

Olivia Plender
Open Forum 2008-



Olivia Plender: Rise Early, Be Industrious

Arnolfini Bristol 14 July to 9 September

In Olivia Plender's extensively researched exhibition 'Rise Early, Be Industrious', the artist delves into the history of modern learning, games, world's fairs, TV and alternative social movements to weave a narrative about the development of learning models, mass communication and social participation. The notion of 'progress', notably through education and labour, underpins the exhibition, while the tensions between self and society, how we learn and who has the authority to teach us, emerge as key themes.

The first room of the exhibition is given to an installation entitled *The New Jerusalem*, 2012, comprising a series of works looking at the British Empire Exhibition, which took place in Wembley in 1924 and was a display of the empire's trade links and history. Another touchstone in these works is John Bunyan's allegorical *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which was widely read among newly literate workers during the industrial revolution. A work entitled *Empire City – The World on One Street*, 2009, featuring scale models of the pavilions of the British Empire Exhibition, but also the Celestial Palace and Delectable Mountain from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, weaves these two educational paradigms together, thereby conflating labour and the cultivation of a capitalist society with spiritual salvation. The UK's mercantile present, meanwhile, is explored in the video work *Market*, 2009, which pictures the market stalls now operating in the shadows of Wembley Stadium and the nearby retail parks, the vestiges of an imperial past evident in the multicultural crowds browsing the stalls and in a sign reading 'Empire Court Flats'.

Upstairs, the focus is on education, games and television as a learning tool, with viewers encouraged to participate. Plender has created her own board game called *Set Sail for the Levant*, 2007, whose chance-led navigation of a post-feudal society (the starting point is the privatisation of common land) satirises popular games wedded to capitalistic enterprise like *Monopoly*. Elsewhere, posters of building blocks based on 19th-century

German educator Friedrich Froebel's 'gifts' entitled *Social Construction*, 2012, and fashioned into what appear to be churches, schools and courts looks at how we learn to build social institutions. A set of these blocks sits on the floor, inviting viewers to build their own structures. These games suggest the importance of play and participation to early education but also to the ways in which we understand works of art – which are, among other things, educational objects as well.

The adjacent gallery is given over to a replica 1970s-era TV studio entitled *Open Forum*, 2008-, screening seminal Open University programmes looking at the importance of play to children's education, while a capsule exhibition next door explores the history of the Open University's experimental 'Art and Environment (TAD292)' course for adults, aimed at rethinking the relationship between art and society. One can almost sense the internet lurking in the wings of Plender's reproduction studio from the glory days of public television, which was underpinned by the Reithian objective of accessible, if also curated and licence-fee funded educational programming. But as Plender suggests upstairs in an installation entitled *Entrepreneurial Garden*, 2010-, a Google-esque office environment filled with games and brightly coloured furniture, the online information we believe to be free and open-source is in fact being organised, and implicitly monopolised, by all-encompassing engines such as Google. A release agreement pinned to the wall and aping those found on social-media sites states that any intellectual property produced within the space automatically becomes the property of the institution.

Self-emancipation movements are explored in the room next door entitled *Regeneration (Awake! Awake! The Dawn is Here)*, namely the spiritualist religion and early-20th-century British youth movement the Kibbo Kift, which advocated a return to the land and self-sufficiency. A diorama entitled *Machine Shall be the Slave of Man but will not Slave for the Machine*, 2006, showing a Kibbo Kift camp across a river from a smouldering city, is accompanied by a poem celebrating the rebirth of the spirit of Robin Hood among Kibbo Kift 'Kinsmen'. Meanwhile, a drawing detailing the levels of the spiritualist afterlife, *A Stellar Key to the Summerland*, 2007, underlines the utopian nature of the religion, which sought to free itself from the hierarchy of established religion in the mid 19th century and became aligned with a number of radical causes. 'Summerland' is pictured as a 'paradise for every working man and woman', in which hard work and the pursuit of knowledge are rewarded with ascent through the spheres.

Plender's work is rooted in narrative and the hand-made, and she ably shows how both are instrumental to how we learn and make the world. Through her complex history lesson she suggests that there is an ideal for every age, an attempt to make things better even if, in the attempt, other problems inevitably emerge. ■

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