

# Iron Lady still rules critics



Thatcher exhibition

By [Nick Hackworth](#) [Evening Standard](#) | 14 April 2003



**G**iven the loathing with which Baroness Thatcher is viewed on the Left, this group show is disappointingly tame.

Despite bringing together the work of 13 well-known artists, including the last two recipients of the Turner Prize, Martin Creed and Keith Tyson, the exhibition is largely devoid of the biting visual criticism of the Iron Lady once produced in the political cartoons of Gerald Scarfe, Steve Bell and Spitting Image.

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It is, instead, full of oblique and, at times, simply lame responses to the lady and her legacy. The limpness of it all bears mute testimony both to the depoliticisation of British art in the 1990s and, more tellingly, to Thatcher's deep and long-lasting success.

She not only revolutionised the political and social landscape of the nation, but its culture, too. The key to her ideological victory lay in exorcising the British middle classes of their traditional class guilt; she convinced them that they were individuals.

This individualism is curiously mirrored in the attitude of members of the YBA generation who eschewed the idea that artists should act as the political and intellectual vanguard of society, spoke only for themselves and found they were naturally adapted for the increasingly sophisticated art market.

Nevertheless, some of the exhibits, at least, are effective. The most overtly political of which is Kenny Hunter's. The pick of his two sculptures is a small, black, two-foot high model of Thatcher with her arm outstretched in an almost fascist style.

Made of resin and coal dust and mounted atop a black oil drum, the work makes its resonant, albeit unsubtle, associations while remaining a powerful aesthetic object.

Even less subtle, but more amusing, is the contribution from Grayson Perry, the art world's favourite transvestite. His trademark ceramic vase is decorated with an image of Thatcher cradling a weeping child to her milky breast and a nice erect penis.

The best piece, however, is a beautiful and subtle image taken a year ago by British artist Paul Graham. It shows Thatcher with her head slightly cocked to one side and eyes downcast, set against a pitch-black background, a work that speaks about the transience of power and of the debilitating of age.

Bringing up the rear in the quality and interest stakes is a crowded group, including both Tyson and Creed. The latter deserves mention for his feeble, framed text piece that reads: "Something on the left, just as you come in, not too high or low."

In some contexts his work can be amusing in an arty in-joke kind of a way, but here it is ridiculous. But even Creed does better than Belgian conceptual artist Kendell Geers, who has submitted a letter to the curator explaining that since his thoughts about Thatcher amounted to nothing, he would take part by contributing "nothing".

A blunt critique from the cutting edge.