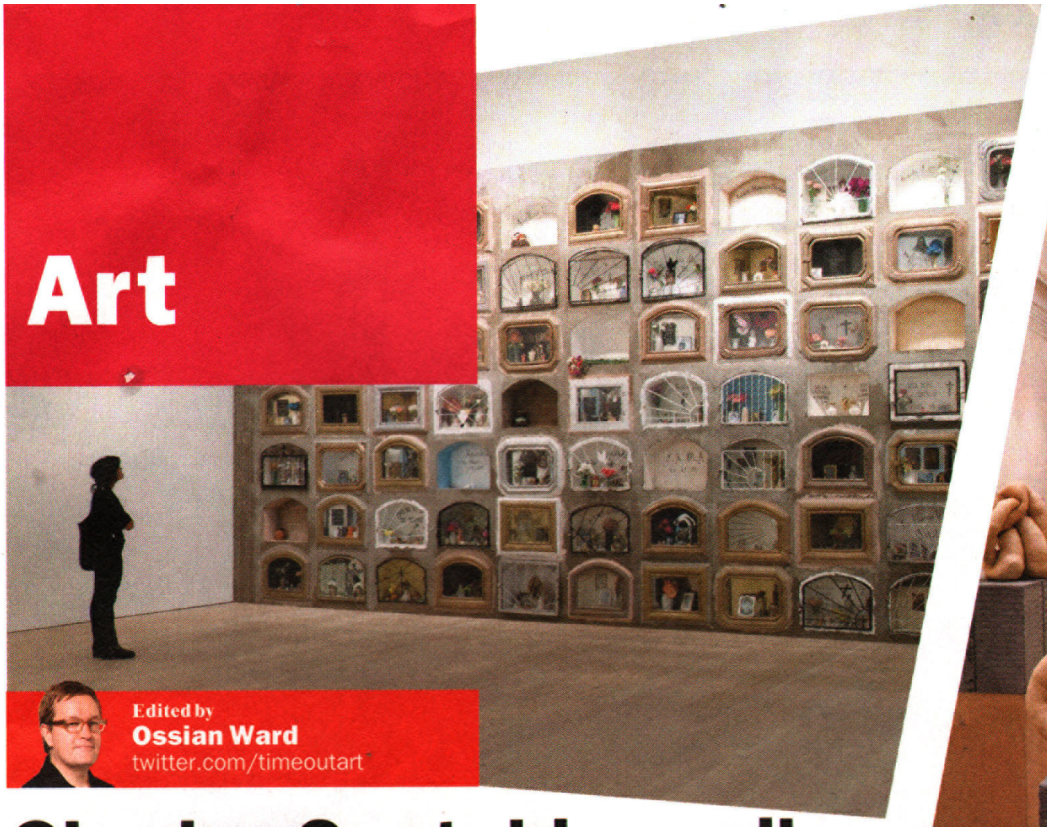

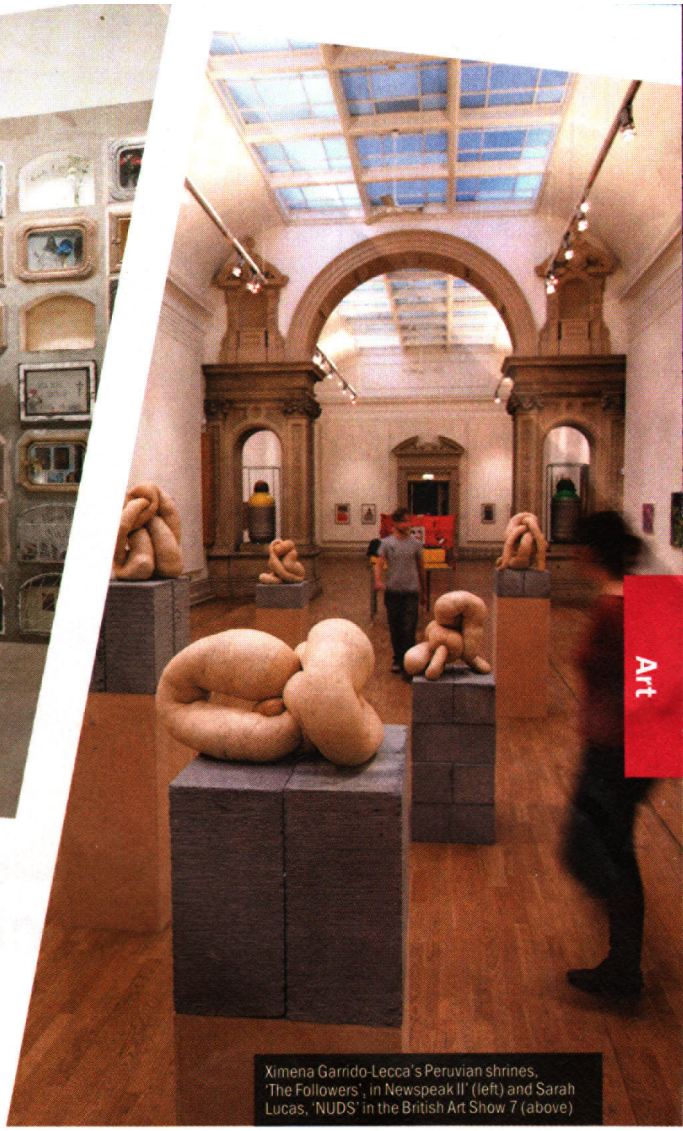

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Charles Saatchi unveils a new Britart generation

It's yet another big week for UK art – a new Saatchi show is joined by a high-profile opening in Nottingham that's heading to the Hayward. **Helen Sumpter** visits them both

Ximena Garrido-Lecca's Peruvian shrines, 'The Followers', in Newspeak II' (left) and Sarah Lucas, 'NUDS' in the British Art Show 7 (above)

When two big group shows open within days of one another, each claiming to represent the best of current British art, the obvious response is to pit one against the other. A pie chart might neatly compare gender ratios and age ranges of the artists represented in the second instalment of 'Newspeak: British Art Now' at the Saatchi Gallery with 'The British Art Show 7' (BAS7) in Nottingham: one show has twice as many men than women, the other an uppermost age ceiling of 76 and so on. But then statistics have never proved very useful tools with which to rate art. A boxing match between the respective curators might settle it: financial heavyweight Charles Saatchi in the London corner versus intellectual thinkers Lisa Le Feuvre and Tom Morton in the Nottingham corner. But that wouldn't be a fair fight (two against one) and the outcome would be just as meaningless.

SAATCHI PHOTO © SAM DRAKE

Neither exhibition presents anything like a string of greatest hits or a thematic survey, preferring instead to imply either a messy, nonsensical language – through the Orwellian handle 'Newspeak' – or merely to offer 'a set of co-ordinates and method of navigation', as vaguely suggested by the subtitle to the BAS7, 'In the Days of the Comet'.

While the BAS7 will be reconfigured for the Hayward Gallery in London next February (and reviewed here in more depth), on first evidence in Nottingham it's a thoughtful and surprisingly cohesive mixture of painting, sculpture, film, performance and sound. It not only feels exciting as a selection but also resonates well in each of the contrasting architectural spaces of its three venues. Even when works or artists are familiar, there's still a freshness to them. For example, Sarah Lucas's 'NUDS' – flesh-coloured nylons filled with soft-toy stuffing and contorted into amorphous, limb-like forms – have never looked better, sitting on their breeze-block and MDF plinths in Nottingham Castle (pictured above right). They may appear to be abject body parts but they also have enough front to give a passable impression of trad marble sculpture.

> **A fist fight might settle it, with Charles Saatchi in the London corner**

Charles Saatchi chooses not to show film or video art, so 'Newspeak II' is inevitably less varied. But there are good pieces here too: Anthea Hamilton's assemblages are loaded with painterly references, Renee So's simple but stylised busts cock a snook at ancient Greek statuary, while Graham Hudson's whirring, light and air-filled junk sculpture also delights. If there's a bias, it's towards painting, which suits artists working in two dimensions such as Ansel Krut, Henrijs Preiss and especially Jonathan Wateridge. Shown together, his three large painted tableaux combining the fictional and the familiar are far more intriguing than when seen in isolation. There's less to like in much of the large-scale sculpture. Compared to Lucas's 'NUDS', which revel in mocking attitude, the mutated animal hybrids of Steve Bishop and Alexander Hoda may be visually striking but are equally empty and emotionless. There are some jarring juxtapositions of ideas here too. Hoda's black-and-white sculptures sit alongside two very different and far more subtle works by Anna Barriball, the only relationship seeming to be that both share a monochrome colour scheme.

Despite having just trashed the pie-chart analysis, it is interesting to look at the crossover of artists between the two shows. Tellingly, there are only three (a few more if you include the first part of 'Newspeak' earlier this year), two of which are female artists with similar practices: Spartacus Chetwynd and Olivia Plender. Both are difficult to categorise due to their use of various media, from collaborative performance and anthropological research to DIY publications. They share an interest in philosophical and ideological systems too, both have bases in Europe in addition to London and have also worked equally successfully both within and outside the commercial gallery structure. If there's a model for where contemporary British art may be heading next, I'd say it's there.

Newspeak: British Art Now – Part II is at Saatchi Gallery until **Apr 17 2011**. **The British Art Show 7** is in various Nottingham venues until **Jan 9 2011** and comes to The Hayward on **Feb 16 2011**.

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Ossian Ward recommends

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