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Vile Affections

Studio Voltaire, London
29 September – 28 October 2007

Reviewed by: [Martyn Cross](#)

Upon entering Studio Voltaire's gothic gallery space I'm confronted by a wall of celebrity. For a moment it's as if I've been transported into the magazine department of WHSmith's, browsing the gossip weeklies in search of a deliciously scandalous story. Except something's wrong. Something is terribly wrong. These aren't just contemporary celebrities, they're well known faces from throughout history and all are horrifically disfigured.

Gazing at Dawn Mellor's Vile Affections, the onslaught of sadistic imagery makes me want to laugh, cry and vomit all at the same time. Hung in a salon style these crudely painted portraits (there are 63 in total) of allegedly camp icons, clash in an amalgamation of vile butchery, cruel satirical commentary and scatological humour. Over there is a double headed Britney Spears playing dominoes and nearby, Mother Teresa, head in hands, chest deep in what appears to be baked beans. Down on the right is Cherie Blair insanely grinning, parading around in overly sexy underwear, two skulls at her feet. How odd. At the other end is wild-eyed hubby Tony with an awful purple Barney dinosaur key-ring dangling from his nose like some bizarre piercing. Most peculiar. It's a surreal information overload and I begin to wonder what this nefarious savagery is meant to be telling me.

From time to time we all doodle on old newspapers, place a pimple on Kerry Katona's cocaine ravaged nose, sketch a flaccid penis in David Beckham's provocatively placed hand. We've all been there and we've all smirked at our own self-important genius, right? Right? Ok, so maybe that's just me in my own degenerate world, but I can't help feeling some kind of empathetic kinship with Mellor's brutal depictions. I suppose it all comes down to our desire to find something in common with our idols. By transposing our own anxieties onto those we worship, in some way we make ourselves feel a whole lot better.

As a lifelong Morrissey fan myself, to see him speared and stabbed by paint brushes is a complex yet deeply meaningful proposition. His cutting remarks and literary genius are enough to make me swoon and I know I'll never be able to match his acerbic wit, yet using a brush laden with paint I know I could match his lyrical poetry in visual form. I suspect Dawn Mellor feels exactly the same.

Taking a painterly cudgel to faces of the famous, in a pregnant statement Mellor suggests the work is "...vulnerable to my own diarist situations...overloaded collusions of identity, bombardment of consumerist products and imagery, psychological trauma, political and financial impotency and so on as a catalogue of felt experiences of the isolation, frustration and anxiety of the urban condition." Quite. But in simple terms, by using camp humour to deconstruct celebrity figures, all Mellor seems to be doing is painting pictures that amuse her,

and I for one applaud her for that. After all, who doesn't find an image of Faye Dunaway in bed covered in her own faecal matter hilarious? Janet Leigh having a shower from an anus spraying liquid diarrhoea everywhere is an image I've often courted but never dared create, whilst a crow pecking out the eyeball's of Alfred Hitchcock is a beautiful sight and one I shall never forget.

The act of taking famous faces from recent history and subjecting them to current social attitudes towards fame is an interesting concept. By painting these portraits Mellor simultaneously promotes and demolishes celebrity culture in much the same way as Heat or Closer. These magazines have taught us to admire our supposed heroes and then a week later chuckle at their very public downfall. Oh what a fickle and vicious bunch of creatures we humans are!

Venue detail: [Studio Voltaire](#)
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