

Fresh hell – it's damned good

The devil has all the best art works in a blackly humorous Paris show curated by British artist Adam McEwen

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Today's art market? ... Michael Landy's Market, at the Fresh Hell exhibition.
Photograph: André Morin

"What fresh hell is this?" the American writer and humorist Dorothy Parker is supposed to have exclaimed whenever the phone rang. No wonder she turned to drink. Fresh Hell is also the title of an exhibition now at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, curated by New York-based British artist Adam McEwen.

McEwen's show gives us old and new hell: performance artist Ana Mendieta naked and lying on top of a skeleton, Martin Kippenberger's inflatable rubbish skip, and funny little films of Gino de Dominicis failing repeatedly to hurl himself to an early death. You think he's going to disappear over a precipice into a lake. Instead, he's merely hopping off a tussock. De Dominicis repeatedly announced his own demise throughout his career, which was cut short by his actual death in 1998. Mendieta, the wife of sculptor Carl Andre, fell from a balcony in mysterious circumstances in 1985, and Kippenberger is also no longer with us. McEwen, it is worth recalling, was once an obituarist for the Daily Telegraph, and went on to write fake obituaries of living celebrities (including Jeff Koons and Bill Clinton) as artworks.

The smell of death hangs around Fresh Hell, and won't go away. Maybe it comes from the separate Sophie Calle show in the Palais de Tokyo basement, which is all about her dead mother, and is undoubtedly the most sentimental exhibition I have ever seen, however cathartic it may intend to be. I much prefer McEwen's hell, which is full of interesting alignments and unexpected artists. Medieval busts of the Kings of Judah, whose faces were mutilated during the French Revolution by protesters who mistakenly thought they represented the French nobility, open the show. These huge, defaced sculptures stare at us, blankly, in front of a wall of silver-backed building boards, a 2003 work by Rudolf Stingel that visitors are also allowed to hack about, to graffiti and to gouge. And they have.

Later, we come across a big outline drawing of the world, by Jessica Diamond, with the words *Is That All There Is?* emblazoned above the crudely-drawn continents. But how strange the world is, how rich, how peculiar, is more the point. A big, battered safe, appropriated by Maurizio Cattelan, stands in one gallery. A neat hole has been torched and cut through the safe by bank robbers, who stole over 74m Italian lire in a famous heist. You can't stop yourself peering into the dark void, looking for the money.

There are lots of works here about the sort of emptiness that feels full and rich: Reinhard Mucha's shadowy cabinets; David Hammons's *In the Hood*, a hood ripped from a sport sweatshirt and hung head-high on the wall – there's no one in it. Michael Landy's *Market*, first seen in a London warehouse show at the beginning of the young British art boom in 1990, is empty, too – a sprawling arrangement of grocer's market stalls, with their stacked crates and

stands covered in carpets of fake grass. Landy's vacant market could be a joke about minimalism, or seen as a forerunner of today's ultra-realistic installation art; it could be a metaphor for Thatcherism or for an art market where there's nothing to buy. Art, after all, can be nearly nothing. Fresh Hell is full of good things, forgotten things, old and new things. McEwen's enthusiasm and humour and curiosity is self-evident. Artists make good curators.

Henri Michaux's intense 1960s mescaline drawings hang near a photograph of Sarah Lucas smoking, and Dan Graham's chart of drugs and their side effects. What are art's side effects? Georg Herold's Mountain of Cocaine is a monstrous alp of powdered milk and resin, while another "mountain" looks like a deflated windsock. Like a stoned rant, all this seemed to make sense at the time. Herold's best work here is a sort of diagrammatic labyrinth of timber lengths, suspended at chest height by threads attached to the ceiling. It blocks the viewer's path. You either have to limbo-dance under it, or take the long way round through the idiotically simple maze. Another metaphor, then. Bruce Nauman's Pursuit (1975), made with Frank Owen, is a running gag, or rather a long film of people running against a black background. Feet pound, breathing accelerates, hair swipes across the screen, breasts and asses bounce and arms flail. It is relentless. Who knows why they run. Nowhere, apparently. This is the goal of most runners, and most artists, too.

Then one comes across an anonymous 15th-century sculpture of Saint Florian, with carved water emptying from his carved wooden bucket. The arrested flow of the water is astonishingly lively, stilled, frozen in the sculpture's chiselled wood. Time is arrested, and us with it. Hell never seemed fresher.

Fresh Hell is on until 16 January, at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Details: palaisdetokyo.com