

Installation Art

Summer Lightning

THIS LONDON summer continues to bring delights for those prepared to venture further than the beleaguered shores of Cork Street to seek out works of art. One of the most rewarding of the crop of site related shows is *Summer Lightning*, at the Dreadnought Seamen's Hospital, Romney Road, Greenwich, until the end of August.

Eleven women artists, five from the UK - Laura Ford, Sharon Kivland, Virginia Nimarkoh, Rebecca Scott, Kate Smith and six from Los Angeles - Elizabeth Bryant, Sheila Klien, Lauren Lesko, Yolande McKay, Theresa Pendlebury and Jennifer Steinkamp were invited by curator Georgie Wise to create work for the historic site. Founded in the 17th century to provide a home for naval pensioners, the building became a hospital in 1870. It ceased to be a hospital in 1986 and the building is now empty.

It is a challenging setting, but the participants rise to the occasion with an affecting mixture of empathy and style. Offering a wide range of individual works of varying degrees of excellence, the show also succeeds overall as an impressive demonstration of how effective such site specific commissions can be.

This is partly due to the work of Elizabeth Bryant, who has ranged six separate installations throughout the building. Their continuity of motif - a painted chair represents the nurses whose work is described on tapes in each location, while a range of objects symbolises the hopes, fears and dreams of the patients - the careful research they demonstrate and their apposite use of the spaces chosen, give coherence to the slightly unnerving wander through empty wards and silent corridors which viewing the show entails.

Before reaching her first room, one passes through a truly sinister parlour, the work of Theresa Pendlebury. Here is her cool description. "The room is not historically accurate but reflects the residue of the nineteenth century in our own time. I selected the microbes and agents of malaria, syphilis and consumption and turned them into decorative motifs."

She has turned the domestic decor of Victorian times into a horror show. The crocheted mats, hanging over black covered chairs, lurking beneath knick-knacks also painted black, display complex patterns based on the deadly microbes which the returning sailors passed on in their homecoming kisses. For them, and for their families, the true souvenir was death.

Some sailors never got back home. Their death was in a far country, a cold country. If they could stand and stagger to the window, they might have seen the ships that brought them there, tied up yards from their bed - perhaps that one "endowed for the use of natives of India by Brigade Surgeon J Low MD India Medical Service 1911" as the wall above one empty ward space declares.

More likely, the patients lay and suffered, fretting about

Lynn MacRitchie
admires a powerful
exhibition in a
historic naval
setting

meeting their end without priest or family for comfort. Their struggles and fears were noted, in documents such as the "1962-64 Night and Ward Report" or "The Nursing of Tropical Diseases" by Alice M Hall, Matron 1909. Recorded extracts from these and other texts are played in Elizabeth Bryant's rooms, and it is remarkable how much can be learned from the quiet voices speaking of daily routines, nurses' duties, details of symptoms and patient care.

Other, hand written, texts tell about the patients. From them we learn that sailors are superstitious, that they used to carry babies' caul in their pouches to protect them from harm. Paintings of ships, casts of babies' heads, garlic in nets, broken eggshells are set before us as we listen to the words of the nurses describing those wanderers whose spells had failed, whom illness rendered subject to control, returned to the hands of women.

Those professionals sought to make them well, noting

their travails and symptoms in an effort to understand. The descriptions are powerful, the suffering felt: it is a relief when the tape records that a patient had a

peaceful night. Outside, a video installation by Jennifer Steinkamp gives a vivid impression both of seasickness and delirium, a square rigged screen set across the dark corridor making the whole space heave in strobed pink and blue.

Many of the patients suffered venereal diseases. In a piece by Laura Ford the floor of one of the upper wards where they were kept apart from the others has been painted with devices from tattoos, buxom beauties with improbable names, their images recording those moments of comfort and pleasure which lead only to a greater pain. But how jolly and alluring they look, tumbling over the floor, the women and the boys - for this is a show of the nineties - and penises, some with little wings, some sporting their owners' names, join the wreaths of roses and bouncing breasts.

The nurses too had their secrets. Lauren Lesko addresses these in a series of powerful pieces of which perhaps the best is "Red Sea". Here, next to the first of Elizabeth Bryant's rooms, we peep through a lens set in a sealed door and see the tiny, sharply focused image of a closed room, its interior pristine white. Next to a black fireplace a blood red gown, formal, full skirted, is displayed. What a lot it says, this little tableau, how hauntingly it hints at hidden desires, richer hopes.

The piece is typical of the subtlety of approach the artists have brought to their task, the variety of ways in which they have tackled an environment both historic and intimate, once with so clear a purpose, now derelict. For despite the heritage industry which now holds Greenwich to ransom, the future of this particular historic building is uncertain. The opportunity to explore it, and in such sympathetic company, is well worth taking.

Exhibition open Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holiday from 12 to 7pm

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