

The power that could destroy the world

WHAT a way to make an entrance. The first significant show of contemporary Chinese art lands in London in the most spectacular fashion. It's hard to think of a more impressive backdrop than Battersea Power Station, temporarily occupied by the Serpentine Gallery's off-site exhibition, nor one more appropriate. There's a poignant circularity to this display of new art from the world's latest industrial power in this physical relic of our own industrial past.

In art, as in other forms of international trade, Western relations with China are inspired by the twined motives of fear and greed. Opportunistic speculation has ramped up prices of appallingly weak, pop-art style Chinese art to ridiculous levels. Meanwhile, a far stronger strand of reflective and critical art has spread through international shows and biennales. Some excellent examples of this work, much of which engages directly with the seismic changes

EXHIBITION

China Power Station: Part 1

Battersea Power Station

★★★★☆

Nick Hackworth

engulfing the country, are on show here. Best known in the UK are the beautiful, oblique, black-and-white films of Yang Fudong, that recall the golden age of Chinese cinema in the Twenties and Thirties. Cao Fei used to make slick images of ultra-hip urban youth, but presents at Battersea a more mature piece, a simple video shot in the Siemens Osram Lighting factory in Guangdong, with close-ups of flames melting glass and robotic arms soldering wires following each other in staccato sequences.

Lu Chunsheng contributes the most overtly politically critical



Decaying impact: Gu Dexin's 10-metre wide installation of 100,000 slowly rotting apples in a wire cage

work, an amusingly edited selection of clips from old regime-approved films, so that the ineluctably smiling masses idiotically clap at a series of silly and nothing moments. Other works also deal with the control of history and memory in China. Wang Jian Wei presents a video in which actors prepare for a fictional martial arts fight that, as special effects kick in, becomes ever more real, until at the end the theatricality becomes once more explicit — the point being the ease with which the fiction becomes reality.

Up on the top floor you are

assailed by an intensely sweet smell where Gu Dexin has built a wall formed by a wire cage containing a 100,000 slowly rotting apples. Not an original idea, perhaps, to present decay as art, but one that here strikes a keen note. It may be that Chinese industrial growth proves the final trigger that, on top of decades of Western over-consumption, pushes the world into ecological meltdown, but if it does at least they'll be some sharp-eyed artists recording the catastrophe.

● Until 5 November (020 7298 1528).

Max spectacle where little goes missing

EVERYONE loves a trier and Maximo Park try harder than the rest. Even before he had belted a note, never knowingly under-dressed singer Paul Smith made his point that this was a spectacle rather than a mere concert. Wearing white jeans, white jacket, white shirt, pink tie and fedora, he resembled a Graham Greene character, even if his singing was more akin to Ant (or, perhaps, Dec).

Smith didn't stop there. He charged hither and thither across

POP

Maximo Park

Brixton Academy

★★★★☆

John Aizlewood

stage, he pointed at the audience (who pointed right back) and he said "thank you" so often that some of us were thanked to death.

Behind him were disparate

characters, as watchable as they were likeable: Archie Tiku, a bear of a bassist; powerhouse drummer Tom English; Duncan Lloyd who looked like Bill Gates's more nerdy brother but played guitar almost as mellifluously as Red Hot Chili Pepper John Frusciante, and endearingly manic keyboardist Lukas Wooller, who dressed as if Cutting Crew were still with us.

The pop-punk songs didn't quite match the spectacle, but on the road-hardened material from

their album A Certain Trigger they came close, particularly the plaintive bluster of Going Missing and the heroic closer, Apply Some Pressure.

Nosebleed ("about kissing on a bench in the evening"), the pick of the new fare, showed a slight broadening of the palette, but in truth Maximo Park are refining their myriad strengths and the response accorded to familiar and unfamiliar alike by a capacity crowd suggested it's the right course for now.

Cross-dressing in Baroque

LAUNCHING an ambitious Baroque season of four operas and an oratorio, English Touring Opera showed impressive musical flair in Cavalli's *Erismena*, a 1655 rarity written for the Venice Carnival. ETO's deft period instrument ensemble, conducted by Brian Gordon, kept musical longueurs to a minimum — this is a drawn-out affair with much coming and going yet little action — and the singers had class, especially the women, Laura Mitchell, Rachel Nicholls and Patricia Orr.

A cryptic story of cross-dressing, it passes in amiably confusing fashion until the last 10 minutes when, to précis, the wounded "boy" soldier of the title bares her breasts, the servant declares himself a prince and the sexy harlot upgrades to princess. To say all becomes clear would be to exaggerate but it allows mercifully swift and happy closure.

James Conway's production was inadvertently pantomimic on the first night but will settle.

OPERA

Erismena/English Touring Opera

Hackney Empire

★★★★☆

Simon Boccanegra/Opera UK

Bloomsbury Theatre

★★★☆☆

Fiona Maddocks

Though Cavalli never attempted full emotional variety, his music will delight those generically susceptible to all things Italian Baroque. For the rest of us, ETO is also touring two established masterpieces: Monteverdi's *Orfeo* and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. On this evidence, musical standards promise to be high.

Opera UK, founded by retired businessman John Mullis, has a big

name for a small shoestring outfit. He has promised non-gimmicky opera for music lovers of Classic FM, a questionable desire but hardly a cardinal sin. A season of Simon Boccanegra and *The Merry Widow*, using young voices and minimal, traditional staging, runs at Bloomsbury Theatre before going on tour.

Verdi's *Boccanegra* makes for a perplexing evening. Such an occluded work is never easy to bring off, even with top performers. Here the voices were a mix of awfully good and, in one case, awful. Loic Gugué's noble Boccanegra, Ronald Nairne's troubled Fiesco and Gediminas Varna's ardent Adorno deserve praise.

The orchestra tried hard, with a fine bass clarinet solo, but sounded out of their depth. If a man with the chutzpah of Raymond Gubbay could fall at a comparable hurdle, Mullis has his work cut out.

● www.englishtouringopera.org.uk/tourdiary/www.operauk.co.uk

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