

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEREMY COOPER

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Hirst, Landy, Hume, Lucas, Emin ... the bad boys and girls of art leave youth behind...

Rosalind Ormiston interviews Jeremy Cooper, author of a new book about the yBas

Jeremy Cooper is a Londoner who read Art History at Cambridge and has since worked as an auctioneer at Sotheby's; an expert on the first three series of the BBC Antiques Roadshow; the owner of an antiques gallery in Bloomsbury – with Gilbert and George, and the architects James Stirling and Denys Lasdun amongst his clients – and now a successful author. March 2012 sees the publication of his books *Artists' Postcards: A Compendium* (Reaktion Books), and *Growing Up: The Young British Artists at 50* (Prestel Publishing).

We met at the British Museum to discuss *Growing Up*. The book follows the history of the 'yBas' – 'young British artists' – a group who graduated from London's Goldsmiths College between 1987 and 1990, and rose to worldwide attention by the end of the 1990s. Many of them are now reaching 50 years of age, a timely opportunity for Jeremy Cooper, a friend of several of them, to reflect on their success and future prospects. The book contains historical accounts, anecdotes, and remarkable conversations with the artists. Many of the illustrations are personal photographs contributed by the artists and are published for the first time.

Rosalind Ormiston: *What made you want to write Growing Up: The Young British Artists at 50?*

Jeremy Cooper: Interested in the Goldsmiths Group, I was irritated by the way their early days were written about; that all sense of them as human beings and practising artists had disappeared; so removed from reality. I thought it was

important to understand their creative relationships, and set out to check whether their friendships are as significant now as they were then.

RO: *When did you start writing the book and how did you set about finding material for it?*

JC: I started work on it about four years ago. I started by recalling conversations I'd had over the years with the artists I knew personally, and then read back into all the exhibition catalogues, small and large. Near the end of this work, I felt ready for the four central interviews.

RO: *The illustrations for this book are remarkable. Many owned by you and the yBas and published for the first time. You include a monoprint drawing of yourself created by Tracey Emin. How did that come about?*

JC: I dropped by her studio, which was then in Waterloo Road – she called it The Tracey Emin Museum! – one afternoon in 1997. The door was open and Tracey was sitting on the floor. Whilst we were talking, and I was having a cup of tea, she was drawing. As I left she handed me her sketch, of me. It's typically generous of Tracey to do that.

RO: *In the 'Introduction' to Growing Up you state '...as they enter their 50s, [there is] the possibility of a dramatic diminution in critical interest in their work.' Why a dramatic diminution?*

JC: It's dramatic because of experiencing 20 years of really exceptional attention. There isn't a group of English artists who have, from so young, sustained attention for so long. But it could suddenly turn sour at any time. Could easily be switched off through new interest in younger artists. All the same, I'd be amazed if any of the central five stopped making art.

RO: *The book follows the early years of the yBas to the present day. For the five central chapters you chose to focus on Anya Gallaccio, Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Michael Landy and Sarah Lucas. Why them?*

JC: They were five of the original sixteen of the Goldsmiths group who together put on the student-exhibition *Freeze*. They seemed to me to be representative of the

group, although it could easily have included Abigail Lane or Angela Bullock or others. It was a personal decision. I knew it would be interesting talking to them.

It was difficult to get hold of Damien Hirst. He was very busy. But Sarah Lucas and Gary Hume told him about the book and his office got in touch.

RO: *What do you think motivated the yBas self-curated art exhibitions in the late 1980s/early 1990s?*

JC: It wasn't to make a revolution. When they were doing the shows they didn't realize it would be historically important. It's interesting that it wasn't about money. The generations after them seem to be more motivated as students by career and money. None of them thought of money. Damien Hirst may do now but he didn't then. As I say somewhere in the book [about Hirst], if you are a working class lad in Leeds, the son of a single mother, in 1984, when you leave school, if you want to make money, you are not going to go to art school!... He is accused of being 'pushy, only interested in money', but if he had just wanted to make money he wouldn't have done art. He would have been a builder, which he was for two years – working on a building site to make the money to go to art school. Many [yBas] took decorating jobs. Gary Hume didn't. He just starved!

RO: *The yBas' working class backgrounds interest you.*

JC: Yes, because it makes the choice to be an artist more committed. And by now it is interesting how they cope with wealth and whether the threat of its removal matters. I am intrigued by that. Of the ones I know – like Sarah Lucas, whom I didn't know to talk to at any length until I went to meet her in Suffolk six months ago – she is conscious of the fact that people might stop being interested in her work. It's important to her that her messages get through in some way, and if they don't she will be sad but she is resilient, confident that she'll find a way to make a living. Her commitment is reassuring, I find. The world view is that she is a tough rabble-rouser but in fact she is a gentle, clever woman. She is one of the British stars in the wider art world. Fifty and still very vibrant. I believe in her.

RO: *Do you think any of the artists have come to regret the label 'yBas'?*

JC: The term, yes, but not the fact. I was slightly surprised. I hadn't expected them still to be, all of them, so generous to each other, about those times, about the importance to them of those times in the 1990s. They actually feel it. They are aware of the fact that the personal experiences, especially something so powerful as that, at art school and leaving art school in the first few years of trying to make a living and express your work, the support they gave each other, the relationships they had with each other are bound to be important, whether they say so or not. But they do say so. They do acknowledge it.

RO: *Do you think there might be a yBa retrospective exhibition?*

JC: No doubt someone wants to do it. I don't think they would want it. I don't know. They certainly wouldn't want to do it themselves; they might lend some stuff to it. They are not particularly proud of 'Sensation' [the yBa exhibition of contemporary art held at the Royal Academy, 1997] Personally, I think the 'yBa phenomenon' has been overdone. I think we should let the yBas go. That's sort of what the book is about.

RO: *When did you first meet them?*

JC: At 44 Charlotte Road [Shoreditch] through Joshua Compston's exhibitions and street events around Factual Nonsense. He was my tenant, from 1991–6. Actually I really got to know them after he died, as it was I who dealt with his artwork, and with the sorrow of his friends. With my own sadness too. This was when Gavin Turk became a really good friend, and Gary Hume.

RO: *In No Fun without You: The Art of Factual Nonsense [Ellipsis Books 2000] you include Gilbert and George, who live around the corner from you in London. Is that how you met them?*

JC: No, I knew them before I moved, in 1985, to Shoreditch. We met when I was dealing in 19th-century furniture in my gallery [1979–83], in Bloomsbury [called 'Jeremy Cooper Limited']. They just walked in. I was so pleased. They are incredibly nice and also incredibly rude! When they first came into my premises they bought an Arts and Crafts table for their house. It was one of the cheapest pieces of furniture I had. They practised telephoning round the table. I was delighted that they asked me

if it could be delivered, and said ‘yes, yes!’ and took it down to Spitalfields for them that evening! They greeted me at the door and took the table off me. Carried it in through to the ground floor room on the left, picked up the black phone from the floor, and pronounced it ‘perfect’. It was the only piece of furniture in the room! After that for the next three years they bought all of their stuff from me. Every photograph of them in the house has pieces from my gallery in the background. When I closed my premises in 1983 George said ‘It’s a tragedy!’ I said ‘Well it’s a bit sad’ and he reiterated: ‘It’s not sad, it’s a tragedy Jeremy!’

RO: *To conclude, what is your next project?*

JC: As a future arts project I’m working with the installation photographer Edward Woodman. And I have an exhibition, ‘The Artists’ Postcard Show’, at Spike Island, Bristol, from 6 April to 17 June 2012. All the work shown will be from my own private collection, including pieces by Tacita Dean, Gilbert and George, Richard Hamilton, Bruce Nauman and Lawrence Weiner, etc. The exhibition links to the publication of my book *Artists’ Postcards*.

RO: *Thank you for talking to Cassone.*

Notes

In addition to *Growing Up: The Young British Artists at 50* (Published by Prestel, March 2012, £29.99 Hardback), Jeremy Cooper is author of *Artists’ Postcards: A Compendium* (Reaktion Books, March 2012; £35); and *No FuN without U: The Art of Factual Nonsense* (2000), a vintage retrospective of the life of late Joshua Compston, who was integral to the Shoreditch art scene in the mid 1990s. Jeremy Cooper’s book *Victorian & Edwardian Furniture & Interiors: from the Gothic Revival to Art Nouveau* (1998), a classic survey, has been reprinted many times. The list of his published fiction highlights success as a novelist.

Background

Growing Up: The Young British Artists at 50- a synopsis

Jeremy Cooper critically appraises a group of artists known as the 'yBas' ('young British artists', but now rising 50) – a term coined by *Art Monthly* magazine in 1996. The group graduated from Goldsmiths College, London in the late 1980s. Through a series of self-organized exhibitions and events that challenged the British Arts establishment, notably 'Freeze' (1988) and the 'Building One' shows (1990); 'Fête Worse than Death' (1993; 1994) and 'The Hanging Picnic' (1995), they caught worldwide media and public attention during the 1990s. Names are familiar and include Anya Gallaccio (b.1963), Damien Hirst (b.1965) and Gary Hume (b.1962), Michael Landy (b.1963), and Sarah Lucas (b.1962), the five artists on whom Jeremy Cooper concentrates in this book; plus others integral to the yBa name such as Gavin Turk (b. 1967), who was refused his MA at the Royal College, Fiona Rae (b.1963), Sam Taylor Wood (b.1967), and Angus Fairhurst (1966–2008); Rachel Whiteread (b.1963), and Tracey Emin (b.1963) This book is a critical observation of the yBas rise to fame featuring many previously unseen photographs and letters. It concludes with an appraisal of the 21st-century yBas and the significant changes to the art market that young artists-turned-curators are making.

ENDS

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