

I have always been drawn to Hannah Hoch's hybrid creations; there is something otherworldly, humorous and biting about them, and at their best they truly transcend categorisation. Whitechapel gallery provides a rare opportunity to see a collection of Hoch's work, beginning as a trained applied artist through to her drawings in old age and discussing how deep secrets lie in abstraction.

The exhibition has an air of the happily ever after. But if we're honest, are we looking for this from our artists.

It seems the exhibition focuses on her abstract period suggesting it is the apex of her career, and that in the removal of realism one comes closer to an essence, or 'truth', however this is habitual theory and one I wish to challenge.

What is most evident here is that Hoch's strength in fact lies in her work's effortless simplicity and cohesiveness that boldly combines strong statement with whimsy. Although the parts may seem naïve their seamless assemblage and effortlessness makes them all the more unnerving. The colour pallet is harmonious and the chaos of post war Europe seems to have given her a clarity as she poetically reveals the absurdity of political facades and idealised stereotypes. At a time when Germany lay in a state of classification mania Hoch states her concern with dissolving "the firm boundaries that we human beings so self assuredly are inclined to erect around everything".

Through bold assemblages of figures provoke challenging new relationships between its fragmented parts, as did European artists Jan Svankmajer, Jans Lenica and Walerian Borowczyk use a device, however the importance of their work is rarely appreciated as widely as it deserves to be.

The exhibition begins by showing her emerging from conventional training but soon grotesque, fairytale-like illustrations of her society begin to scramble from the walls and contaminate your senses.

One of the most important collage artists of 20th century Hoch exploits the power art carries, believing that art was a powerful vehicle for change, and in this prolific period she does just that as her work questions the construction of societies' ideas of reality and beauty. Further in to the exhibition the space is populated by dreamlike and carnivalesque figures, and amongst her winged ministers and hybrid beauties one cannot shake associations to Kafka's six-legged protagonist.

Perversely as you ascend in to the second part of the exhibition the energy seems to dissipate. Here the work is noticeably more abstract and painterly, as if she has returned to the more formal elements of her textile past. The vast examples of abstraction left me feeling a little cold and asking why narrative has become such a dirty word? (and perhaps one which sullied artists such as Lenica) It is as if its believed that in becoming increasingly detached from the figure one gets closer to some true essence or meaning, when in fact the human element can engage it with its society and provide it with a great power. Amidst the later

rooms it seems that along with the narrative, the humour has also gone, and so has its bite.

This is not to say that the work is not interesting, it is, and there are pieces that show a masterful sensibility for colour and composition. The use of negative space and bold placement in 'degenerate' is effortlessly sophisticated. Try imagining the work without its fluidly repetitive lines that are gently broken by soft verticals and the poetry is dispelled. These decisions are made by a masterful hand, but they quite simply do not carry the frissance of her earlier work.

Amongst abstracted objects one does not feel the urgency and distaste of her earlier work that so cleverly jarred and mocked society's rigidity. And it is this that I feel is the most important message of the exhibition and something perhaps a lot of new art is lacking. Art can carry great power and it is important that those making it respect and are aware of it, for used wisely it can be a vehicle of freedom through which one can truly challenge and ask questions.