

You are here: [Home](#) \ [Arts](#) \ [Exhibition review: History Is Now: 7 Artists Take on Britain](#)

ARTS

Exhibition review: History Is Now: 7 Artists Take on Britain

The Hayward Gallery's vast exploration of Britain's cultural, social and political history since 1945 certainly doesn't lack ambition, but you'll need a good few hours and a lot of patience, finds *Mickey Noonan*.

Posted on 18/02/2015



A Woman on a Hulme Walkway, Manchester (1976) by David Chadwick. Part of Hannah Starkey's curated section

It's an undeniably neat idea. Seven artists curating six exhibitions (twins Jane and Louise Wilson work together) connected by Britain and what makes it Britain: past, present, political and cultural. Aiming to offer a fresh way of thinking about how we got to where we are today in the lead up to May's General Election, there are more than 250 works from 100 plus artists. It's...knackering, frankly. History might be now, but to do this exhibition justice, you probably need a good chunk of next week as well.

This is a lot of a shame, as there is much to enjoy and engage with here, from a tiny newspaper cutting of Madeleine McCann's left eye, which speaks masses about press obsession and marketing, to the decommissioned Bloodhound surface-to-air guided missile on the sculpture terrace, the City in its sights.

It all kicks off with Simon Fujiwara's eclectic, clever and thought-provoking collection of disparate items, displayed on plinths like museum artefacts – or corpses. Fujiwara's room looks at Britain's move from material to immaterial production, resulting in happiness being a gross domestic product. It's a keen statement as politicians flog us optimism to get the vote.



Hipgnosis Winkies (1975) by Audrey Powell

Jane and Louise Wilson's room also packs a political punch, as well as a plethora of excellent works by women. Penelope Slinger's black and white psychodramas and short film, *Lilford Hall* (1969), use surrealism – something of a boy's club in the art world – to probe the feminine psyche, to see women through a woman's lens. Snippets from Lyn Barlow's diary (1984-89) about her experience as one of the women on Greenham Common and then political prisoner, alongside photographs by Lesley McIntyre, depicts the social and political unrest that marked that decade. A further gut-punch comes from Stuart Brisley's *1 = 66,666* from 1983: bloated plaster gloves hanging ominously in a cage, each one representing someone out of work.

John Akoufrah's no doubt carefully-curated selection of Arts Council funded films is a baffling addition. Coming in at a grand total running time of 546 minutes, with many of the individual films more than an hour long, it's simply too big an ask. Who has the time? Instead, I guiltily tiptoed through the oddly soothing flickering of myriad TV screens like it was so much white noise. Maybe that's Akoufrah's intended response: guilt at never having the time to properly engage in time-starved modern Blighty.



July, the Seaside (1943) by LS Lowry

It is a lot to take in. Too much to take in. That's history for you. And yet, it still works and it's well worth spending a bit of your future checking out this take on Britain's recent past.

History Is Now: 7 Artists Take on Britain is at the Hayward Gallery, London, until April 26

Popular Articles

- ARTS**

Whooping, walkouts and weirdness
- LIFESTYLE**

Making Winter
- HEALTH**

Silence is deadly: male suicide
- LIFESTYLE**

Knitting beards for Comic Relief
- HEALTH**

Measles – why all the fuss?

New Reads

- VOICES**

Lady Parts
- ARTS**

Let's get SICK!
- VOICES**

Letter To My Home Town: Drymen, You Glorious Nutter
- ARTS**

Introducing My Little One To... The Machine Gunners
- ARTS**

Cards on the table

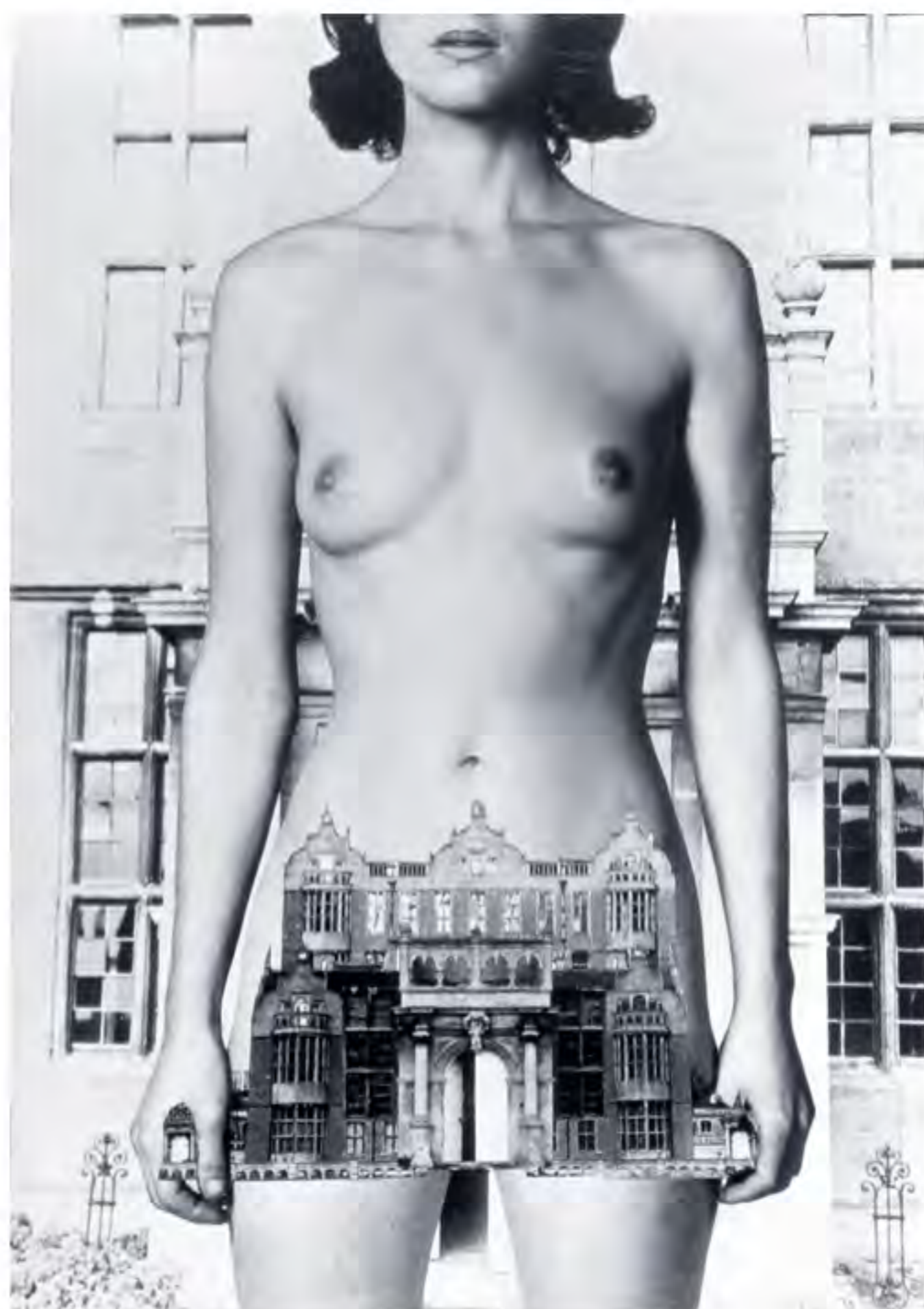
Sign up for our newsletter

Email Address

SUBSCRIBE



Photographer Hannah Starkey's room is an absolute gem. Delving into the ACE archive from 1970s-90s, she's unearthed some real doozies: documentary photos from, among others, John Hilliard, Paul Graham and the Hackney Flashers that tell the stories of a broken benefits system, the poverty-stricken, the ignored. She contrasts these with the glossy, fake narratives of advertising – 'sex sells' imagery plastered onto columns in-between the real stories – in a sharp and slick take on how we engage with images, and how they've been hijacked by capitalism and political campaigns.



Perspective (1977) by Penny Slinger

In the final room lies Richard Wentworth's curation and it's something of a palate-cleanser after Roger Hiorns' pummeling with "mad cow disease" facts (a room that feels too concentrated and out of place here and one through which I noted many people walked straight through), and the overwhelming prospect of 546 minutes of viewing in Akoufrah's offering. Wentworth's narrative may be a familiar one – the optimism yet ongoing austerity of post WWII Britain – but he tells it with gusto and style. It's a big room with big names: LS Lowry; Eduardo Paolozzi; Henry Moore; Robert Capa – and then there's that behemoth on the sculpture terrace, impressive, and, though no longer an actual threat, still threatening.

Recommend This Article +2



WRITTEN BY MICKEY NOONAN

Aged five, Mickey Noonan shoved an apple pip up her nose to see what happened. Older, wiser but sadly without a nose-tree, Standard Issue's editor remains curious about the world. Likes running, jumping and static trapeze.