

Sexually explicit Saatchi lacks the shock factor

By **Ruth Holmes**

ANY exhibition which comes with a parental guidance warning for its sexually explicit content is bound to attract attention.

And if it's genitalia you're looking for, there's plenty of it in Charles Saatchi's new collection at London's Royal Academy of Arts.

The works which leave least to the imagination are self-consciously displayed on the first floor of the USA Today gallery, like top-shelf magazines.

As if by way of a warning - or invitation, depending on your inclinations - visitors are guided up the stairs by Huma Bhabha's phallic stone sculpture, "Waiting for a Friend".

On the mezzanine floor you are greeted by Lara Schnitger's giant pyjama-clad structure entitled "I want kids", with pubic hair protruding from a suspended pair of underpants.

Meanwhile, further into the gallery, are hidden the more risky works of Gerald Davis, most notably, "Monica", a pre-pubescent girl sporting pretty kitty knickers giving head to a male in superman pants in a striking evocation of lost innocence.

Then there is Ellen Altfest's "Penis" - pretty much summed up by the title - an intensely detailed dissection of the male member, withered with age and revealing every wiry hair, vein and fold of the dangling organ.

However, there is nothing here as shocking as the portrait of Moor murderer Myra Hindley, which appeared in Saatchi's previous collection - a piece comprising children's hand prints and child mannequins with penises as noses.

Indeed this latest exhibition, which features some 100 new works, has come under attack for failing to produce anything of any real impact - anything that is really powerful or original.

But the artists do all in some way capture or critique post-modern America, commenting on consumerism, violence and politics as well as sexuality.

And there is little to be optimistic about, seems to be the consensus.

Sculptures, paintings and photos from some 38 young American artists who have lived through 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantanamo, give an angry and dismal view of the world.

None the more so than Jon Pylypchuk's miserable battle scene, peopled with hapless tragi-comic furry animals, dismembered, supported by crutches and vomiting. "Hopefully I will live through this with a little bit of dignity," reads the title.

Paris-born Jules De Balincourt takes a brighter, lighter approach but none-the-less points the finger at an ego-centric America where the poor fund the lifestyles of the rich. This is played out in the cartoon-like "People who play and people who pay" where the affluent and beautiful sun themselves by the poolside while black servants wait on them and clean their hotel rooms.

But not every artist has a political point to make. In fact you have to wonder what exactly Dana Schutz was thinking of when her paintbrush spewed forth a stream of snot in "Sneeze", or when she conjured up a face eating itself in the equally imaginatively titled "Face eater".

Well, at least Saatchi can't be criticised for his lack of variety. USA Today does show-case a wealth of new work which draws from diverse traditions to censure and celebrate post-modern American culture.

While not exactly a family day out, it does have plenty to inspire and entertain. But if it's outrage or the outrageous you're after, then look away now.

USA Today runs until November 4 at the Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington Gardens, W1.

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