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ART REVIEW: ALEX ROBERTS

British artist Alex Roberts' new exhibition Individual Liberty tickles our senses and challenges our perceptions with its bold portrayals of women

Lucy Fry

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What is genuine beauty, how do we respond to it, and can we recognize it in ourselves as well as others?

Those interested in exploring such questions, and the nature of identity and sexuality, should head down to Southwark in London to view the latest exhibition by British artist Alex Roberts, Individual Liberty.

Expect to be privy to portraits of sexually charged, powerful women, who instantly challenge the viewer with fierce but playful stares. You might recognize some of the subjects too - a portrait of actress Sharon D Clarke makes up one of the three works in the triptych, Three Graces. These supersized canvases are larger than life, much like those they portray, who ooze a busty self-confidence, inspirational to those of us still struggling with the acceptance of our bodies.



Perhaps there is an element of didacticism here, Roberts pushing us to be fearless, just as she is, about desire, individuality and truth. But the continual emphasis on gender-orientation and self-expression is delivered with a flirtatious irony and humour that nods towards human vulnerability. Here the viewer is understood rather than alienated, laughed with rather than at, and becomes as much a part of the exhibition as the pieces themselves.

We are urged to admire external individuality whilst simultaneously acknowledging our shared internal landscapes.

Says Roberts: "I am not looking to influence or dictate in my work but I do think as artists we have a responsibility to observe the current period of time we are in and provide room for dialogue or contemplation from what we observe. I am simply observing, creating and reflecting, although through participating in this process, there is no denying that I am nudging the viewer to respond a bit. I would hope that I simply place the work out there and in so doing, 'poke' the viewer to arrive at their own informed and individual responses whether good, indifferent, challenging or excitable."

It's not just paintings and sketches either - Roberts plays with media as much as she does with our own view of others and ourselves. Individual Liberty reminds me of a game of pass the parcel - every time you think you've revealed the "present", there is another layer to unwrap. Wandering around for the second and third time, I saw new things, and noticed pieces that I had completely missed on my first turn around the old warehouse.

These include a wonderful series of sketches entitled 'Light up Middle England', and a flurry of digital signs that offer us different epithets, ranging from the profound to the portentous. There's also a telescope, which holds a rather stimulating surprise for the viewer who dares to look in, and the scantily clad mannequin that welcomes us at the entrance. Is this a joke, or a very serious statement about the role of women today? And what does it mean if we don't notice the mannequin the first time? She's for sale after all, just like all the other women here...

Although spread across such a variety of media, the works all share a common focus, causing us to question our attitudes towards sex and the different shapes and forms of femininity and self-expression. Half exhibition,

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half installation, Individual Liberty tickles our senses and challenges our perceptions, both of the subjects of the works, society as a whole and, most importantly, ourselves.

See www.alexroberts.com for more details.

Individual Liberty is at 77a Gt. Guildford Business Square, London, SE1 0HS. The artist will be present on Friday evenings for a beer and a chat about the works.

IMAGE CREDIT Supertime (Dr Footlights) *(detail)* by Alex Roberts

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