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School Days

BY ISOBEL HARBISON IN REVIEWS | 01 MAR 11



Contemporary art practice is certainly alert to the social politics of education, whether addressing these issues in individual works, enacting them through public events or casting suspicious eyes on parachuted 'participation' schemes. 'School Days: The Look of Learning', curated by Matt Packer, is yet another exhibition exploring this volatile alliance, this time focusing on the culture of a western classroom as mediated by nine quite different artists.

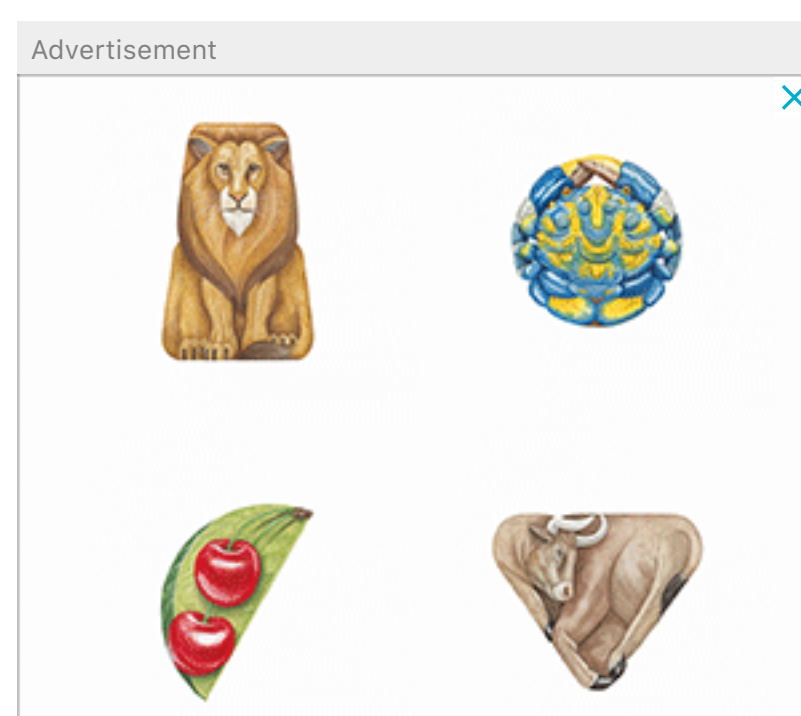
Each body of work is split up and forced to play with its errant neighbours. Raimond Wouda's photographs of student common rooms, corridors and recreation areas are brightly lit and taken from an elevated platform ('School, 2002-7). In this artificial environment, the subjects – whether doe-eyed innocents or their older, shrewder peers – have clearly been asked to interact 'naturally'. What results is a reduction: the self-regard of youth is purged and replaced by its bare surfaces, cast in flat, Thomas Demand-like surrounds.

In contrast, Eva Kotátkova's works present the psychological effects of formal education through sculptures, drawing and video installation – that is, how schooling felt but never appeared. Sit Straight (2008) comprises two videos projected from timber boxes, as if earnestly assembled in a woodwork class. The videos show a schoolchild sitting side-on at a desk, with a light timber structure balancing on her shoulders and crowns. Tracing her daily posture, the props extend forward onto their desk and mark the tedious stasis imposed on young students. Works by both Wouda and Kotátkova are distributed throughout the gallery, their contradictory natures setting up a productive binary: the vast difference between how school is experienced first-hand and how it is later observed.

Within the context of Lewis Glucksman Gallery, a university-affiliated space, attention to the sites of learning is openly self-reflective. Eamon O'Kane's Froebel's Studio (2010) is a functioning play space with freestanding partition screens, colourful stools and a table, on which sit several early learning games summoning the spirit of both the 19th-century educational theorist to whom the title refers and the pedagogical toys which preoccupied him. In contrast, a designated 'learning' area in a far corner is easily distinguishable, especially given the latter's uninviting use of battered school furniture from the university's 'collection'. Christian Philipp Müller's 'Universities with Exhibition Galleries' (1998) comprises ten silkscreen prints, each showing plans for Lüneburg University Gallery, which are superimposed in red onto the grey plan of ten international counterparts with a brief text outlining their differing origins and ambitions. Bridging the gap between political study and collectible art work, the silkscreens are equally reflective of the Lewis Glucksman Gallery, an object repository and space for pedagogy.

Annette Krauss' Hidden Curriculum (2007-ongoing) and Darcy Lange's Work Studies in Schools (1976-7) are both archives of the artists' prolonged engagements with schoolchildren. Lange recorded a range of different classes in Birmingham in 1976 and then recorded the students' responses when the footage was replayed. Their self-awareness on film speaks of an entirely different age. Krauss' more camera-friendly classroom collaborators are filmed in various poses, physically intervening or obstructing social spaces, mimicking, blocking or channeling innocent passers-by. The real pedagogical resonance of making these absurd gestures and surprised responses is unclear, however the experience of watching the extensive footage is amusing and oddly liberating.

Works in 'School Days' are loosely bound by formal reference to the western school system and the impact on those who pass through it. Some suffer slightly in this terse contextual cul-de-sac. However, unlike many such exhibitions in this field that gather works that support clunky metaphors for schooling and political governance, the exhibition asserts the difference between art and results-driven education systems, its clear strength lies in its loose ends.



ISOBEL HARBISON
 Isobel Harbison is an art critic based in London. Her book, *Performing Image*, will be published by the MIT Press later this year.

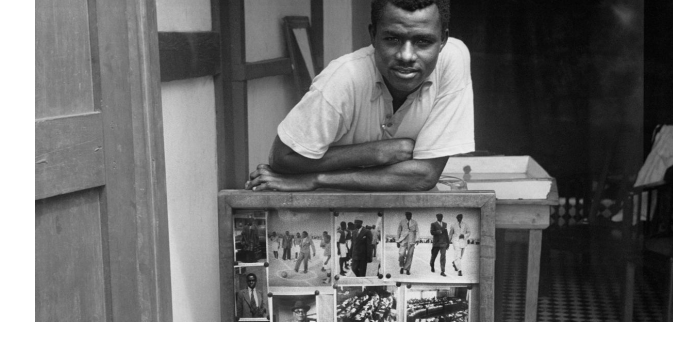
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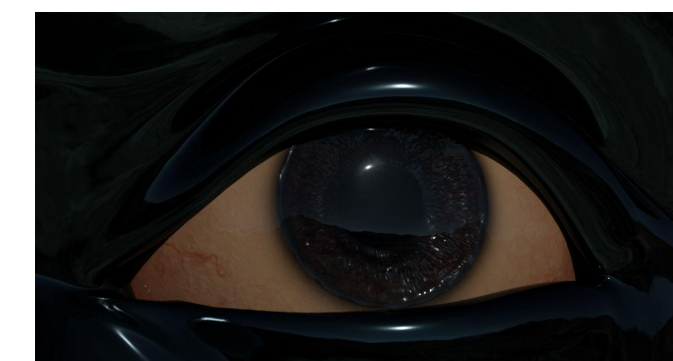
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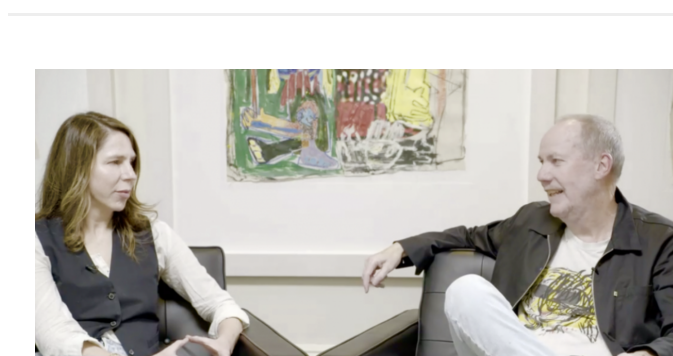
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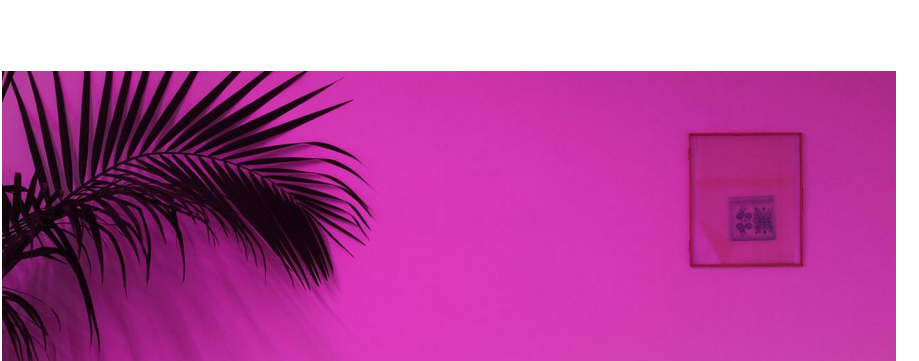
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