

Exhibitions

A FRESH NEW CROP

THE SHOW, 2004

Royal College of Art

28 May-6 June

Reviewed by Ken Edwards

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We tend to expect a great deal from the annual art school shows - a barometer reading of coming trends or perhaps a thermometer healthcheck of contemporary visual arts.

In the week before The Show 2004, as the Royal College of Art haughtily refers to its yearly exhibition, the news was dominated by the devastating fire at Momart. It was tempting to look to the RCA show for signs of how a new generation can provide optimism after the burnt out disaster of BritArt. Looking at this year's RCA show it was quite clear that the barometer is set fair.

This was particularly so in the photography section. Now the medium of choice among so many artists, it is often difficult to separate those who call themselves 'photographers' from those who eschew the label, yet produce works in which photographic images are central. Many of the works here pointed to the cross-fertilisation which takes place between photography and other practices, producing a striking heterogeneity of method, media, subject matter and theoretical approach. Nevertheless, there was an overall coherence in the questioning of the history and orthodoxies of the medium.

...Other work in the show blurs the conventions accorded to photography. In Lucy Levene's pictures, for example, we are presented with what look like staged photoshoots but turn out to be pure reportage or documentary photographs. Taken in nightclubs and bars, they portray private moments between couples and friends, unaware of the camera. Here we forcefully experience the ambiguity so often examined, yet never resolved by photographic theory, the tension between photography as recorded fact and constructed representation.

These examples are representative only of a huge diversity of work in the show. All of the participants displayed a sense of rigour and sobriety, an informed awareness of the rhetoric histories and contradictions of this beguiling medium. It is likely that we will see and hear much more of these artists in the coming years. -

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