely enchanting and then, finally, genuinely moving.

Like many of her peers the attention she garnered may have overstretched some of her work. It didn't always deserve either the hype or later opprobrium it attracted.

**GEORGINA STARR: BEFORE LE CERVEAU AFFAMÉ**  
Cooper Gallery, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee  
★★★★

**HIRAKI SAWA: LENTICULAR**  
Dundee Contemporary Arts  
★★★



Her forays into sci-fi kitsch and forgotten B movies and her love of retro clothes and shoes seemed out of kilter with the macho values of much London art from the later 1990s. Her insistence on being at the centre of her own world and her shabby production values eventually bored (and occasionally enraged) critics who might not have thought twice about similar self-indulgence with big budgets and better sets in the work of a figure like megastar Matthew Barney.

But of course the world keeps on turning, and in an age where every young person is remaking classic sci-fi movies using tin foil and imagination and putting it on

YouTube it is salutary to remember that Starr was doing this with humour and zest in 1994, without access to the web.

These days Starr feels like a (fairy) godmother to a younger generation of lo-fi performers and makers, with her interest in costume and dance and the characters of the tarot. In the age of a cat-obsessed Internet, this show even includes a selection of rather comic kooky cat ceramics with beautiful rare glazes.

Before *Le Cerveau Affamé* feels part nightclub, part seedy dancehall, and part sculpture studio. The walls are studded with explicit early pornography where modesty has been restored by the affixation of giant pink bubblegum bubbles in strategic places.

In a theatrical twilight the brains sit throbbing under spotlights whilst an old Columbia turntable plays a disc of strange recitations in French, which are Starr's charming versions of avant-garde sound poetry. They are both very funny and peculiarly good. Soon you believe, as Starr seems to suggest, that blowing bubbles might be the gateway to some kind of higher consciousness.

The conceit is a new feminine cosmology, with its own mystical cards, cat worship, maternal cult and fondness for gymnastics. It is tempting to see in all those pink

bubbles the image of a plump pink womb, the possession of which seems to make a certain type of avant-garde figure foam at the mouth.

But it's not just a pastiche of avant-garde seriousness; it's a kind of aesthetic revenge. If I'm not sure whether this really adds up to that much, I'm awfully glad it exists. Sculpture students from Duncan of Jordanstone were heavily involved in the blowing of bubbles and the painstaking brain construction. Starr herself, in a charming little video, declares that she doesn't call it bubblegum. "I call it the pink material". It's ridiculous stuff like this that makes me so glad that art schools are still around.

Across at Dundee Contemporary Arts another vinyl junkie is at work. The London based Japanese artist Hiraki Sawa's opening weekend featured a set by the duo Tenniscoats who are Tokyo indie royalty. Sawa is a frequent collaborator with musicians at the further reaches of the experimental spectrum, including, in this show, Pamiako Tamura and Dale Berning and Ute Kanngiesler.

The exhibition is timed for Dundee's Discovery Film Festival, an event uniquely aimed at young people. It begins by featuring a lot of small things – tiny worlds and

tiny creatures – and much of it will thrill people who are quite small themselves.

Sawa's early works in this vein include the delightful *Inhere*, in which the circular glass door of a front-loading washing machine becomes a window into a night sky full of space shapes and interstellar overdrives, and a goldfish bowl which contains a miniature fairground.

*Unseen Park* from 2006 takes the idea a step further and ups the production values. An abandoned fairground turns out to contain another tiny world, a diminutive ferris wheel that dips in and out of a crack in the pavement, animated flowers and curious cardboard creatures that miniature humanoids bump around on. Both these films work with children's drawings to maintain a sense of naïve delight and otherworldliness.

Shown in the tiniest format imaginable, the video, *Eltewhere*, made a decade ago, is set inside what you assume is the artist's own dull apartment. Inanimate objects sprout legs and run amok. The teapot runs across the kitchen worktop, the loo roll is on the march.

This is all delightful, but there are problems when Sawa's vision is writ too large. A new work, *Lenticular*, takes Dundee's Law Observatory as

a starting point. A straightforward high definition portrait of the observatory as a giant working machine is simple and ravishingly beautiful. Next to it, though, is an animation in which star maps and squiggles are projected onto a dome. It doesn't quite add up.

In a quiet back gallery Sawa's lens rests on some simple things: a roaring campfire, a blazing poppy. In another work, he films the Northern Lights and then mirrors the image for effect. There's plenty of poetry here and genuine beauty, but the recent work, *Lineament*, a

**Starr feels like a (fairy) godmother to a younger generation**

two-screen installation feels like Wagnerian excess compared to the simple pop music of Sawa's best work. A 20-minute examination of amnesia it feels like the Peter Gabriel *Sledgehammer* video remade by an arty depressive. Sawa has a great eye and sensibility, but he is at its best when he embraces the lo-fi.

Georgina Starr until 13 December; Hiraki Sawa until 5 January



The spectacular launch of Georgina Starr's show, main and far left; part of Hiraki Sawa's new work, *Lenticular*, bottom left

