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Life Is More Important Than Art review - banality turns into poetry

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From snaps of car parks and train platforms to an operatic film showing people arriving at an airport, this show reveals that art is a particular way of looking at life

Nearly 50 years ago, a young artist called John Smith took his camera to a street in Dalston, London, to film people going about their lives. Except that he pretended to construct and author this raw slice of reality. Over the black and white footage you hear Smith barking out commands like a director. “I want the man in the white



📷 Almost too real ... still from *The Girl Chewing Gum* by John Smith.
Photograph: BFI

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boiler suit to come in from the left!” It’s funny and thought-provoking: what is art, if not a moment in which we frame all the stuff going on in the world, and see it as if we were part of a vast fiction?

Smith’s work forms part of the first exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London under its new director, Gilane Tawadros. It’s a promisingly quirky, adventurous start by her, that challenges you to wonder what the difference between art and life is, if any. This is not exactly a new question. But it is asked here in a daring way that risks utter banality to unlock poetry.

Smith’s 1976 conceptual art masterpiece The Girl Chewing Gum is its keynote, a British punk version of French New Wave cinema that suggests art is life, and life only. The parody directorial voice becomes increasingly deranged: a young man walking by in a rain coat has just robbed a bank and has a gun in his pocket. Then the kids in the cinema queue notice the camera and start looking at it, curious, amused and self-conscious. A moment of truth that transcends invention. It’s lovely.

Much in the exhibition turns a direct mirror to the streets outside, in almost unmediated images of British urban life right now. Playing a similar game to Smith, Mitra Tabrizian’s Film Stills invite you to find a narrative in apparently chaotic, random photos of lockups and parked cars. Yet the depth of this show lies in seeing inwards, understanding that as we pass by each other, our memories and desires brush the air like ghostly shadows. Alia Syed crosses that border between outer existence and inner consciousness in her film Fatima’s Letter: against fleeting monochrome images of platforms and trains, we hear fragmented memories of migration and lost worlds, lost connections.

That same sense of the infinite mystery hidden in the daily grind is given transcendent form by the classic of contemporary art that concludes this exhibition. Mark Wallinger’s Threshold to the Kingdom may be familiar to some but seeing it again makes you startled at how such a simple idea can be so profound. Wallinger fixes his camera on people coming out of the arrivals gate at an airport. Their smiles and the hugs of waiting friends, or their anxious, isolated faces, or confident strides, are shown in slow motion, lifesize, approaching you directly. Allegri’s Miserere plays majestically. And it is like seeing people enter heaven, a scene from a Last Judgment altarpiece, a canto written by Dante: so much poetry, taken from completely real, ordinary moments in modern lives. It makes the exhibition’s point perfectly: art is just looking, in a certain way, at life.

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There are good works aplenty, but the discovery here is the radical veteran John Smith. In 2020 Smith started filming over the rooftops from his window in the London borough of Hackney. There's so much mist and snow in the opening shot that you can only see a white blankness above the houses. When that clears, the glass towers of the City loom and we hear Boris Johnson in the early weeks of 2020 talking dismissively about coronavirus. As the days pass his pronouncements get more alarmed. Smith carries on filming, spying on his neighbours as they move around their homes in lockdown. While Downing Street partied.

It's almost too real. Often, art is an escape - or at least a way of sublimating the mess of life, like Smith pretending to "direct" it in his early film. This exhibition wonders what it would be like if art was as true, as unvarnished, as a piece of chewing gum on asphalt. Refreshing, is the answer.