

## History Is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain – a review

By all accounts the winter of 1941 was an early, bitter one and in his flat in Rue Grandes Augustins, Picasso was struggling. Of course, he had been struggling since the first day he moved to Paris, but by now, famous and at ease with his immense talent it was a down to earth, prosaic type of battle that consumed his legendary energy. He fought with the unreliable electricity, he fought with the mercurial Dora Maar and also with the ever so constant, dull presence of the Gestapo officers that were assigned to harass him.

To spite them, he would offer these unwanted visitors little postcards that depicted his sorrowful indictment of war, the famous Guernica canvas which, by now, was safely exiled in New York. The story goes that one day, one of them, half admiringly asked: “Did you do this?” to which the modernist master wittily replied “No..., no..., you did! Take one, souvenir!”

Today, almost 75 years later, it is surprisingly convenient to apply that anecdote and its logic to one of the most striking exhibitions that the Hayward Gallery has commissioned: **History is Now - 7 Artists Take on Britain.**

Of late, those who travel south of the river are by now very well acquainted with one part of it, the *Bloodhound surface-to-air missile* that towers over the concrete elegance of the Hayward building, but however prominent, it is only one of the 250 objects that constitute this incisive retrospective of the last 75 years of British history. Inside the gallery itself the seven artists (**John Akomfrah, Simon Fujiwara, Roger Hiorns, Hannah Starkey, Richard Wentworth and Jane and Louise Wilson**) were given the opportunity to curate their own spaces, and by this sheer variety of perspective the show highlights its best feature, managing to capture a tremendous amount of the diversity that is modern Britain.

In the first room, Simon Fujiwara selection, from Hirst and Hockney canvases to Taylor-Johnson’s *David* and Nigella Lawson’s kitchen equipment is a cross section of contemporaneity and its recent spasms: the London riots, savage capitalism, and consumerist art. Although the choice of objects is serious, deliberate and illuminating, what is most evident is the completely effervescent nature of its wry humour and irony.

Further on in the gallery, we encounter Jane and Louise Wilsons’ depictions of protest and tension of which the most arresting piece is Conrad Atkinson’s *Northern Ireland 1968 – May Day 1975*. The 126 photographs that make up the piece have an almost concert like momentum as we follow them along the wall of the gallery but they also offers the viewer an inward journey into the most human aspects of conflict: pettiness, one-upmanship and rivalry.

Photography, as one of the defining disciplines of post-modernity is highlighted by the collection put together by Hannah Starkey and the medium of video is explored by John Akomfrah’s universe, but finally, and poignantly the high note of the exhibition is Roger Hiorns room on the *bovine spongiform encephalopathy* where the works range from 17<sup>th</sup> century prints to 21<sup>st</sup> century MRI imagery, from news footage to texts on animal husbandry, from comments on consumption, to explorations of environmental catastrophe.

All together they create one of the most baffling and magnificent commentaries on our age. Compendium like, in our Wikipedia age, and blending the border of science and art, more than

anything, this transient assortment will endure, if not in the physical space, certainly in the minds of the visitors. That being said, I am sure that in years from now, we can look back at this exhibition, and much like Picasso's unwanted visitors we can say with confidence "Yes, yes, ... we did this!"