Foundings and Fledglings

By Beth Walton, Deputy Arts Editor (2009/10)
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Foundlings and Fledglings - Our Angels of this Earth, 2009, argon, by Tracey Emin, courtesy of White Cube, photo Benjamin Westoby

Matt Collishaw ,Tracey Emin & Paula Rego:At the Foundling
Venue: The Foundling Museum, London
Rating: * * *
Runs: 27 January to 9 May 2010

Following a long tradition of artists active in supporting The Foundling hospital, this year three renowned contemporary artists joined the canon of greats, showing work alongside masters like Hogarth in and around the museum. Opened in 2004 on the site of the original Foundling refuge established in the 1740s, the museum is home to a fine collection of 18th century art as well as a research library dedicated to composer Handel. The Foundling is perhaps an unlikely venue for a modern day exhibition including such controversial artists as Paula Rego and Tracey Emin, but along with Matt Collishaw the respective artists' work all explore themes central to and in keeping with the building's history. All three artists are known for producing work about childhood and the maternal subject but simultaneously about loss and separation.

Baby Things, Teddy Bear, 2008, bronze cast, by Tracey Emin, Photo C Todd- White Art Photography

Set against a backdrop of decadent 18th century interiors the work is spread out across various galleries including the Committee and Court rooms ending with a selection of works from all three artists in the white cube style basement gallery.

In the Committee room sits Matt Collishaw's Snow Globe containing a beggar boy, that I admit having neglected my brochure I failed first time to spot from the 18th century furnishings. Yet far from being a negative thing, this element of discovery is enjoyable and in keeping with the whole idea of the Foundling as an institute for the lost and found. Collishaw's curio sits well in its setting, but only when you get up close to glance at the globe is it that you realise the harrowing image of a vagrant child.

It is when the pieces are curated thematically here that they seem to sit best in their surroundings. Upstairs in the Courtroom, Emin's rail of baby clothes and rack of tiny shoes make an interesting contrast to the cases of curios and coins left by women regrettably giving up a child. However upstairs in the Handel rooms it is difficult to establish the link between the classical composer and the subjects of maternal ambivalence and abortion, whilst trying to read a pamphlet left by Emin in the side pocket of an arm chair. Here the artwork seems sadly very much out of place.

Children of a Lesser God, 2007, transparency in light panel, by Mat Collishaw, courtesy of the artist and Haunch of Venison

Paula Rego's huge installation Oratorio loosely based on Hogarth's Gin Lane and complete with life size models of foundling children steals the show. Completely overcrowding the first floor landing the piece was modelled on the elaborate altarpieces found in Rego's home country, Portugal. Although the severe space restriction limits how one can view the piece , this serves the pieces purpose well by forcing the viewer to confront the harsh realities of Rego's subject matter. The monumental piece encroaches on your personal space and seems to looms over its audience. Both Sinister and theatrical this piece deserves a view.

A trio of minute bronzes from Emin's Folkestone Triennale back in 2008 extend the exhibition out into the street. On the steps to the museum you would be forgiven for missing a little pink sock lying discarded and crumbled, or the tiny teddy under a bench in Brunswick Sq. Less mistakable is the pink mitten sat on the fence behind the monument to the building's founder Thomas Coram, and the bold but beautiful blue neon 'Foundlings and Fledglings' on the museums facade.

Although at times the juxtaposition of old and new really works, carried by the running themes, the show can feel somewhat disjointed. Rego's conte work in the entrance hall is lost and the basement gallery feels dim and isolated from the rest of the works scattered around the museum. Having said this there are some really interesting works from all three artists on display which are well worth a look.

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