

What time is it? No need to check your watch. You can watch a movie instead, or rather snatches of thousands of films, each of which features a timepiece of some sort: a digital alarm clock, Big Ben, a fob-watch or a Rolex. And each clip tells the right time, at the moment you look. It's astonishing.

American artist Christian Marclay, now living in London, has spliced together all these moments from B-movies and cult films, forgotten third-features and international classics, to make a filmic 24-hour clock. Currently on show at White Cube in London's Mason's Yard, *The Clock* can also be seen at the New Art Exchange, in an inner-city Nottingham suburb, as part of the seventh British Art Show. *The Clock* is at once unmissable and unwatchable, in that it is impossible to sit through the whole 24-hour cycle at one go, even when galleries stay open all night to screen it, as White Cube recently did.

*The Clock* is full of continuity gags, branching fragments of stories you can almost grasp, and moments you recognise from the movies you've seen - here's a bit of Bergman, and there's Dandy Nichols, the "silly old moo" in *Till Death Us Do Part*. There's William Holden, menacing and dangerous, and here's Tom Courtenay, camping it up in *The Dresser*. Much more than merely clever, *The Clock* is relentless and compelling, and it's hard to drag yourself away. Like life itself, it is one damn thing after another, and sweeps you along. But time runs on, and so does the seventh, five-yearly British Art Show, currently showing at three Nottingham venues before touring nationally next year.

Curated by Lisa Le Feuvre and Tom Morton, the current British Art Show, which opened on Saturday, is no pick'n'mix of what's hot and what's not. Intended to showcase the best of contemporary British art over the past five years, the exhibition's subtitle, *In the Days of the Comet*, makes us think of celestial signs and portents, the comet as harbinger of doom or a cataclysmic shift in the world order. And like Marclay's *Clock*, the exhibition is full of mad stuff, lyricism, pain and misery and laughter, things you've seen before and things you never want to relive a second time. Comets return, sometimes unexpectedly, on their unknown parabolas around the solar system.

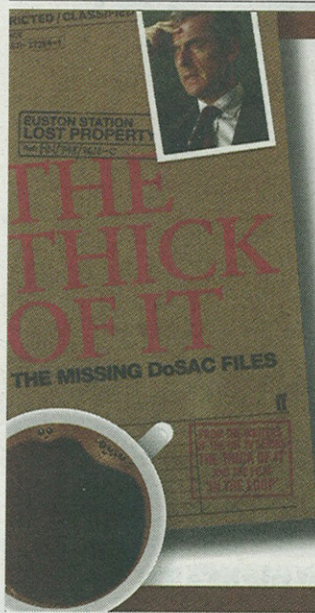
Over at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, a very lifelike animatronic head, hooked up to a dodgy life-support system of tubes and wires, vomits a frothy spume into a bucket. The quiet gurgling is unnerving. Nathaniel Mellors's head is mounted just off the floor in the corner of the room, and many visitors walk straight past, before doing a double-take. Did you see that? It's revolting. Let's look some more. The head is a sort of appalling, mute chorus to Mellors's video, which is showing in the same room. This is the artist as critic, puking at his own work, as well he might. The film's action involves a barmy family of wealthy eccentrics, and an uninvited guest dressed in white who no one perceives as being human. Dad talks total art-bollocks about his mouthy daughter's risible sculptures, though they're no more ludicrous than much of the art one comes across everywhere nowadays. It's a farrago of embarrassments and humiliations, the bonkers and the insanitary.

We have come to expect the absurd,



Clockwise from main, *Untitled* by Roger Hiorns; a Charles Avery installation; one of Sarah Lucas's Nuds

the oddball, the incomprehensible and the impenetrable in contemporary art. Sarah Lucas's Nuds sculptures bloat and bulge, penetrating and ingesting themselves. The Nuds might be mistaken for carved and polished alabaster, but really they're



## Meet the team behind *The Thick of It*

To celebrate the publication of *The Thick of It: The missing DoSAC files* the Guardian and the Observer are hosting an exclusive event with the team behind the award-winning TV series. Join Armando Iannucci and his co-writers for a panel discussion about modern politics, writing comedy and bad language. The event will be followed by a book signing.

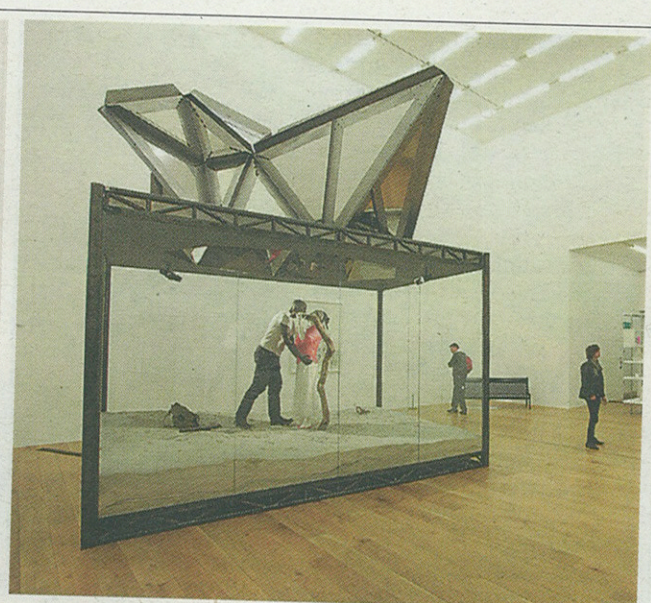
Featuring **Armando Iannucci, Jesse Armstrong, Tony Roche, Simon Blackwell, Ian Martin** and special guest **Rebecca Front** Chaired by **Anushka Asthana**, policy editor, the Observer

**Friday 12 November, 7 - 8:30pm**  
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the sheen on a cheap figurine and the light-catching slither of a vinyl LP and the glittery spangle of a revolving egg whisk, all set to the hard shudder of remixed 1980s pop. Price's work is an erotic encounter of objects, surfaces and colliding categories. I nearly did myself a mischief watching this.

While Price seems to be revelling in the timbre of a certain kind of modernity, and taking the idea of postmodernity somewhere new, other artists concern themselves with the persistence of the past in the present - Anja Kirschner and David Panos's almost hour-long video about the 18th-century folk hero and criminal Jack Sheppard is a riot of Restoration muck and coffee-house intrigue, mouldering wigs and handbill illustrations. Simon Martin remakes a 1969 Hollis Frampton film of the passage of light over a lemon, and accompanies it with a loaned 3,000-year-old Mexican Olmec stone sculpture. Becky Beasley pays homage to Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard's great 1975 novel *Correction*, and Duncan Campbell constructs a quasi-documentary about the Northern Irish activist Bernadette Devlin.

**Did someone catch fire?**

All this makes for the best British Art Show I've seen - and I've seen them all, back to the late 70s. It is full of variety, wit and seriousness. The coming economic cuts might mean that big shows like this no longer even happen, let alone tour. Some might think that this is a good thing. We all might end up like the young man in underpants, who sits on top of a council bench, his feet on the black metal seat, staring at the floor. Down at the other end of the bench a small fire burns merrily. Did someone spontaneously combust? Or maybe the youth decided that starting a fire was less effort than putting some clothes on. That's Britain for you. Roger Hiorns says he doesn't know what it means either. The boy is a stand-in for the artist, who posed, naked, for a photo depicting the same scene in his studio half a decade ago. Art, like comets, means different things at different times in different places: I think of wrecked benches on sink estates, and a boy in an urban wilderness keeping the fire burning.

Visit the show and you may miss the nudity and the conflagration, though. The boy and the fire will only appear at odd, unannounced moments. But hang around long enough and he'll be back - like that comet.

**i** British Art Show 7: In the Days of the Comet is at Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham Castle Museum and New Art Exchange until 9 January. Then touring. Details: britishartshow.co.uk

just stuffing-filled women's tights which form mental as well as physical knots: are they male or female? The shapes hint at penises, orifices, bulgy intestines, knees, bellies, breasts. They're sexy but not sexed, and make you think of Jean Arp and Hans Bellmer, and all sorts of 20th-century things on plinths. But it's all one to Lucas, whose sculptures get better and better. They sit in the yellowish light of a long, old-fashioned gallery at the castle. I like this space, which also suits the almost trudging academicism of Michael Fullerton's portraits (he knows this is how they look, it's part of his bigger game with history and manners).

**Lie down and think of Russia**  
Other painters in the British Art Show don't fare so well. Painting here is the weakest link, except for George Shaw's paintings of the Coventry suburbia where he grew up, with their litter-strewn verges, graffitied walls and grim, lightless afternoons. Shaw's paintings don't change much, but then neither do the psychically deadening places he depicts. He paints as though it's always damp and melan-

choly, and escape were impossible. A similarly pervasive and lowering atmosphere becomes almost elegiac in Luke Fowler's film *A Grammar for Listening*. This work takes us from a flooded quarry, the air thudding with the sound of a distant aeroplane, to the emission-choked air and sick trees of the M60 motorway, and from sparrows nervous in the roar of industrial noise to the quiet crackle of a burning walnut, and a metal spring flickering in the light. Fowler is concerned with the dynamics of sound as much as of place, time and focus, but the real power of the piece is that it is so unexpectedly moving, for almost no identifiable reason at all.

The British Art Show is full of good things: Ian Kiaer's cardboard model of the cylindrical 1920s house of the Russian architect Konstantin Melnikov (you have to lie on the floor to get a view of the building's interior, and you forget what size you are); Karla Black's gorgeous festoon of pink suspended polythene, catching the light - it is so simple, so playful; Wolfgang Tillmans's roaring abstract photographic smear. The show goes on. Elizabeth Price's fetishistic high-definition video presents a taxonomy of kitsch pottery,

**Sarah Lucas's sculptures hint at penises, orifices, intestines, knees, bellies, breasts. They're sexy, but not sexed**

PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVID SILLITOE FOR THE GUARDIAN