

Voices from the shadows



Kate Davis has trawled the archives of Glasgow Museums to liberate and reinterpret a range of works in her exploration of the feminist movement, writes *Moira Jeffrey*

Peace At Last!
Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow

KATE Davis's excellent new show at Glasgow's GoMA, *Peace At Last!* sounds rather idyllic.

Both the title and the methodology of the show lull one into a lovely sense of security.

The artist has been spending some time rifling through the archives of Glasgow Museums and, entering the darkened spaces of the GoMA's upstairs galleries, one imagines one is going to come across some harmless old stuff: pleasant, dusty and, as Davis has always been an artist of incredible precision, tastefully arranged.

The slogan that gives the exhibition its name, however, turns out to be vile. It is emblazoned on an anti-suffragette postcard bearing a cartoon of a strident, shrewish woman. She has a bulbous red nose and an open mouth. It takes a few moments to realise that her flapping, red tongue has been nailed to the table.

The metaphorical violence of this cartoon, which brings to mind the most horrible of medieval punishments including the scold's bridle, is echoed in the final artefact in the exhibition. It's a pamphlet containing a speech made by the suffragette leader Christabel Pankhurst, in 1908. When Davis found it, the cover, which bore an image of Pankhurst's face, had been partially defaced.

Between these two artefacts there are numerous other acts of violence and an equal and balancing number of acts of restitution. This is a show about presence, absence,

image-making and erasure, about the feminist necessity of making or remaking history. And Davis, best known for artworks that combine her training in printmaking and her exemplary drawing skills with a sculptural and photographic insistence on the artefacts of the real world is about ideas of reproduction and transmission, of both images and ideas.

Peace At Last! draws on two presiding and contradictory artistic spirits: that of the 18th-century Spanish artist Goya and the 20th-century British photographer Jo Spence.

These unlikely bedfellows share a number of things: both believed that art should live and act fiercely in its own time, and both made some of their most compelling works when confronting illness and death.

Goya is represented in the first room by two etchings from the series known as *The Disparates*, not his angriest works but certainly amongst his most powerful and enigmatic. The follies his work addressed seem to be those of the aristocracy: *People In Sacks* is the odd shuffling queue of ruffed and

wrapped figures, swaddled and helpless in their privilege.

Strange Folly shows figures roosting up the (family?) tree like hopelessly opportunistic vultures. A photograph that Davis found in Glasgow's social history collection shows a strange echo of the former work, a bunch of women, lying on the floor wrapped in blankets, in a suffragette protest

Across the room, another echoing image: the faceless clock cases in the Glasgow Museum Resource Centre. Davis has recorded the image in a photograph and then stabbed it with what might have been a very sharp pencil. Time if not quite stopped then certainly punctured.

This is one of many plays on the relationship, or rivalry, between drawing and photography throughout the show. For the central room, about which the rest of her show pivots, she has captured two key photographs by Spence in the museum stores, drawn the scene laboriously and then rephotographed her drawing. These raise questions about archiving and truth, about passive or active reception.

In keeping with his gender and the convulsive spirit of his age, Goya directed his anger outwards. Spence, in keeping with her gender, and her aspirational working-class upbringing, later recalled that she spent most of her life

directing it inwards. Only in her middle age did she begin to feel that here might be political and economic reasons for feeling the way she did.

She used her camera, and a technique she called phototherapy, to examine her life and to try to wrest control of it when she received treatment for breast cancer and subsequently leukaemia. Hers was an art that managed to be an intimate examination of her life without ever being reduced to the confessional. Spence was angry, but in person I remember how softly spoken and nuanced she was.

Similarly this is an exhibition with quiet insistence, openly torn by the need to cherish history as is and the need to tear it down, to liberate ourselves from its constraints. It represents a seizing of the means of production, or reproduction, and an emphasis that has been consistent in Davis's art on participation rather than spectatorship.

How to describe Davis's relationship with the artists and artworks she draws on is complicated. She has long explored the work of other artists; some are those she seems to admire and emulate, such as the feminist Faith Wilding with whom she had a fruitful collaboration at the CCA during last year's GI Festival. At other times she has explored artworks which have that strange pull that is sometimes admiration and sometimes perhaps a strange kind of repulsion that means you can't stop looking. It's an endless wrestling with the weight of the image.

Peace At Last! leaves you not with a sense of resolution in the battle, however, but with an open-ended "what if?" After working so well and so movingly with a historical collection I'd now love to see what might happen if Davis addressed her audience more directly in the present tense. ♦

Until 16 October

Tack got her tongue: clockwise from main: the exhibition's eponymous cartoon, *Reversibility* (Wellifex and HB versions), *Reversibility* (It is the body and Excised), and *Strange Folly*. Photographs: Robert Perry

