

Sarah Lucas, "Titti Doris" (2017): It's not a stretch to relate responses to the current fracas over public sculpture.



Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Rude amid the Rodins

Sarah Lucas' works offend plenty, but they're part of larger debate

By Charles Desmarais

"Sarah Lucas at the much revered Legion of Honor is wrong and disgusting," a reader wrote to me in an email last month. "To walk into this fabulous institution and be confronted by a plaster torso with a cigarette up its anus is just crude ... and to see all the pee colored urinals in front of Rodin's magnificent 'Gates of Hell'

"Sarah Lucas: Good Muse": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Through Sept. 17. \$6-\$15 ("Degas, Impressionism, and the Paris Millinery Trade" has an additional charge). Legion of Honor, Lincoln Park, 100 34th Ave., S.F. (415) 750-3600. <http://legionofhonor.famsf.org>

was so insulting.

"Just saying what everyone will be thinking."

Daniel Detorie was referring to the exhibition "Sarah Lucas: Good Muse," on view at the Legion through Sept. 17.

He is not the only fan of art who doesn't fancy the Lucas method. Legion officials at first agreed to give

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Sarah Lucas' "Pauline" (2015) is one of her rejoinders to our assumptions about women's fertility, sexual availability and domestic reliability.

Rudeness among the Rodins at Legion

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me access to comments received directly by the museum, but later offered only a "selection" to be made by them. I declined for obvious journalistic reasons.

However, if the social media response we can all see online is any indication, the overall tenor of audience response would give pause to any public relations professional. For every "congratulations on these new bold inclusions" one will find 10 opinions on the order of "an affront," "an insult," "embarrassing" and "a total mood killer."

The Lucas show, like the exhibition "Urs Fischer: The Public & the Private" at the Legion this spring, is interwoven among the museum's famous collection of sculptures by Auguste Rodin. Both shows participate in international efforts to recognize the centenary of Rodin's death. Both, to be fair to the irritated visitors, are calculated provocations.

They are not of equal quality. Fischer's show was rich with associations. Lucas makes a legitimate and pointed case for feminist ridicule of the macho heritage of sculpture in the European tradition. Still, notwithstanding her cultivated reputation for slack-affect, she might have put more into the commission than a few one-liners, repeat-

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ed throughout the galleries.

Those are, in order of frequency of appearance: cast-resin, life-size "Floppy Toilets" (seven of them); stuffed-pantyhose approximations of body parts, mostly female, flagrantly posed; plaster-cast women's bottoms with cigarettes stuck in odd places; an oversize pair of streetwalker-style boots, built of concrete; and a mattress strategically pierced by neon shafts trailing scraps of women's hosiery. Many of the individual works are mounted atop home appliances like mini-refrigerators or a washing machine.

Despite flaws in presentation, the artist's rejoinders to our assumptions about women's fertility, sexual availability and domestic reliability — as well as our expectations about how such matters might be addressed in art — are brought into high relief among the portentous works permanently on view at the Legion.

If the viewer objections are to flaccid thinking underlying the listless objects splayed around the Rodin galleries and adjoining spaces, I get it.

But it's not a stretch to relate some of the responses to aspects of the current debate on public sculpture. Not the part about using art and history discussions as a cover for abhorrent prejudices, of course, but the position that an idea can be somehow immutably embodied in bronze, and thus forever privileged over any new understanding of the complexities of that idea.

The reason that symbols of the Confederacy must be removed from our public squares and gardens is that we, as a culture, have failed to cure the disease of mind that might lead a person to kill for the right to own other human beings. And so, the bronze sculpture of, say, a Robert E. Lee continues to stand for the most evil thoughts that Lee ever had. If, on the other hand, we had reshaped our understanding of one another, the meaning of that sculpture would have shifted, as well.

The question is not whether Sarah Lucas shows herself in "Good Muse" to be as refined a sculptor as her self-serious forebear. It is, instead, whether we can possibly comprehend the works of Auguste Rodin today without a Sarah Lucas.

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Lucas' "Washing Machine Fried Egg" (2017) is installed in the Rodin galleries at the Legion of Honor through Sept. 17.