

# Champagne Life review - from the monumental to the mildly insulting

**Saatchi Gallery, London** Despite individual highlights - huge, hyperreal portraits, a marooned horse, spectral wax sculptures - this all-female show invites the suspicion of tokenism

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Sunday 17 January 2016 03.00 EST

From a distance, I thought they were dirty hubcaps, arranged as if on the wall of a grimy backstreet mechanic's. Only up close did I realise that what I was looking at was a collection of aluminium cooking pots, each one placed upside down, the better that I might contemplate its base, blackened by the braising of a thousand stews. For a few moments, I took in the gradation of their colour and condition: here a pan with a long life still ahead of it; there one whose time was surely up. Then I did the maths. In front of me were 233 such pots. If each one had once belonged to a family of five, who ate together perhaps once a day for a year, then this display represented the cooking of 425,225 meals - at which point these dented vessels seemed to take on the lustre of priceless objects.

The work of the Saudi Arabian artist Maha Malluh, this installation - its deeply unpoetic title is *Untitled (Food for Thought series), 2016* - currently graces the pristine confines of the Saatchi Gallery in Chelsea, where it vies for the visitor's attention with a stuffed horse marooned on a turquoise jesmonite blob (a piece from 2011 by the Iranian artist Soheila Sokhanvari). The horse has an amusingly pleading expression, as though it is willing you to give it a good shove. In the end, though, it's Malluh's display that holds the attention. Though she is not the only woman to have used kitchen equipment to make art - I thought of Mary Martin, the dimensions of whose abstract plaster relief, *Columbarium* (1951), are defined by the baking tray in which it was "cooked" - she is surely the first to have done so on such a grand scale.

Last week, moreover, her work had been freshly sharpened by the news that international aid had finally reached Madaya in Syria, a town where pots like these have lately held little more than boiled grass. Melting borders, refugee camps, futile proxy wars: it seems to me that with her battered pans, Malluh has drawn a map of our burning, unequal world.

The Saatchi's new exhibition, *Champagne Life*, features the work of 14 female artists, and has been staged to mark the gallery's 30th birthday. I have, to say the least, mixed feelings about gender-specific exhibitions. Yes, I know the statistics (to take just one example, in 2012, only

27.5% of the artists shown at the Frieze Art Fair were female). But if you're trying to improve the woeful under-representation of women in the art world, you need to do so consistently, and repeatedly. Mount a single show - "Look, girls, just this once, you can have the whole place to yourselves!" - and you risk looking little more than patronising. Sure enough, there is indeed something mildly insulting about Champagne Life, not least its grisly title (its curators insist this mention of bubbles is ironic, but I'm not so sure: the exhibition's major sponsor is Pommery). All these female artists, partying wildly together, and yet they have so very little in common.

Divided by practice, subject matter and, above all, by quality, this is a gathering whose invitees are in serious need of conversation. Only one of its rooms - that in which Malluh's pots adorn an entire wall - comes with a theme, all three of its installations connecting pointedly to events in the Middle East, a triptych of disillusion. *Moje Sabz* (2011), aka Sokhanvari's horse, speaks to Iran's green movement uprising in 2009, the deflated balloon on which it sits a metaphor, perhaps, for hopes raised and then cruelly dashed. Meanwhile, on the other side of the space lies *Jerusalem Donkey* (2015), by Mia Feuer, a papier-mache sculpture inspired by a visit the Canadian artist made to the West Bank. Forbidden to drive cars through Israeli roadblocks, Palestinians sometimes use donkeys instead. The hooves of this particular beast, however, are bound with rope, that it might symbolise the struggle of an entire people. It's a bit obvious, but it works.

The exhibition's other highlight is a series of hyperrealist monochrome portraits by the Serbian painter Jelena Bulajić, without doubt the most accomplished artist here (Bulajić was shortlisted for the BP portrait award in 2014). She paints old women - very old women - unsparingly, her brush taking in every line, every age spot, as if each face was a landscape and she was the Ordnance Survey.

The result is anything but melancholy. Bulajić's vast canvases have a monumental quality, a feeling of strength that only grows when you know that to her oils she adds limestone, marble dust, even ground granite. Of the three paintings on display, *Grozda* (2014) was the one I admired most: a woman who smiles with her eyes as well as her mouth.

Sharing the space with Bulajić is *Echoué au Seuil de la Raison* (2014) by Virgile Ittah, a French sculptor. Ittah works in wax, a material that from afar might be marble; but move closer, and its layers seem fluid, transitional. In this particular piece, two young women, hanging perilously from the frames of their antique iron bedsteads, are at once both fleshy and spectral, with a purgatorial state that gave me the shivers.

That's the good stuff. Elsewhere, a lot of the work is, alas, dispiritingly bad. In her depictions of vanished rural life, the Australian Sigrid Holmwood uses neon orange and yellow with all the subtlety of an East End market trader; while the digital prints of Marie Angeletti, a French artist, reminded me of nothing so much as sale time at Clintons. The paintings of American artist Suzanne McClelland, the exhibition's (meagre, unscholarly) catalogue informs us, are

informed by data. Well, maybe so; but to the casual and even the not-so-casual observer, she's just a cut-price Basquiat, her graffitied daubs stimulating neither eye nor brain. Gazing down from a mezzanine floor on to Londoner Alice Anderson's arresting but ultimately rather pointless *Bound* (2011), a bobbin so huge it turns every visitor into an extra on the set of *The Borrowers*, I was weary, despondent.

When this exhibition gets it right, it feels necessary, and deserved. But when it doesn't, it reeks of tokenism and false promise: a boast that is in danger of seeming idle.

· Champagne Life is at the Saatchi Gallery, London until 9 March

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