



Judy Garland, Liza Minnelli and Joan Crawford revamped in paintings by Dawn Mellor

Chantal Joffe, Dawn Mellor

Victoria Miro (Upmarket)

A grid of tiny paintings covers the gallery walls. Charming scale belies horrific content. These preposterous images are the virulent imaginings of two recent graduates. Dawn Mellor paints Hollywood icons in familiar poses. Marilyn's skirt billows as she stands over the ventilator in 'The Seven Year Itch'; in top hat, waistcoat and suspenders, Liza Minnelli sings her heart out in 'Cabaret' and Diana Dors stands squeezed into an amazing, hour-glass dress. But Marilyn's skirt is splattered with dirt, she shits a long blonde plait and her head is plastered in turd-like curls. A probing tongue protrudes from Liza Minnelli's mouth and vagina; a morass of curls flows from Raquel Welsh's head and pudenda and, while milk gushes from Diana Dors' exposed breast, Joan Crawford has a parasitic infant growing from hers.

These fetishised figures are both monstrous and risible, to be pitied and feared. 'They reveal themselves in a glorious display,' says Mellor, 'which is simultaneously seductive and repulsive, violent and violated, gothic and kitsch.' One associates such a mixture of fear and veneration with adulation by the seriously unhinged; out to lunch, as well as over the top.

Apparently taken from family snaps, Chantal Joffe's hastily painted people seem to be caught on the hop, as though one had opened the door on to tacky, domestic psychodramas. Expressions look forced; fixed smiles are closer to grimaces than grins. The 'Red Girl' series is more subtle. Pinioned on to oppressive red grounds are girls – from infants to young teenagers – also, it seems, borrowed from the family album. Wearing anything from bridesmaids' dresses to T-shirts, they present a whole gamut of formal and informal occasions. Embarrassed attempts at naturalism give the poses a staged immediacy – as though family life were an act played out for the viewer. Remembering the stories of abused children being forced to smile for their tormentor's lens, one searches these faces for signs of distress. Rapid paint handling blurs the distinctions between freshness and age, innocence and corruption, happiness and hysteria, a smile and a leer. This is familiar ground – think of James Rielly – but Joffe's pleasure in painting gives the pictures an aura of battered sensuality missing from Rielly's more austere images. *Sarah Kent*

Critics' choice

1. Material Culture

Hayward

2. The Berlin of George Grosz

Royal Academy

3. Chantal Joffe, Dawn Mellor

Victoria Miro

4. Eric Bainbridge

Delfina Studios