

Barbican's transformations



Tina Modotti's *Woman with a Flag*, taken in 1928

By [Sue Steward](#) [Nick Hackworth](#) [Evening Standard](#) | 27 April 2004



Tina Modotti and Edward Weston

The Barbican Art Gallery has emerged from an 11-month closure with subtle transformations.

The purpose-built humidity and temperature control system has enabled the loan of fragile vintage prints for the inaugural exhibition in the upper gallery.

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This intriguing combination of works by Edward Weston and Tina Modotti during their shared Mexico City years (late Twenties to late Thirties), reveals two very different approaches to the same surroundings: his realist's accuracy and fascination with the characters and always the erotic potential around him; her artist's eye, which eventually became politically directed.

The show follows their brief love story during the period they described themselves as "Modernists".

Given the context is Mexico, the photographs are surprisingly muted. Frida Kahlo's Technicolor palette makes us expect explosions of colour, but of course photographers weren't yet blessed with that possibility, and Modotti and Weston were committed to exploring the spectrum between black and white, and the manipulation of light, shade and tone. Some of Weston's early portraits are as delicate as etchings.

Newly widowed, Modotti had arrived as the older man's assistant, and became his student - and lover (a 1921 portrait of her curled-up nude, radiates a tender calm).

At first, Modotti captured the abstract in ordinary situations, and they both experimented in shots of the same circus tent, cactus or stone steps. Hers reveal a fashionable angular modernism, his are beautifully precise.

Mexico clearly charged his imagination, and eventually made possible the irritating series of erotically entwined vegetables.

Modotti's still-life experiments included the iconic Roses (1924), and the palpably erotic Calla Lily (which points to Mapplethorpe).

Weston's nudes of his lover on a patterned rug reveal meticulous manipulation of light - and her body - into shapes; a century of nude photography doesn't diminish their power.

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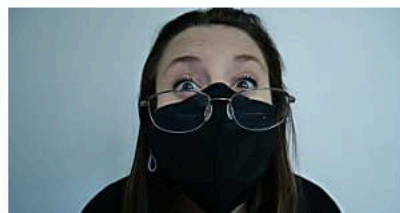
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But the most powerful pictures in the show are Modotti's documentaries of life of the working Mexican people.

When politics guided her eye to gnarled hands and feet, people asleep in the street, and a woman carrying a flag, the poignancy never overwhelmed her artistry - as shown in the pattern of sombreros seen from above during a worker's parade.

Opens tomorrow and runs until 1 August. Information: 0845 120 7550.

Helen Chadwick

It is in the part of this exhibition that resembles a particularly perverted corner of Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory that the depth of Helen Chadwick's influence on contemporary British art can be seen.

Chadwick, who was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1987 and died suddenly in 1996, with heart failure, at the age of 43, has long been regarded as the precursor of the punky Young British Artist tendency.

This, her first major retrospective, is an attempt to cement her reputation, which currently does not extend beyond these shores. It also inaugurates the newly refurbished Barbican Art Gallery, in the downstairs space, along with the accompanying photography exhibition upstairs.

The already well-lit bottom floor has been competently enlarged and improved by the removal of a redundant staircase so that it forms one unified area.

At the heart of the Willy Wonka area is Cacao, a large fountain of warm, liquid chocolate, first shown at the Serpentine a decade ago (with Chadwick's best known work, *Piss Flowers*). Hung around it is a photographic series, *Wreaths to Pleasure*.

Like the related piece, Billy Bud, in which an unattractive ensemble of male genitalia nestles discreetly at the heart of vibrantly coloured flower, the Wreaths are about the closeness of beauty and corruption, featuring flowers and fruits, sometimes arranged in sexually suggestive shapes, floating on toxic substances.

Similarly Cacao, which happily exploits the scatological connotations of chocolate, articulates the relationship between defecation and consumption, inviting you to be simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the thick, brown, bubbling liquid.

The constellation of subjects that these works address - the body, gender identity, the sacred and the profane - were Chadwick's staple and common to art, especially feminist art, since the Sixties.

However, as the Eighties flowed into the Nineties her work became increasingly slick, less laboured and pseudo-theoretical, so developing the characteristics that defined the work of the YBAs.

There are some howlers along the way, such as the magnificently naff and quintessentially Eighties photo Meat Abstract No 8, in which a lump of meat with a lit light bulb protruding from it, rests upon a bed of lush golden yellow and silvery blue fabrics, next to a golden egg.

Such mistakes were occupational hazards, though, for someone who, unlike other artists of her generation (Anish Kapoor or Antony Gormley), tried to make her work increasingly accessible.

So the retrospective proves that Chadwick does indeed deserve to be seen as a significant founder of the Young British Artist sensibility.

Whether one would want that accolade is another matter.

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