

The World of Martin Parr

Parrworld

MARTIN PARR IS KNOWN FOR HIS SATIRICAL DOCUMENTATION OF CONTEMPORARY BRITISH LIFE. OPENING THIS AUTUMN AT BALTIC IS LUXURY, A COLLECTION OF OVER 40 RECENT WORKS. ALSO INCLUDED IN PARRWORLD ARE OBJECTS FROM PARR'S PERSONAL COLLECTION.

As Orson Wells so famously said: "Living in the lap of luxury isn't bad, except that you never know when luxury is going to stand up." He obviously knew a thing or two about the vagaries of finance. Exactly what he'd make of our current economic mess is anyone's guess, but it's a safe bet that he'd find a lot of the photographs in Martin Parr's latest exhibition wryly amusing. The exhibition, *Parrworld* at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, is a double-whammy, presented on two floors. The second floor is a thrilling potpourri of 150 prints from some of the world's most exciting and influential photographers, as well as a fascinatingly quirky range of objects from Parr's own collection. On the first floor there is, with consummate cultural timing, *Luxury*, a clear eyed appraisal of wealth and how it looks, how it is appropriated for different scenarios worldwide, and how having too much or not having enough can blur into one gaudy celebration of all things bling.

The current resonance of the word "luxury" is not lost on Parr, one of the UK's most highly regarded photographers. "The show is an epitaph," he says: "We can see why the bubble burst." Indeed many of the photographs in *Luxury* focus on the excessive regalia of new money, an international phenomena that is no more fascinating because of its shaky standing in the new world order. There is the perennial phallogocentric pull of the cigar, the white flash of reflective shades and champagne glasses, the red robo-grin of bored women. One photograph shows a fluorescent jacketed mother and tiny child reclining beneath the blazing blue of a ski resort sky, while behind, rendered as keen as cartoons, skiers prepare to hit the white slope. These are photographs of a different species, a different tribe of people, but one that straddles continents. From the Moscow Millionaire's Art Fair, to the Motor Show in Beijing, the subjects here are literally glittering with luxury, revelling in it, glowing with it

and, crucially, blissfully ignorant of the first global spasms of disillusionment with it.

Although a fascinating show, is it one that segues with our increasingly austere zeitgeist? It's a valid question, as Munich's Haus der Kunst commissioned Parr's response to *Luxury* six years ago. Our response to the subject has changed massively in the space of 12 months. No more are we charmed by rock stars on yachts or members of the royal family jet-setting into exotica. Even personalised number plates engender a different response than they did a year ago. Doesn't the show belong in a different era, like, say, the 1980s when recession-proof Gordon Gekko could say, with his hand on where his heart should have been, that "greed is good"?

Well, no as it turns out. "The timing for these photographs is perfect," says Parr. It is only now that the recession begins to bite that we can see just how dangerous was our laissez-faire approach to spending stupid amounts of money on at times tasteless pleasures. It is only now that Parr, faced with a commission that was always going to incite a mixture of envy, amusement and disgust in its viewers, can truly hold a mirror up to us and say: "There, you see. That's what went wrong," and its international presence doesn't make it any more explicable. Spilt champagne on a flesh stretched \$3000 dress is as tasteless in New York as it is in Dubai.

Which is all very serendipitous for the exhibition. The opulent eponymous subject matter endows it with an extra sense of event. When money or the lack of it is all we're talking about, a show like this is just what the doctor ordered. The financial crisis and its accompanying troubles are beyond most folk: the hows and whys are hard to answer. Indeed "luxury" as a concept is now a misnomer, and the title of the show has perhaps taken on an ironic tone. Parr presents





Martin Parr. Moscow, Moscow Fashion Week, 2004. © Martin Parr.



us with photographic evidence of the first few steps of what went wrong. And isn't that what great art should do? It should chase the chimeras and skewer them with meaning. And when current art is running around trying to reflect the symptoms of the global recession, Parr sits back and with a characteristic light touch lifts the stones to see the causes. The resulting find is a funny, sickly and highly pertinent collection of beautifully composed photographs. A vital show, one that should be embraced by everyone who still likes their art to inform as well as entertain.

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The second part of *Parrworld* is irresistible. What is it about collections that has such a pull on fans of all things aesthetically pleasing? Especially collections such as Parr's, an at times dizzying maelstrom of commercial design and memorabilia documents, original posters and leaflets from key historical and political moments such as the 1984 UK Miners' Strike, a collection of commemorative china from the Margaret Thatcher days, examples of prayer mats featuring the New York Twin Towers, a bizarre range of Saddam Hussein watches and his most recent collection of Barack Obama ephemera. It's a “very personal collection”, says Parr, interested in making clear the link between photography and the notion of collecting: “It's a question of looking at things and organising them into groups, trying to make a statement about them.” The political inclusions are instantly provocative; especially the miner's strike paraphernalia. The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art is after all a main

player in Gateshead, historically a miner's area. Wounds run deep and in the North East there are still bitter memories. “I guess a lot of it is relevant,” concurs Parr, “The Miner's Strike stuff should go down well in the North East. But there's been a phenomenal response in Paris and Germany.” It would seem that area-specific politics and its accompanying responses are secondary to the sheer fascination of browsing through a quirkily curated collection such as Parr's.

Dovetailed with the display is a similarly enchanting smorgasbord of photographers ranging from North East alumni Chris Killip and Graham Smith – “people I know and like” – to highly respected international photographers David Goldblatt, William Eggleston, and Bernd and Hilla Becher. Teesside's Graham Smith's return to exhibiting his instantly atmospheric montages is especially a cause for celebration, his black and white reportage as at home on a Smiths album cover as it is on the Baltic wall alongside David Goldblatt's searing analysis of Apartheid, or William Eggleston's pioneering and starkly colourful interpretations of Americana. The ultimate impression here is one of admiration and respect on Parr's part for his peers. It is this generosity of spirit that gives *Parrworld* wings: each participant benefits from the proximity of the other, and the overall synergy reaffirms the sparkly relevance of photography as a contemporary medium. Add to this the limitless curiosity factor of Parr's collection of items picked up from decades of travelling and the sumptuous swagger of the *Luxury* show downstairs and you have an unmissable display of great art for our times.

For more information visit www.balticmill.com.

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