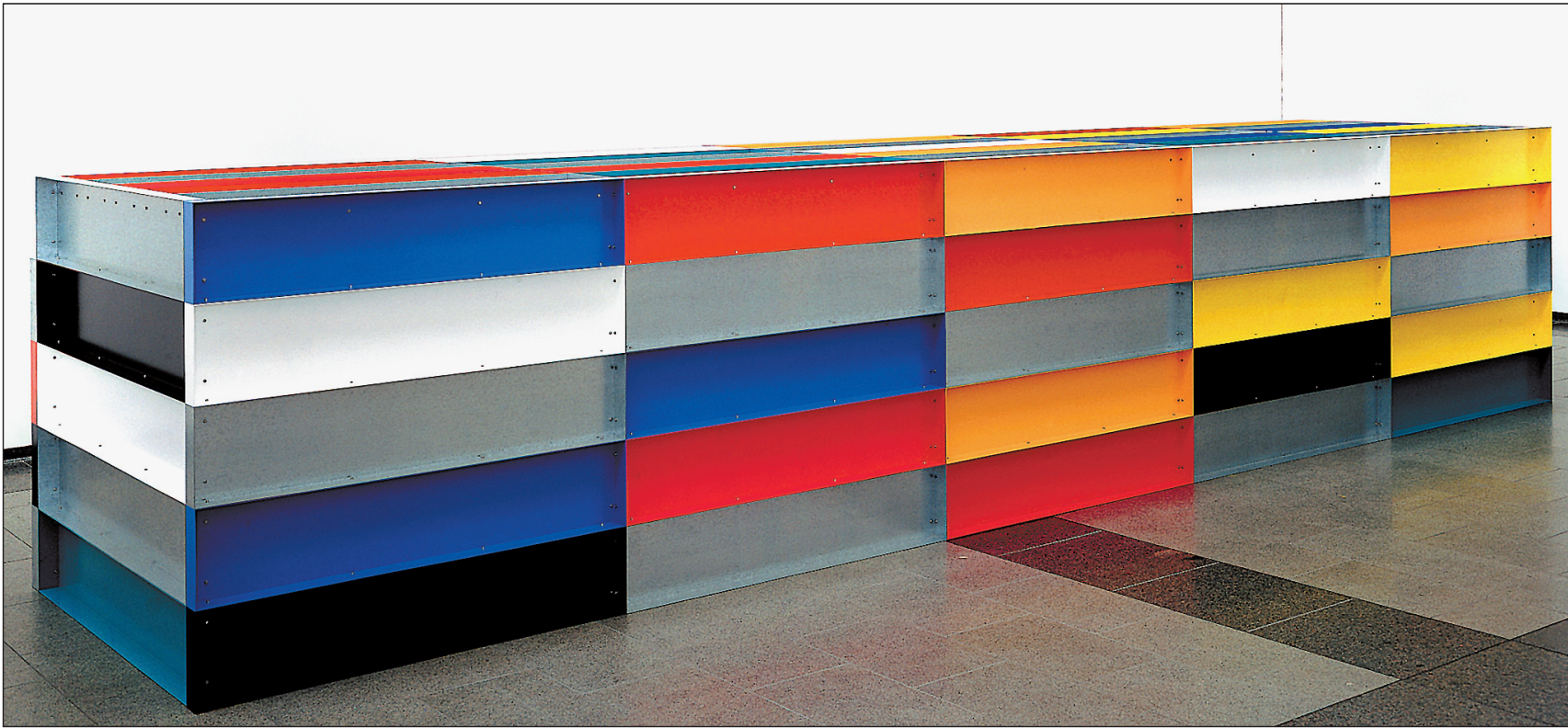


The Arts



Misplaced: at Tate Modern, Donald Judd's collection of brightly-coloured plywood boxes and metal cubes, such as *Untitled* (1989), look more Ikea than art gallery

Designer touch is in need of a home

WITH commendable intelligence, the Tate is staging exhibitions of two giants of 20th century sculpture — the Romanian, Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), and the American, Donald Judd (1928-1994). Though Judd was not particularly influenced by Brancusi, there is a measure of intellectual continuity that runs from one to the other, and a sense of how iconoclastic early modernism developed into the austere high modernism characterised by the younger man's minimalism. But there are closer parallels too, for both sculptors were interested in purity, both had a keen sense of their own worth and both, rightly, as these shows prove, were suspicious of museum displays of their work.

Brancusi, who lived in Paris in its glory days, in the first half of the 20th century, was an ancestor to the Mockney — he shuffled around in clogs, talking up his elemental peasant roots while talking about himself in the third person and disgorging aphorisms. Of his work, he said, "They are imbeciles who call it abstract", because apparently what he was really interested in was "the essence of things".

Imbeciles we are, then, for in practice he sought the essential by steadily

EXHIBITION

Donald Judd/Constantin Brancusi

Tate Modern

Nick Hackworth

abstracting natural forms, as shown by the series of small egg-like forms from a decade later. This smoothing and rounding both fitted and fed the Zeitgeist of Art Deco with its aesthetic of the aerodynamic. Indeed, Brancusi's most iconic works, *Maiastira* and *Bird in Space*, could have decorated the bonnets of luxury cars (US Customs felt the same way — in 1927, they attempted to tax *Bird* as an expensive kitchen utensil).

Though a competent, modish sculptor, Brancusi was not a great one. But Tate Modern's pompous display suggests otherwise. His best pieces perch atop specially created white columns rising from absurdly wide white disks that resemble huge buttons with erections. They try to make you forget that these are domestic-scale works, meant to sit on a collector's table, and elevate them beyond their worth.

In a sense, Judd's work, in a show

curated by Tate director Nicholas Serota, is also presented out of context. Hanging in the café between the two exhibitions, a series of photographs of the sculptor's live/work spaces in Texas and New York reveal how the sculptor displayed his work. They show spaces with minimal furniture, in which art by Judd and his contemporaries holds court — austere beautiful and habitable aesthetic environments. The repeated wooden and metal units make sense in Judd's settings; he knew this and took pains to ensure that they would not be changed after his death. The studios have since become a temple for art pilgrims.

In the gallery, en masse, Judd's works become rather silly, though still worth seeing for their illustration of how minimalism has had such enormous impact on contemporary visual culture. Intelligent use of space was his obsession, and his champions talk of his "dynamic impact on the space". In his homes, the phrase fits, but, as one stands in front of the huge, open plywood boxes, or large metal cubes in this impersonal, public display, there is little dynamic impact.

At Tate Modern, Judd's works look like dysfunctional Ikea storage units.



Abstract form: Brancusi's *Danaide* (1913)

Serota could have used them to display the Brancusi.

● *Constantin Brancusi runs until 23 May, Donald Judd from tomorrow to 25 April. Information: 020 7887 8888.*

Bitten by Sven, the showbiz shark

COMEDY

Gareth Tunley

Lowdown at The Albany

Bruce Dessau

CHARACTER comedy has slipped out of vogue since the heady breakthroughs of Rich Hall's Otis Lee Crenshaw and Al Murray's Pub Landlord, but recently it has reasserted itself. New romantic parodist Gary Le Strange and hellish kids' entertainer Jeremy Lion left their mark on Edinburgh 2003 and seedy agent Sven Stacy may do the same this year.

The man pulling Stacy's strings is Gareth Tunley, of madcap duo The Legendary Polowski. Sven is the ultimate Mr Ten Percenter, a shark swimming through showbiz waters who promises to transform nobodies in the crowd into somebodies. In his scruffy coat and noisy tie this Ealing Broadway Danny Rose oozes insincerity from every pore, living by the maxim "always have something in the briefcase". Usually a dubious contract.

Tunley's satirical cod masterclass in making it boasts a breathless performance and some sharp throwaway lines. Curriculum vitae is, apparently, "Latin for half-truth". When Stacy is not encouraging audience members to sign away their souls, he is cutting deals on his phone. Although, it gradually emerges, usually for two-bit pantos rather than primetime.

Stacy, of course, is a Great British Comic Failure. There are echoes of David Brent's abject desperation and shades of the Pub Landlord's pathos as it unfolds that his marriage is on the rocks. While he seems superficially cocksure, considerable fun is derived from his self-awareness bypass. Maybe Tunley dubbed his winning creation Sven because he is only half the svengali he thinks he is.

● *Info 18 February. Information: 020 7387 5706.*

Black-hearted thunder and dark, satanic thrills

ALL things considered, I remain head-scratching perplexed as to what an "item likely to challenge public safety" may be. No matter; the banning of said items was the fifth of six commandments A Perfect Circle had plastered upon every available surface of the Carling Apollo. Before the California quintet emerged, in case the beleaguered audience were insufficiently cowed, a hostile public-service announcement declared that the band had demanded no one could smoke or take photographs. Cheers, everyone.

A Perfect Circle are so dark and satanic, it's a

POP

A Perfect Circle

Hammersmith Apollo

John Aizlewood

wonder they are not mill owners. Including former members of Tool, Smashing Pumpkins and Marilyn Manson, they are a mini-supergroup who thrive on alienation. Singer Maynard James Keenan spent the entire show

in darkness on his own raised stage. In silhouette, tiny, hunched and wayward, Keenan resembled Ozzy Osbourne, but, for the most part, his voice was too weak to compete with the black-hearted thunder around him.

What a sound they made. They resembled The Cure's doom-laden moments, most notably during the swirling *Blue* and the drum-led *The Package*. From there they expanded into the guitar heroics and raw anger that made the closing *Judith* sound like a declaration of war.

There were no encores (although they told the audience to pretend) and at one point bassist

Jeordie White ordered clapping to cease. Yet guitarist James Iha told a joke ("Where does a penguin keep its money? In a snow bank") and there were several ad-hoc comic song interludes. Even when attempting jollity though, they looked ever so serious. Thankfully, public safety was never challenged.

Somewhat mismatched in a supporting role were Melissa Auf Der Maur, once of Hole and (alongside Iha) Smashing Pumpkins. The pop-punk of *I'll Be Anything You Want* bristled with taut melody and *My Foggy Notion* is a hit single in the making. Their time may come.