

Good Timing

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The NAKEDS started awkwardly, with a row. I was introduced to David Austen, the artist and my co-curator, at an opening at the Jerwood Space. Neither of us can remember what show or when it was. We went on to a bar and began to talk about the exhibition I was developing for the National Gallery on the portrait in 'Vienna 1900' – Gustav Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka, Egon Schiele... 'What drawings are you including?' he asked. 'None,' I said, 'the ceilings are too high in all but the last room and that's reserved for unfinished paintings – abandoned portraits, defaced portraits.' He was stunned, 'How can you not include any drawings by Schiele? His *line*, that's what everybody should see. No one cares about anything else.'

We argued more than we should have – I think because I knew he was right – and the next day he texted with an apology. I didn't see him for a long time after that but I included a drawing by Schiele in the exhibition. It was his final work on paper, an image of his wife Edith on her sickbed. The line is spare, exact and unflinching. Edith was six months pregnant and soon to die from the flu pandemic that raced across Europe at the close of the First World War; Egon would follow her within a matter of days.

Many months later, just ahead of the opening of the National Gallery show, I sent David a photograph I had taken of Schiele's death mask – his eyebrow hairs still caught in the plaster – as it was being installed in a long glass vitrine in a room called 'Love and Loss'. I asked if he'd like to come to the private view to see this mask and the last, uncompromising drawing, the *line*. After the opening we went on to another bar and he described his first encountering of Schiele's work, his visit to Wolfgang Fischer's gallery to see the drawings whilst studying at the Royal College of Art in the 1980s, his frustration with the life class, and his association with Drawing Room. We talked about what would become the exhibition as mice hurried along the skirting boards, gathering midnight feasts in miniature. He named it there and then because he is good with titles: The NAKEDS.

The next day I visited David at work. A photocopy of a black and white photograph of Schiele on his deathbed was propped up in a cheap wooden frame on a stack of books. On that occasion (the still lifes that emerge on his studio's surfaces are rarely arrested for long), a piece of paper with a single, startled eye drawn in black felt-tip lay next to it. Alongside it, David had displayed an old drawing from a past life drawing class. He'd been pissed off, he said, at having to conform to the expectations of this environment – the decorous distance, the anatomical accuracy. He admires Schiele for challenging these expectations – for standing too close, for drawing too easily.

Like Schiele, David's tiny, tender watercolours of naked figures are far removed from the grand history of the nude that is conjured by the life class. His men and women are abject and acrobatic, they tremble and weep, reach out to touch each other, fly from an unseen trapeze, arms outstretched, weightless and joyful. They are painted from a memory piled high with visual references – film noir and found theatre programmes, Renaissance Expulsions and photographs of performers in working men's clubs. They are just one spoke in the wheel of an

artistic practice that is concerned, above all, with the fearful, fickle heart, with what David describes as the human condition. The drawings are laid out on trestle tables surrounded with large flax canvases covered with words: 'CHANT L'AMOUR'; 'GROAN'; 'THE END OF LOVE'. On a black board, a not quite life-size naked woman with breasts that curl to the sky dances. She is also bounded with text: 'BLUE PINCHES MY HEART; EXPOSE & INFLICT; FUCK WITH THINGS; and 'A TERRIFYING LOVE STORY', the by-line from Nicolas Roeg's *Bad Timing* (1980) that David used as one of his many, unexpected portals into the exhibition.

The exhibition we went on to curate with Mary Doyle and Kate Macfarlane at Drawing Room is unlike any I have worked on before. It does not focus on a particular period, place or practice ('drawing' is used expansively to refer to work on paper as opposed to work in pencil). It resists the principles of selection and organisation I am familiar with, of choosing works in terms of artists' shared experiences and interests, of displaying images chronologically or thematically. The argument that became a conversation was about Schiele and the relevance of his drawing practice to contemporary artists, but the contemporary was pushed back, to Joseph Beuys and Louise Bourgeois, as Schiele himself became less central, one of many other 'contemporaries'. 'Think of it as a group show that Schiele would've wanted to be included in,' David said; 'Some of the artists know about each other's work, others don't.' I stopped tracing the lines of influence that run through the 20th century, from Schiele to Arnulf Rainer to Tracey Emin; I abandoned my search for mentions of Schiele's work in artists' writings and interviews. Neither activity would inform the choice of works we would include – there were other, more creative curatorial decisions to be made.

What part, then, does Schiele play in *The NAKEDS*? The Viennese *Wunderkind*, David feels, is many artists' guilty secret – a figure they came across at often-formative times (Rosemarie Trockel describes her mother's gift of a Schiele book to her as a young woman of 20 as an 'interesting turning point' in their relationship). Many of these artists, as Trockel herself admits, sought to emulate Schiele's work before realising that no one can imitate that line, and no one is that interested in imitation. His images, and in particular his sexually explicit drawings which were often only seen in reproduction, were part of their history, but this isn't the case for all the artists included in this 'group show'. David described Schiele as 'the trigger' – a word I was reluctant to use because of its suggestion of the shotgun – but a trigger refers to any small device that releases a spring or a catch which in turn sets off a mechanism, and this does describe Schiele's role in the exhibition.

Sex and death, exposure and exploitation, violence and vulnerability, love and hate – Schiele's representation of these themes through the drawing of the body was the trigger that activated the choice of artists and works. This makes *The NAKEDS* an idiosyncratic and unpredictable collection of images; it is, above all, an artist's selection. It rejects notions that are dear to art history – of chronology and influence, of context and interpretation – juxtaposing the work of those who have never shared wall space before. It is the kind of exhibition I would like to historicise because it raises so many intriguing questions: why these artists, why not so-and-so, why here, and why now? These, however, are for others to debate as they turn from 'contemporary' to 'contemporary', body to body, between the buff-pink walls of Drawing Room.

