

report by
richard cork

artists'

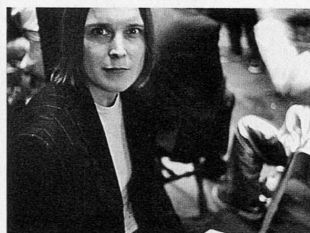
impressions

Dead sheep, blood-filled heads and mutated bodies may hog the headlines, but they represent only one aspect of Britain's art scene. In his new book, the photographer Gautier Deblonde has captured the bigger picture of the nation's wealth of talent

Talk of British art in the Nineties invariably centres on the emergent generation, the highly publicised young pack whose vitality has earned them the high international profile they enjoy today. But the truth about a decade is far more complex. Even the most rebellious *enfant terrible* turns out to have been influenced by more senior artists. And the best members of older generations continue to develop, often producing their finest work and setting an example of sustained energy. The strength of Gautier Deblonde's photographs, taken over the past five years and now published together for the first time, lies in his acknowledgement of the British art scene's extraordinary diversity. Since he is close in age to the youngest artists in this collection, Deblonde might have been expected to concentrate on them alone. Instead, he has set no arbitrary limits on the men and women defined by his lens. They ►



damien hirst, jeu de paume, paris, 1996



sarah lucas, soho, london, 1996



antony and vicki gormley, peckham studio, london, 1996



georgina starr, caravan studio, hexton, 1996



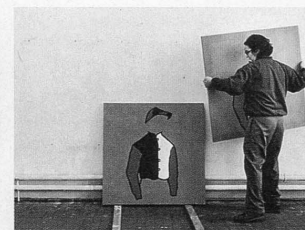
anthony caro, studio, camden, london, 1996



marc quinn, foundry, putney, london, 1996



gillian wearing, butler's wharf, london, 1997



mark wallinger, elephant and castle studio, london, 1994



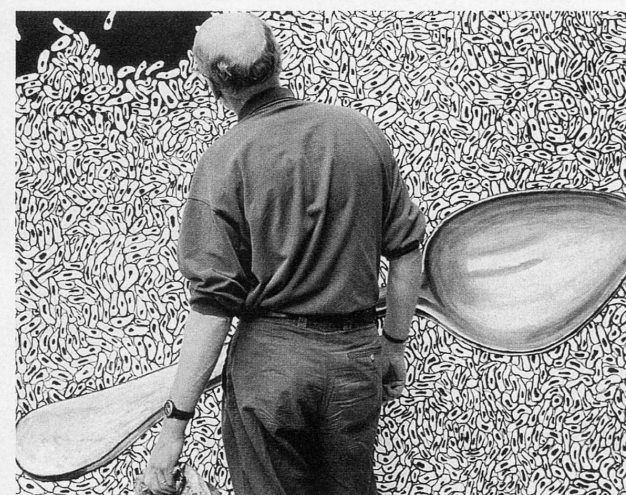
paula rego, camden studio, london, 1994



rachel whiteread, venice, 1997



tracey emmin, waterloo road, london, 1997



bill woodrow, camberwell studio, london, 1993

◀ range from the 75-year-old Anthony Caro, still spry enough to be caught balancing like a tightrope walker on an edge of steel, to the baby-faced Simon Patterson, only a precocious 29 when short-listed for the Turner Prize in 1996.

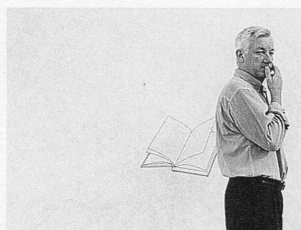
Older artists often influence the young through teaching. Michael Craig-Martin's impact on the outstanding generation of Goldsmiths' students would be hard to overestimate, and in Deblonde's photograph he looks suitably professional next to an open book suspended in the picture behind him. Craig-Martin's teaching has always been rooted in his activities as a hard-working, highly professional artist. He instilled that attitude in many of his students, and their success testifies to his effectiveness.

Not that the young have allowed the pursuit of reputations to impair their sense of playfulness. Jake and Dinos Chapman, incorrigible brothers who specialise in provocative tableaux, are seen in front of a studio wall spattered

The **older** artists become, the more **unwilling** they are to 'act up' for a **photographer**

with childlike graffiti. As for the notoriously irreverent Tracey Emin, she raises a sceptical eyebrow at the camera while kids on the street outside gawp and giggle at her. Deblonde indulges in wry humour of his own when dealing with the ubiquitous Damien Hirst. Rather than taking yet another photograph of Hirst himself, he trains his lens on two masked and goggled technicians pouring formaldehyde into tanks containing a sliced cow. Their anonymity could not be further removed from Hirst's instantly familiar face, and a serious point is also made about the dangers of the preservative liquid he employs.

Antony Gormley, likewise, seems at risk as he sits in his studio, steadfastly waiting for a cast of his head to be set. He looks like an Egyptian potentate preserved for posterity, while the severed heads and limbs heaped on the shelves above hint disconcertingly at human sacrifice. But his wife Vicki, disappearing through a door with plaster-mixing bowl in hand, introduces a more ▶



michael craig-martin, at home, kentish town, london, 1995



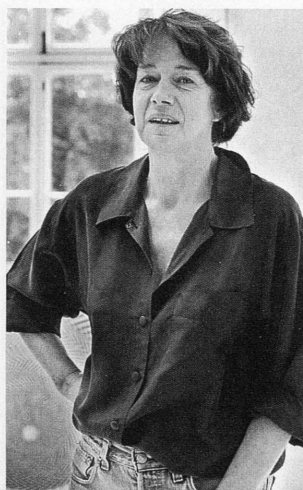
david hockney, his london gallery, 1997



gavin turk, at home with his son, charlotte street, london, 1996



gilbert and george, café, fournier street, london, 1995



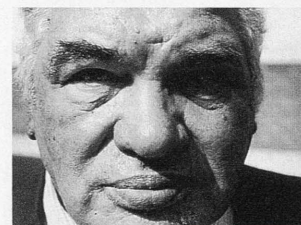
bridget riley, at home, holland park, london, 1998



julian opie, barbican, london, 1997



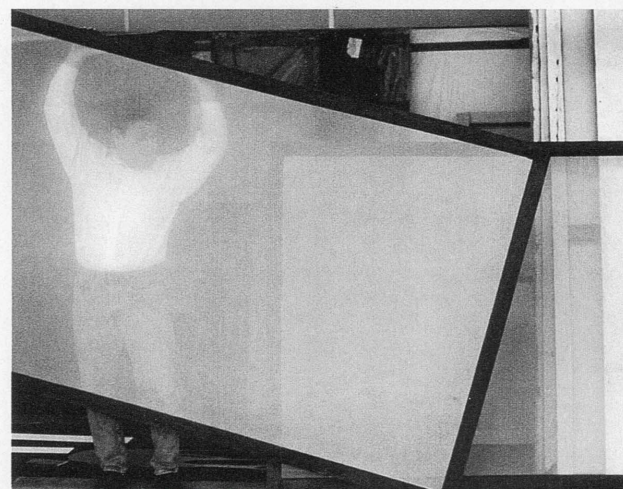
sam taylor-wood, london, 1997



eduardo paolozzi, opening of the new british library, london, 1998



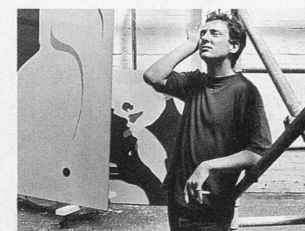
jake and dinos chapman, brick lane studio, london, 1997



bruce mclean, hammersmith studio, london, 1995



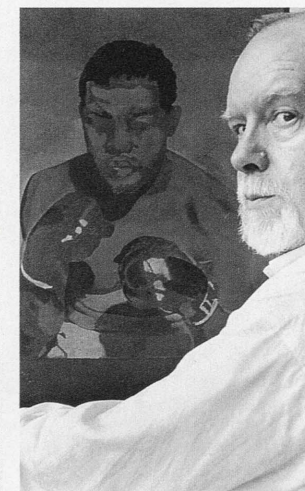
helen chadwick, at home, bethnal green, london, 1995



gary hume, hoxton square studio, london, 1996



chris ofili, king's cross studio, london, 1998



peter blake, at home, west london, 1994

◀ practical note. Artists know how their chosen materials should be handled. And judging by the photograph of Marc Quinn, his overalls spectacularly smeared as he peels the outer layer off a cast figure, some of them do not mind getting mucky in the process.

Deblonde is very open about how to obtain the image he wants. Sometimes, his lens ignores the artist's surroundings and moves in very close to the face alone. The strategy pays off best with his senior subjects: the septuagenarian Eduardo Paolozzi, eyes deeply shadowed, stares forward with a frowning, defensive expression like an old pugilist who still refuses to let his guard down. Frank Auerbach, head cocked on one side, looks gentler, but he eyes the camera with a distinct wariness. The older the artists become, the more unwilling they are to "act up" for a photographer. An outstanding portrait of Howard Hodgkin, looking sidelong at the lens, catches his vigilance. Hodgkin's eyes remain supremely watchful, missing

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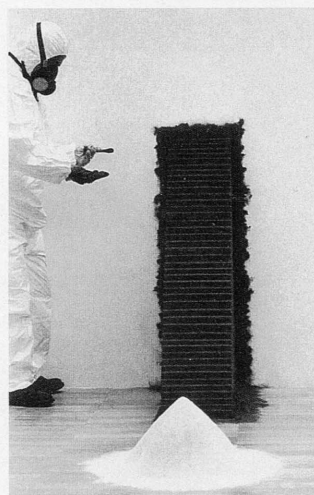
nothing, and even the cloudy reflection in his mirror reinforces the image of a man forever on the alert.

Some artists, of course, cannot help staying camera-friendly. Deblonde cleverly catches the gregariousness of David Hockney by photographing him while he poses for another photographer. But his geniality seems, in the end, curiously unrevealing; as it discloses little, just as Gilbert and George adopt expressions of studied politeness as they sit with teacups in their local café. Their emotions are held in reserve, and wilt only to be unleashed in the outspoken images of themselves deployed so frequently in their own photo-works.

All the same, showing artists in the surroundings they like to inhabit can be revealing. Helen Chadwick, whose death at the age of 43 robbed British art of a stubborn individualist, sits barefoot on the doorstep of her East End home. This terraced house was as unpretentious as Chadwick's approach to art. But it did not feed her work in the same way that



fiona rae, studio, east end, london, 1995



anish Kapoor, jeu de paume, paris, 1996



frank auerbach, waddington galleries, london, 1997



howard hodgkin, at home, coptic street, london, 1995

urban architecture is reflected in Julian Opie's art. He is blurred in Deblonde's portrait, whereas the tower block beyond him is in focus. And Opie stands to one side as if to acknowledge that impersonal buildings of this kind occupy a central position in his work.

Ultimately, though, the most illuminating of Deblonde's portraits show artists interacting with their work. Gary Hume takes his cue from the gesticulating woman in one of the paintings stacked

behind him. He adopts a self-consciously preening attitude, parodying the peacock assurance of a model posing on the catwalk. Hume discloses a great deal about his own fascination with stylishness, and at the same time maintains a fastidious distance from the painting itself.

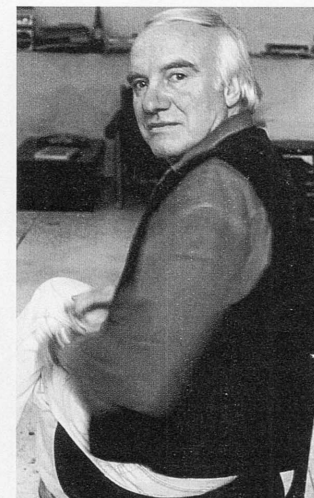
Other artists appear more intimately involved with their work-in-progress. Chris Ofili allows powerful lighting to project his own shadow on to the wall next to his painting. His hand invades



tony cragg, venice, 1997



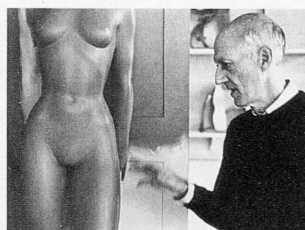
simon patterson, studio, bethnal green, london, 1997



patrick caulfield, at home, beiseize park, london, 1995



cornelia parker, Tate gallery, london, 1997



allen jones, shoreditch studio, london, 1994

the picture, appearing to juggle with the spades dancing across its surface. This is the artist as conjuror, playing with ironic references to his black identity. Paula Rego, on the other hand, appears to be dreaming about the bizarre incident depicted behind her. With upturned eyes, she seems in thrall to the mood of a painting in which a half-dressed woman lies helpless on the floor, violated by a smaller figure brandishing a weapon. The violence of the image contrasts with

Rego's ruminative face, suggesting that she is herself surprised by the fertile workings of her own imagination.

Peter Blake looks positively conspiratorial as he looks back at us from his painting of a boxer. He appears to be warning us that the fighter's menacing gloves might suddenly burst out and deliver a blow to anyone who finds fault with the picture. And Deblonde certainly suggests a close identification between artist and subject in his photograph of Mark Wallinger. While one painting of a faceless jockey rests against the wall, Wallinger grasps a similar picture and places himself over the blank, anonymous rider. For an instant, he almost becomes the jockey.

In several photographs, Deblonde proves himself adept at conveying the artists' ability to become absorbed in their work. Bruce McLean, caught in a typically robust action-man pose, seems to be enmeshed in the gauze-like surface of the screen he grasps. Its fuzziness robs his body of its solidity, and there is an intriguing suggestion that McLean might end up as a figure trapped inside his own picture. Bill Woodrow still clearly stands outside his monumental drawing. But he appears arrested by the forms wriggling across it, while the floating spoon looks colossal enough to scoop Woodrow up and drop him into the maelstrom of swarming organisms.

Such notions could easily be dismissed as fanciful. But Deblonde knows how intensely artists can project themselves into their work as it develops. Tony Cragg, dwarfed by the titanic, undulating sculpture in front of him, appears oblivious of anything except the forms consuming his attention. Fiona Rae, arms akimbo, seems to be caught wondering how best to proceed with the painting beside her. But the most magical photograph shows Cornelia Parker, engrossed in the act of installing one of her Turner Prize exhibits at the Tate Gallery in 1997. Called *Colder Darker Matter*, it suspends the charred remains of a baptist church struck by lightning in Texas. Parker gazes upwards, her attention perhaps focused on how best to hang them on their wires. But her arms rise up like an orchestra conductor's in response to the charcoal fragments dangling before her. She appears as spellbound as we may feel when, confronted by an especially potent work of art, we end up lost in wonder. ●

Artists, by Gautier Deblonde, Tate Gallery Publishing, £14.99. All photographs © Gautier Deblonde