

Art of darkness

Like his giant container at Tate Modern, Mirosław Balka's latest exhibition recalls the horrors of the Holocaust. But what exactly is the artist trying to say? By **Tom Lubbock**

Mirosław Balka's art is an art of fear and menace. It's also, often, a very direct art.

His sculptures, environments, projections, can be literal frighteners. At a time when playfulness is still the order of the day, that seems worth holding on to. The world, after all, has been and continues to be awful.

Poland's leading artist is conspicuous in Britain this season. He has two shows, both nightmarish. The first is the installation in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, which opened in October. *How It Is* consists of a vast sea-container, open at one end. You enter it up a ramp, and as you approach its opening you find – very suddenly – that total shadow falls. You're looking into a maw of darkness, standing on the threshold of nothingness, with perhaps a few ghostly human presences just visible beyond.

It's immensely effective, for a stretch anyway, until the eye adjusts, or somebody flashlights their mobile. It's like a mouth of hell. Or rather – as surely everyone feels – the association is not with the old metaphysical hell, but with the recent historical hell. I mean the Holocaust, that ultimate nightmare vi-

sion which is now available at any moment. That's what this void of annihilation calls up.

Of course, it's never hard to call it up.

The Chapman Brothers may make jokes about it – or are they jokes about our piety towards it? – but that hardly modifies the terror of the 20th century, or dispels it. Almost any vision of hell, however abstract, will attract this association. The history is still so present.

That doesn't mean it's always wise or decent to make the association. Perhaps, on the contrary, we should resist it, for as long as we can. I mean, *How It Is* doesn't have to portend death camps. It could just announce a general pessimism, and be no less powerful. But with the Balka work that's just opened at **Modern Art Oxford**, it's another matter. This is Holocaust art quite overtly. The question is: but seriously?

There are great artworks concerning the Holocaust: Paul Celan's poem "Death Fugue", Primo Levi's memoir *If This Is a Man*, Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*. There are also some not such great works: D M Thomas's *The White Hotel*, several paintings by Anselm Kiefer. And I think the general moral is that nobody is

obliged. The Holocaust may not be beyond expression. Levi, if nobody else, has overcome that superstition. But it doesn't demand expression from anyone. And it certainly doesn't suspend artistic criteria.

The danger is that the Holocaust has become – what William Empson called death itself – "the trigger of the literary man's biggest gun". It's too much of a temptation. It is one thing to use art to bring us the bad news once more. It is another thing to use the famous horror as a resource to fuel, to pump up, the art. And then it is another thing again to mix the horror of the camps with a general vision of life-horror.

Let's look at the work in Oxford. It's almost all video installation, short looped films, shown at different angles. *Carrousel* is a four-screen projection, onto the four walls of the medium-sized gallery. Everything spins. Huts, bare trees, snowy ground, are rushing through the frame, over and over. It's the same scene that passes on each screen, but synchronised to create a sense of circulation – the scene is going round you, or you're going round in it. It goes on unstoppingly, without focus or grasp. It's dizzy-making, hysterical.

And you guess, if you haven't read already somewhere, that these huts



once belonged to a Nazi extermination camp, now abandoned but not destroyed. Why? Why not some more innocent setting? Because these are huts, and the combination of huts and art invariably means death camps? Your guess is right. *Carousel* (ironic title) was filmed in the remains of Majdanek camp in Poland, one of the first camps to be liberated, and one of the best preserved. But not in this visualisation.

So what is this work showing us? That the experience of the camps eludes us utterly? That we're insufficiently mindful of their history? That we can only respond with a kind of raw excitement? Some Holocaust art takes an opposite tone, slow, funereal, melancholic. Is that better or worse?

Move to another, smaller room. Pure pain with no history is the subject here. Three videos, projected onto the floor: onto frames that turn out (reading again) to be beds of powdered salt. A nice idea, you might think – the light stinging? – except that you'd never know, just from looking. So you have three video loops called *Flagellare*, which show an area of floor, being whipped violently, over and over, with loud cracking impact noise.

It's another raw and hysterical piece. Its associations can be as general or as specific as you please. It has a tendency to loosen overall the meanings of the whole show, so you find that one kind of suffering bleeds easily into another. Sado-masochism. Depression. The Holocaust. Thoughts of the Holocaust.

The last and largest gallery is total confusion, and deliberate, though not the better for that. It's hard to describe it accurately, because what you need to convey are not the ingredients of the chaos – overlapping sounds and sights – but the chaos itself, and the fact that it is made up, all the same, of separate works.

There are two very large, boring projections, filmed in Auschwitz: one shows a wide uneventful pond, the other some deer feeding among fences. The boringness of these films is an irony, of

course, against the historic horror. (And the deer film is entitled *Bambi*!)

There are other pieces I don't begin to understand, such as a downwards projection showing the number "4", zooming in and out while going in and out of focus. It's called *IKnew It Had 4 in It*. I've looked it up in the catalogue so I learn that the reference is to the film *Shoah*. It would take a long time to copy it out, and if you don't have it in your mind already the work is meaningless. The problem is, the work depends entirely on the reference, while adding nothing to it.

And then there's a sound piece, or mostly a sound piece, completely cacophonous – voices, machine noises, electric guitar plus some momentary flickering lights high on the wall – titled *Sundays Kill More*, after Charles Bukowski's suicidal motto, "Sundays kill more men than bombs". But what is the connection between existential misery and race murder? Not much that I can see.

Balka is piling it up and piling it on, without making any of the necessary distinctions. It's because the work is so vague, or sometimes so obscure, that he can do this. Nothing exactly connects or disconnects. Nothing is exactly about anything. Everything is generally bad, and the more you mess it up – this seems to be the idea – the more powerfully bad it will feel. Not so. It's not how the Tate Modern installation works, which (whatever its further associations) has its specific, firmly calculated sensation, as you stand on the edge of its darkness: abrupt, vast, engulfing, non.

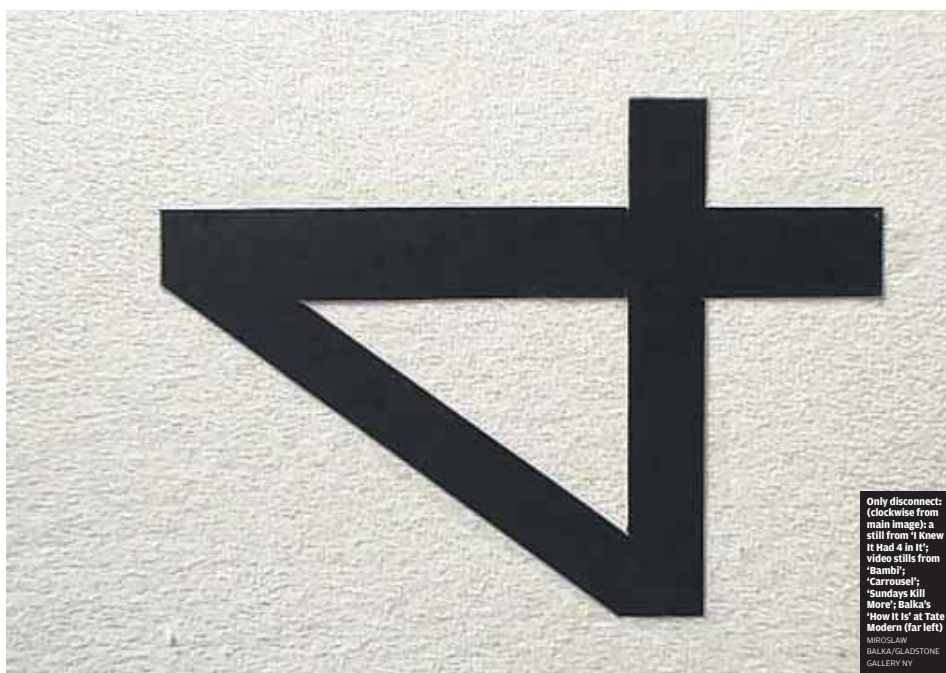
Mirosław Balka: Topography, Modern Art Oxford, Pembroke Street, until 7 March (Modernartoxford.org.uk; 01865 722 733). Free admission



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Only disconnect:
(clockwise from
main image): a
still from 'I Knew
It Had a Bit in It';
video stills from
'Bambi';
'Carrousel';
'Sundays Kill
More'; Balka's
'How it is' at Tate
Modern (far left)
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