

🏠 > Culture > Art > What to see

## Champagne Life, Saatchi Gallery, review: 'heartening news for art'



Bound by Alice Anderson CREDIT: ALICE ANDERSON/SAATCHI GALLERY

By **Mark Hudson**, ART CRITIC

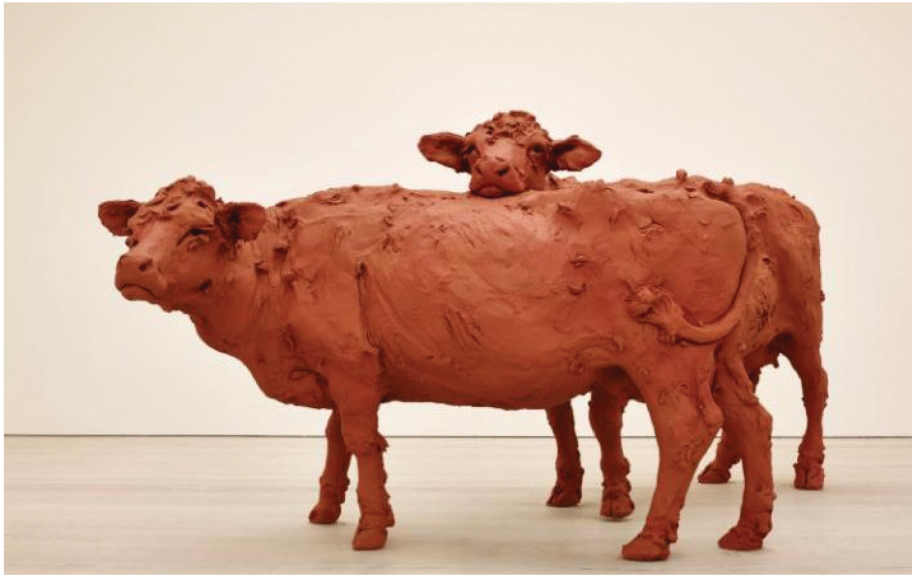
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**C**harles Saatchi's days as an arbiter of cutting-edge art feel long gone. The ad-man collector's 1997 exhibition *Sensation* at the Royal Academy had a crucial impact in launching the **YBA** generation, who – love them or loathe them – reshaped British art over the following decade. Yet subsequent attempts at moulding the zeitgeist misfired: anyone remember New Neurotic Realism?

Nowadays Saatchi is notorious more for **tweaking his ex-wife Nigella Lawson's nose** than for foisting revolutionary artists on the world.

This exhibition, his first devoted entirely to women artists, may be seen as an attempt to get back in with the female sex, and at first sight it conforms to all our worst expectations of a Saatchi exhibition. It's hard to know whether the heart sinks more at the fact that the show takes its rather silly title from a painting featuring rapper **Kanye West** and his wife **Kim Kardashian**, or the fact that it's sponsored by champagne manufacturer Pommery.

Yet, for all these evocations of superficial glamour, the work itself, by 14 “emerging” international artists ranging in age from 25 to 59, is notable for its thoughtfulness and solid crafting. **The recent Turner Prize exhibition**, in which three of the four contenders were women, may have given the impression that art has almost completely abandoned the physical object in favour of the intellectual gesture, but everything here falls broadly into the categories of painting or sculpture. Yet surprisingly for an exhibition devoted to female artists, the presence of powerful male exemplars looms large throughout.



Two Cows by Stephanie Quayle CREDIT: STEPHANIE QUAYLE

Born in 1959, Julia Wachtel is the oldest artist here and the creator of the show's title painting. She seems to style herself overtly as an updated Andy Warhol, with grainy silkscreened images, from a prom queen parade to a street attack, contrasting with goofily hand-painted cartoon figures. Fellow American Suzanne McClelland's seductively vaporous abstracts recall the late **Cy Twombly**, but with a touch of graffiti attitude. Where Twombly's charcoal scrawlings invoked classical mythology, McClelland gives us lists of apparently random numbers which are, we are told "stats pertaining to body builders and domestic terrorists"; how the two groups relate to each other isn't explained.

London-based Australian Sigrid Holmwood's quirky, multi-referential images of peasants recall **Peter Doig**'s saleroom record-breaking magic realist paintings, with touches of **Bruegel** and **van Gogh** rendered in eye-popping day-glo pinks, yellows and oranges that bring a smile to the lips. If they're essentially slight works, getting a laugh out of colour isn't to be sniffed at in today's art scene.

Huge close-ups of elderly women by Serbian painter Jelena Bulajic bring **Chuck Close**'s large-scale photo-realist portraits to mind. But, as with Korean Seung Ah Paik's huge drawings of morphed body parts, there's a slight feeling of what's the point?



Work by Soheila Sokhanvari at the Saatchi Gallery CREDIT: SOHEILA SOKHANVARI

Yet this apparently predictable pattern of influence from modern male masters can be deceptive. At first sight, Briton Alice Anderson's gigantic cotton reel and sphere formed from miles of hair-like copper thread echo American pop artist Claes Oldenburg's massively enlarged domestic objects. Yet the eerie glow of the copper and the subdued lighting lend these forms a mysterious, fairy-tale quality that feels a world away from Oldenburg's off-hand humour.

And there are works here that appear without obvious precedent. Canadian Julia Dault does virtually nothing with her materials, simply loosely rolling and stacking sheets of translucent Plexiglass and formica. Yet the contrasts in texture between utilitarian dullness and luminous colour create a fugitive beauty, and the fact that these sprung materials would jump out into the room if their binding ribbons were cut gives them a precipitous, even dangerous quality. Dault's work is minimalism, but not quite as you know it.

Iranian, sometime Goldsmiths student, Soheila Sokhanvari, presents a taxidermied horse astride a deflating balloon, which somehow evokes Iran's "Green" uprising of 2009, while sculptures of cows by Stephanie Quayle from the Isle of Man, are rendered in air-drying clay, which retains its wet appearance lending them a disconcerting physicality.

French artist Marie Angeletti presents enigmatic streams of apparently unrelated images: a stylised painting of an oriental woman beside a glossy photograph of a grand piano, or a digital printout of a sinister nightclub scene stuck straight onto the wall. Drawn from google searches – a kind of collective stream of consciousness that didn't exist two decades ago – these images are scanned, rescanned and re-photographed till they take on new forms and textures. Even if the logic doesn't quite work, since the prevailing characteristic of google imagery is a levelling uniformity, there's an entrancing sense of striving towards new ways of constructing meaning through images.



Lastly, and in complete contrast, American painter Mequitta Ahuja's boldly coloured faux-primitive paintings look from a distance like lumpen, sub-Gauguin. Yet there's a lot more going on than initially meets the eye. Her blue-skinned women in tropical landscapes are formed from sumptuously matted stencilled patterns, screeds of writing and other found textures. Ahuja's own severely cross-eyed features appear frequently in images that subtly layer mythological references and diverse forms of drawing and representation.

For every artists he's turned into a superstar, Saatchi has exhibited at least 20 who've never been heard of again. Yet here, the art goes against that rather dated boom-and-bust vision of art where everything is either a Jeff Koons/Damien Hirst-style mega-success or an abject failure. If none of the artists here looks likely to change the world, a good half of them deserve to be seen far more extensively.

In contrast to much contemporary art's concern with a desperate, posturing nowness – exemplified by the latest Turner Prize exhibition – this exhibition tells a far more accurate story about serious artists developing imagery and ideas with a much longer time-frame. That has to be heartening news, not only for women artists, but for art in general.

**Until March 6. Details: [saatchigallery.com](http://saatchigallery.com)**