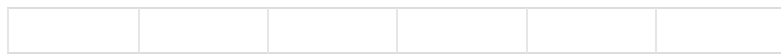


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David Ross's exhibition covers art from Pop to Brit

'Pop Art to Britart: Modern Masters from the David Ross Collection' features Bridget Riley's dynamic visual waves and the emotionally arresting and exquisite Gossip by Howard Hodgkin. William Cash previews the show



Previously unseen and important British country house art collections do not often travel en masse. Maybe the odd picture is crated off to a loan exhibition at the Met, or the Ashmolean or the Venice Biennale (such as the Franchetti Collection this summer). But an art gallery on the university campus of Nottingham? As ever David Ross has revealed himself to be bold, radical and innovative.


While most serious collectors -if written a suitably flattering or well phrased letter by the director of a museum or gallery - can usually be persuaded to loan out the occasional painting or piece of furniture in the interests of civic philanthropy, having the removal vans roll up and depart down the drive with nearly 50 pieces of art is almost unheard of today.


But being a bit different is what has always made businessman David Ross stand out as one of the most generous cultural philanthropists - as well as serious modern art collectors - in Britain today.


As Sir Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate Gallery, remarked at the dinner to mark the opening of 'Pop Art to Britart, Modern Masters from the David Ross Collection', when David commits to an idea - whether it is helping Nottingham University with a £2.1 million personal gift to support education for less advantaged children,


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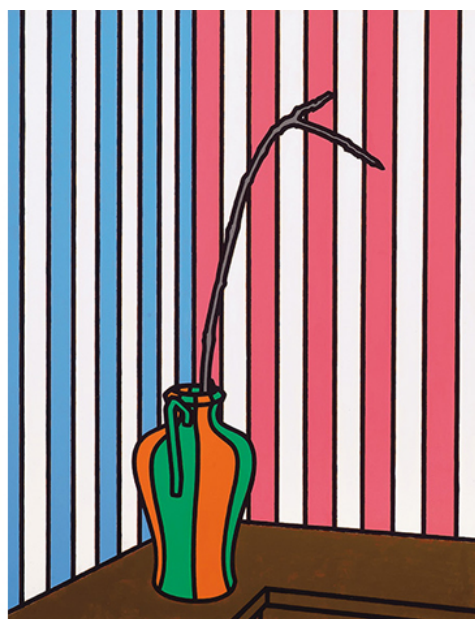
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building one of the most important private collections of post 1960s British art in less than 12 years, or founding his acclaimed new Nevill Holt opera festival, or even hosting his annual Halloween party spectacular - Ross carries through with determination and a knowledgeable and instinctive aesthetic eye, as well as high levels of focus and energy to ensure that the end result is the very best.

The role of perception

Above all, as Tate Gallery 20th century curator Paul Moorhouse writes in the introductory essay to this excellent and unusual exhibition, one of the underlying qualities or themes that ties this very personal and eclectic collection (which crosses various different artist generations, from Hockney to Hamilton) together is the importance to both artists and collector of 'the role of perception'. The art of successful business - especially for the visionary and avant-garde serial entrepreneur - is often being instinctive and dynamic.



Pictured above: Patrick Caulfield's Fig Branch

These very same qualities of purist affinity with the emotional and inner landscape applies to many of the artists featured in Ross's collection - from Bridget Riley's dynamic visual waves (Image 1, Revised White, 1967) and Gerald Laing's Number Sixty Seven (1965) to the emotionally arresting and exquisite Howard Hodgkin work entitled Gossip (1994/5) - in a rainbow of heated and intense colour - (1994/5) which Serota joked about as exactly the sort of piece he would like the Tate to get its hands on - well, one day at least.

It is precisely a combination of these qualities that have also helped him to become one of Britain's most successful entrepreneurs - creating a fortune from co-founding the Carphone Warehouse and his many other business interests.

Loaning on this scale is extremely rare. I have been to Nevill Holt as a guest of David Ross various times but have never seen any of the pictures exhibited at Lakeside Arts Centre. As David Ross said in his own remarks, he never started collecting thinking, 'I wonder whether other people will like what I like?'. He started collecting in a very private way - partly as a result of buying a very large country house with empty walls and needing some pictures to fill the walls. What makes the Ross collection unusual is that rather than a 'sound-track' to his own lifetime (he was born in the mid sixties), the collection is a 'gallery' of the very best British artists that 'relate to his own lifetime'.

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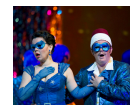


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Nevill Holt Opera

Just as Nevill Holt opera was partly founded as a showcase of some of the most innovative and dynamic young opera singers in the country, so the Ross collection is a collection of the most radical, visionary and innovative contemporary artists working in the last forty five or fifty years.



As with everything that Ross (pictured above) does, there is always an injection of self-deprecation and black humour. One of the Gilbert and George pieces at the show - and I should stress that the 50 pieces on show only amount to a part of the David Ross collection - is entitled *Muscular* (2009), featuring a collage of telephone kiosk rent boy ad cards which read: 'Ross Man2Man, Fit, Muscular Tanned Body Available 24 hours'.

The dinner to open the exhibition featured some fine opera recital by some young stars of the Nevill Holt Opera, including tenor Anthony Gregory (a Jerwood Young Artist at Glyndebourne) performing 'Love, too frequently betrayed' from *The Rake's Progress* by Stravinsky (Libretto WH Auden and Chester Kallman). Perhaps one of the most innovative and memorable stage designs of *The Rake's Progress* was, of course, by David Hockney for Glyndebourne in 1975. So this was a typical and telling example of the artistic symmetry and 'cohesion' - as Serota defined another feature of the collection.

That the famous aria is set in Mother Goose's 18th century London brothel where Nick Shadow has brought Tom Rakewell - Hogarth's 18th century decadent playboy profligate - to 'initiate' the young rake into manhood, was also an inspired and mischievous choice by Ross. When Nick Shadow asks Tom Rakewell what his opinion of love is, the young debt-ridden buck expresses only horror before Tom sings (beautifully) the whores in Mother Goose's brothel that - as the programme reminded the VIP and glitzy art world crowd at the dinner, from Serota to the Serpentine Gallery's Julia Peyton-Jones - that he 'views love as a fickle but also very influential thing'.

What does, however, tie the contemporary collection obsession of Ross with some of the country's greatest other country house collections is a desire for his collection to remain 'current'. One of the inspirations for his collection's zeal came from a lunch Ross had with the Duchess of Devonshire at Chatsworth (a house that acted as salon for friends such as Lucian Freud) where she said that collecting new living artists was just as important as looking after the old.

The other refreshing thing about the exhibition is that there is no self-aggrandizing agenda. Unlike many other well known and high profile modern collectors - such as

Charles Saatchi and his Cadogan Square neighbour Ivor Braka - one does not sense that Ross buys with a view to possibly selling on or dumping stock when he gets bored with an artist. Ross is a long term collector who buys out of passion, not simply for profit.

Stately art

There are often hidden perks - not to mention tax exemptions - that go with loaning works of art. When the famous 'Treasure Houses of Britain' exhibition (featuring over 500 works of art and furniture from the private collections of 220 of Britain's best known stately homes and historic houses) opened in Washington in 1985, not only did over 150 stately home owners all get to be flown business class on BA to America for the royal gala opening (attended by HRH Prince of Wales and the Princess of Wales) but they also discovered - to their barely concealed delight - that the very fact their family heirlooms were featured in the thumping great hardback catalogue (published by Yale) meant that their provenance (and value) was suddenly increased due to being associated with a such a grand blockbuster exhibition that also doubled as a political and diplomatic platform for promoting Anglo-American relations.

In return, all the 220 stately home owners had to put up for a few months was the inconvenience of the odd few empty wall spaces - where their Holbeins, Van Dycks, George II state beds and Delft porcelain orange trees, had been collecting dust for years - often since their ancestors came back from the Grand Tour in the 18th century.

This year's great blockbuster show 'Houghton Revisited' - with the collection of Robert Walpole sold to Catherine the Great re-installed on loan at Houghton over the summer - was in many ways a generational cultural successor to the 1985 'Treasure Houses' show in terms of paying homage to the idea of the country house art collection.

The collector David Ross is a very different sort of modern collector. He has gone to the other extreme in loaning out a sizeable part of his private collection of British modern art to the Lakeside Arts Centre at the University of Nottingham, where he was himself a law graduate and now sits as co-chair of the Nottingham University Impact Campaign Board, along with Jeff Randall. The loan exhibition has left not just a few empty spaces on the walls of Nevill Holt but rather in Ross's; own words, 'had made the place feel as if somebody has come in and stolen all my paintings'.

Most of the collection - featuring 'prime examples' (in the words of Sir Nicholas Serota who opened the show) of works from major British artists from the 1960s to today, including David Hockney, Peter Blake, Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach, Bridget Riley, Joe Tilson, Richard Hamilton, Damien Hirst, and Marc Quinn, have never been seen before by the public, so it is well worth a visit.

The exhibition will run from 23 November to 9 February at the University of Nottingham's Djanogly Art Gallery at Lakeside Arts Centre.

(Pictured top, Peter Blake's Babe Rainbow)

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