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Taking a pop at pop culture

Sex, movies, Marie Claire and Last Tango in Paris have all inspired an assured show by E J Major, finds Jack Mottram

ONDON-BASED artist E J Major's first solo exhibition, *Try To Do Things We Can All Understand*, takes its title from the first work on show, a wall of monitors showing stills from films accompanied by matching lines of dialogue, each displayed at random.

At first, it is hard not to treat the piece as a sort of quick-fire film quiz, racking your brains to identify a given still or quote, but, as images and texts fade into one another, the fragments begin to form a loose narrative.

A glimpse of Bette Davis sitting in the back of a car, her eyes downcast, calls up the breakdown of the Hollywood star system and Davis's fiery feud with Joan Crawford. Robert Redford, looking especially craggy beside a roaring camp fire, points to the double standard that allows male actors to play romantic leads into their seventies while their female counterparts struggle to find a part, a thought reinforced by the appearance of exceptions to the rule, Meryl Streep and Sigourney Weaver.

When Christian Slater and Patricia Arquette pop up, silently mouthing Tarantino's clever-clever bon mots from *True Romance*, Hans Zimmer's tinkly reworking of Carl Orff's *Musica Poetica* seems to fill the gallery. More generically, passionate kisses and violent tempers, steely gazes and weeping women flow into view, flung up cinematic clichés and stock shots, the trite tactics directors fall back on to elicit an almost conditioned response in their audience.

These commonplaces aside, each viewer will bring their own set of memories and associations, reading these fleeting, randomised images to write their own personal story, just as Major's reasons for choosing these particular scenes from these

particular films are unknown, rooted in her own private associations.

The snippets of dialogue work in parallel to the images, and, with the odd exception – Marilyn Monroe's memorable cry of "You're three dear sweet dead men!" in John Huston's *The Misfits* – are hard to place. Free of specific associations, these brief, often prosaic texts allow a more specific, though inevitably fractured, narrative to reveal itself. For instance, the question "Why are you doing this?" is answered cryptically: "She looks very small."

Taken together, the gobblets of dialogue and freeze-framed images form a densely woven work, concerned with the viewer's response, that unavoidable urge to impose an ordered narrative on this disordered presentation of Major's filmic autobiography, a taught essay on the tension between text and image in the language of cinema, and a meditation on the power of shared symbolism.

Autobiography, text and image underpin the most recent work on show, *From a Distance*, as well. This time the text is William Faulkner's stream of consciousness novel *As I Lay Dying*, which Major read and annotated at 17,

an age at which she apparently periodically lost the ability to speak, while the images are culled from the pages of *Brownie* annuals and other sources less suitable for children. Major matches her teenage underlinings, many of which reflect her personal, traumatic, relationship with language at the time, to the sanitised vision of girlhood provided by the comic strips. The result is a rather disconcerting, if sometimes hilarious, psychosexual drama. The single word "steer" is accompanied by a collaged image of a lonely girl, sitting apart from her peers, and the phrase "it talks" is illustrated with an exasperated mother and glum daughter.

Some of these juxtapositions are, I think, made with a wink, but the public, adult revising of private, juvenile preoccupations, the remaking of a text already remade in the earlier act of annotation and the implied critique of the gender roles reinforced in children's literature combine to form a work that, like *Try To Do Things We Can Understand*, offers a layered examination of language, shared



elements of popular culture and the divide between the public and the private.

This divide is explored more explicitly still in *Marie Claire RIP*. Twelve self-portraits show Major, first as a fresh-faced, peppy teen, ending up hollow-cheeked, battered, bruised and wearing filthy clothes. The series is based

EXPOSED: Marie Claire RIP shows a fresh-faced teen who ends up appearing hollow-cheeked and dishevelled. Below, a detail of *From a Distance*.

Pictures: Stuart Nimmo

on an article in the titular magazine which featured mugshots of an anonymous woman, taken over a 14-year period, to illustrate the effects of heroin addiction. This is powerful stuff and, once again, Major uses relatively simple tactics to expose a broad range of concerns.

The series is at once a memorial to the unknown woman and a consuming attack on both the assumption that her deteriorating appearance is the most important aspect of this woman's addiction and the magazine's printing of the images, using the mugshots to turn a private life into public property. It is, too, a nuanced look at the nature of photography, questioning assumptions of documentary truth and blurring the boundaries between the portrait and the self-portrait.

After this, the mail art project *Love Is...* comes as something of a relief. In 2004, Major took screenshots of every second of Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*, printed postcards of each image

and distributed all 7000 of them, accompanied by a note asking recipients to return the card along with their thoughts on the concept of love. The volume and range of responses is remarkable. A five-year-old girl defined love as "Mum and Dad"; an elderly lady returned the card unused, a polite note explaining that, at 85, she had no use for Major's services. Predictably, there are several exasperated requests that Major "get a life" (from people who nonetheless took the trouble to post the card), musings trite enough to grace a greetings card and a slew of popular song lyrics.

This is an assured show, then, one that, across four distinct bodies of work, deftly marries together musings on the consumption and disruption of popular culture, gender and identity by making the private public.

EJ Major: Try To Do Things We Can All Understand is at Streetlevel Photoworks, Glasgow, until May 10.

