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Artist of the week 209: Anthea Hamilton

From Perspex legs to a young Karl Lagerfeld and huge images of John Travolta's sweatband-clad head, exploring this artist's work is like stumbling on to a weird and wonderful theatre set



Travolta, bust-like. Anthea Hamilton, Portrait of John.
Photograph: Andy Keate/Courtesy of the artist

Walking around Anthea Hamilton's installations can feel like you've stumbled onto a theatre set without a script. There are plenty of cues but you have to keep improvising the lines. They typically feature cut-outs of women's legs in wood or Perspex. There might be artfully arranged prop-like objects including food, or kimonos, hanging like costumes, ready to be stepped into. Then there are her blown-up images of yesteryear's body beautiful: Amazonian gym queens, pouting pin-up boys and hunks with luscious hairy chests. It's always sexy, funny and formally seductive.

Yet what to make of this young British artist's weird conjunctions? The heap of buckwheat for instance, echoing the cut-out silhouette of a dark-eyed man with a fulsome chest rug reclining in a low-cut swimsuit? This, astonishingly, turns out to be the young Karl Lagerfeld, long before the ponytail, big collar and gloves. It's a shock: another Karl behind another image. A more whole version, like the wholesome food he's paired with? Maybe. The associations Hamilton tempts us into making feel as provisional as the props and wheel-on, inch-thin theatre scenery the work resembles.

Massive images of the sweatband-clad head of disco icon John Travolta welcome visitors to her current show *Sorry I'm Late*, where they're pasted over the towering walls of the entrance corridor. He also bounces around as a screensaver on a series of screens aping the kind of clocks you find in banks, reporting the time across the world. Disco might have originated as a subculture that brought together African American, Latino, gay and psychedelic communities of New York City, but, as Hamilton implies, it's Travolta's image that now dominates. Yet shown in profile, in stony pixelated grey and on a monumental scale, he starts to resemble other ideals of male beauty: a classical bust, a Greek god.

Sometimes Hamilton paints gallery walls with the deep blue of Chroma key video paint, as it's known in the movie business where it serves as a backdrop for action that will later be superimposed into other settings. There's a similar sense that things might go anywhere, with the alter-universes she conjures into being. It's a place where culture, identity and sexuality are always in flux, ready to be reinvented.

Why we like her: For Leg Chair, built from Perspex cut-outs of her own flexed legs, with a rice cake at the crotch. It's a deliciously absurd spin on sexist precedents, including Allen Jones's notorious sculptures depicting semi-clad women doubling as furniture, the nude Christine Keeler hiding behind a chair back, and Sharon Stone's crotch shot on a swivel chair in Basic Instinct.

Strange Fruit: One of Hamilton's favourite paintings is Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber by the 17th century Spanish artist Sanchez Cotan. Its fruit and veg hanging against a black void seem fit to burst with metaphor, though its original intention was mathematical: a sequence recording decay.

Where Can I See Her? At First Site, Colchester to 25 November. Her performance Kabuki, is at Tate Tanks, SE1, 5 October.



Astonishing ... Karl Lagerfeld Bean Counter by Anthea Hamilton.. Photograph: Andy Keate/Courtesy of the artist

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