

Crash
Homage to JG Ballard
11 February – 1 April 2010, Gagosian Gallery, London

Crash

'I have used the car not only as a sexual image, but as a total metaphor for man's life in today's society.' JG Ballard.

JG Ballard's death last spring 2009 has sparked the Gagosian in London to make an homage exhibition. Its name is taken from his most controversial, but not necessarily his best novel, *Crash*, written in 1973. His dystopian themes featuring bleak man-made environments, devoid of empathy, have left a powerful cultural mark on our last century as we struggle with the flip side of our technological progress: it's psychological implications.

The book itself is a vicious take on the marriage between flesh and technology and the sexual perversities and possibilities opening up in the wounds of the victims and participators. 'The author is beyond psychiatric help. Do not publish!' was the firm response of one of his publisher's readers. The protagonists are chilling psychopaths and their graphic visual fantasies are often hard to swallow. Formally the writing conveys a cold, obsessive repetition, a constant rehearsal for the bigger, the better: the final climax of the final crash resulting in the final death. Words such as 'chromium' and 'instrument binnacle' puncture habitually like strange neurotic spasms. The book is a veritable anthology of automobile-porn. The lines between car, voyeur and participator are blurred and meshed by the violence of the car's speed.

Ballard had stated in 1995 'Needless to say, the ultimate role of *Crash* is cautionary, a warning against the brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape.' Man has created a technology capable of destroying him, while he robotically obeys the needs of his fetish. It is a reality where the obscene becomes something detached, a mechanical sensation. Linking Paul McCarthy's *Mechanical Pig*, 2003-05 to this notion functions as an apt criticism.

The Gagosian has brought together an impressive number of artists tuned in to the Ballardian universe. Just to list a few: Hans Bellmer, Jeremy Deller, Douglas Gordon, Jenny Saville, Damien Hirst, Karsten Höller, Gerhard Richter, Allen Jones, Rachel Whiteread. Mike Kelley, Jeff Koons, Helmut Newton, Ed Ruscha, Cindy Sherman. The list goes on and on with 56 artists in total. The exhibition itself is perhaps a rather obvious and loose take on this novel, with bold impact works of Richard Prince's *Elvis* 2007, Adam McEwen's *Honda Teen Facial* 2010, (comprised of a Boeing 747 undercarriage), Rauschenberg's *Jockey Cheer Glut* 1987 and Lichtenstein's *Explosion II* 1965. Roger Hiorn's piece, *Untitled* 2009, consists of shiny dismembered engine-like parts encrusted with strange blue crystals, hung like futuristic slabs of metal-meat in transit.

There is also some fine visual juxtaposition. Next to Edward Hopper's *Intermission*, 1963, featuring a lady seated in the front row of an empty cinema theatre, is a cleverly installed dusty double-door. To open the door is to walk into the remnants of a bygone era. Mike Nelson's construction *Preface to the 2004 Edition (Triple Bluff Canyon)*, 2004, is a rather dingy, musty smelling, red lobby. An abandoned box-office window still bares a few fading flyers. It is a simulated past, an unexpected pseudo-reality with entrance and exit doors connecting two pristine white galleries. The outer constructs of Nelson's installation, seen only after exiting, lays bare the fiction within this fabrication. There are two realities at play here.

A surrealist at heart, Ballard was concerned with our assumption 'that the external world around us has represented reality, however confusing or uncertain, and that the inner world of our minds, its dreams, hopes, ambitions, represented the realm of fantasy and the imagination.' He believed these roles had been reversed: that we actually 'live inside an enormous novel. It is

now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality.' And is this also not the task of the artist? Inventing art realities as new realities? A group exhibition is precisely a showcasing of multiple art realities, linked within a conceptual universe, in this case, the Ballardian universe.

Does this exhibition match the radical perversity of Ballard's *Crash*? Not quite, but it does in a broader perspective echo its compliments and bodes its gratitude to the literary man and his influence on our cultural thinking. And isn't this what an homage should do?