

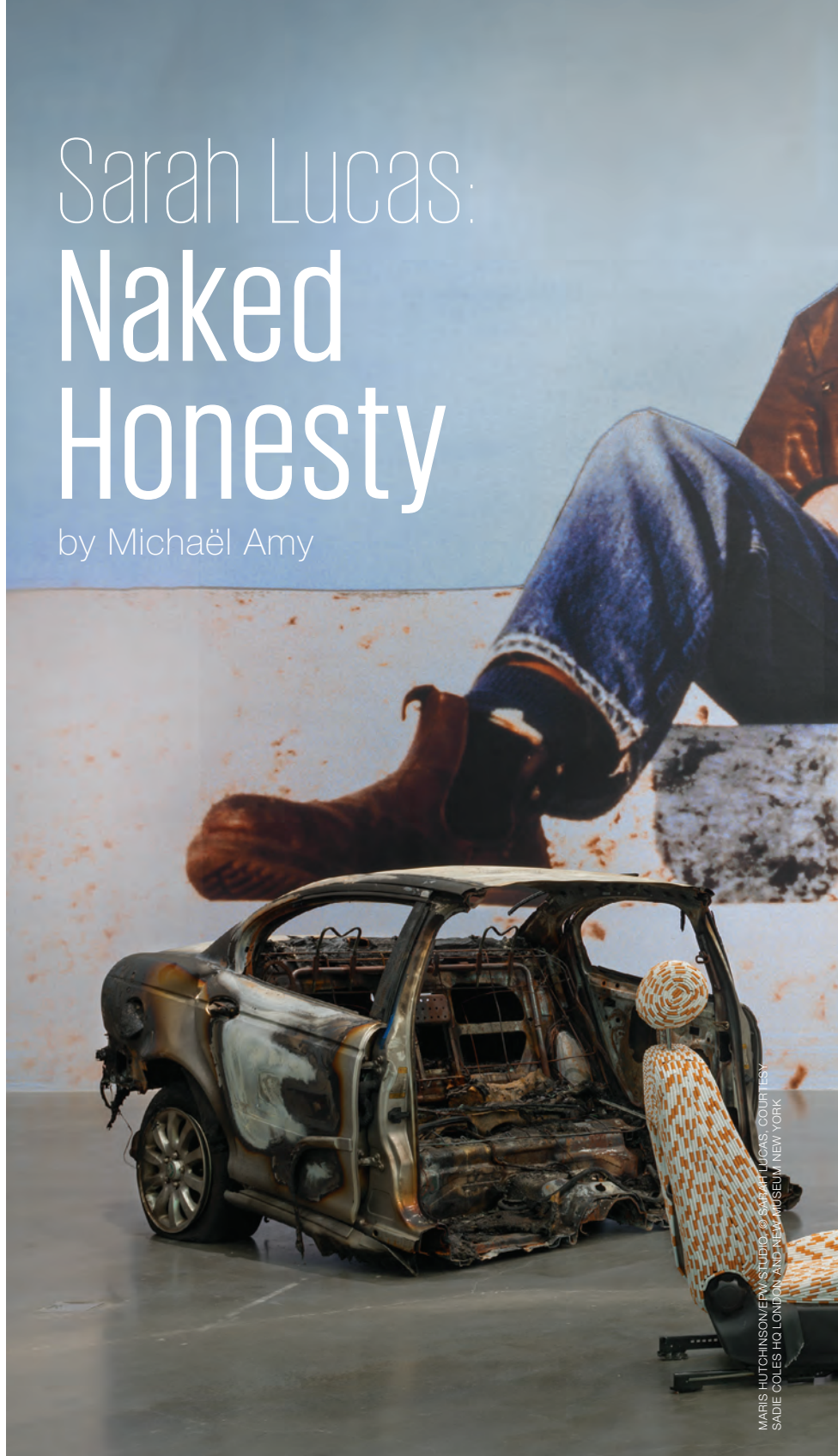
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**arah Lucas has a feeling** for materials that quite simply takes your breath away, a formidable command over sculptural form, a knack for striking compositions and juxtapositions, an abiding interest in charged and often politically incorrect content, and a deliciously wicked sense of humor. One might ask, “What is there not to like?” But Lucas has her detractors, who insist that she has not done one original thing over the course of her 30-year career.

Anyone with a modicum of grounding in Modernist and avant-garde practice can find sources or parallels

## Sarah Lucas: Naked Honesty

by Michaël Amy

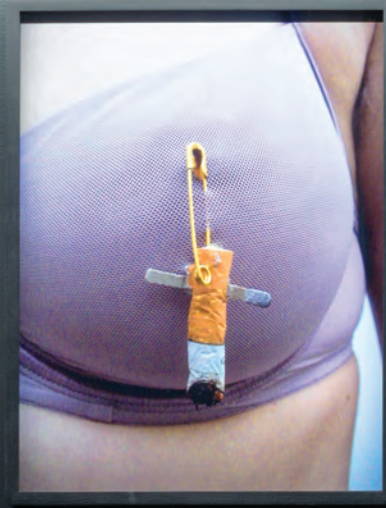


MARIS HUTCHINSON/NEW STUDIO. © SARAH LUCAS. COURTESY SADIÉ COLES HQ LONDON AND NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK



Installation view of "Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel," New Museum, New York, 2018.

“ Furniture cannot fail to evoke the body. Our bodies lie in beds, sit on chairs and couches, and are placed in front of tables. In fact, we spend most of our lives interacting with furniture. ”





Installation view  
of "Sarah Lucas:  
Au Naturel,"  
New Museum,  
New York, 2018.

for Lucas's interventions. She has looked around—what ambitious artist has not?—and borrows or takes what she can use. What is important is what she does with her sources, and why she does it. Lucas has built a coherent and highly idiosyncratic body of work with a specific look, tone, feel, and content, despite the range within her oeuvre. The contemporary art scene would be a much poorer place without her input.

Great bodies of work do not always strike us immediately as being so. Some work requires time, and repeated confrontations, to process, and that can be a sign of quality. Not everything by Lucas has worked for me at first or even second glance. I am thinking of her "GOD IS DAD" exhibition—with, as I now recognize, its intimations of an incestuous relationship—at Barbara Gladstone Gallery (2005), which included many works I now cherish. I am also thinking of her recent exhibition of *Muses* showcasing the lower halves of women cast in plaster and plunked on top of household appliances (dishwashers, washing machines), which were installed at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco among bronzes and marbles by Rodin, as well as Baroque paintings ("Good Muse," 2017). I wanted to love both of these exhibitions, but could not. The fault may have been mine, however; I might not have been ready for what Lucas had in store.

My initial conversion came in 2011, when I chanced upon Lucas's phenomenal sculptures exploiting the elasticity, tautness, transparency, sexiness, melancholy, and tawdriness of distressed nylon stockings. These works more than held their own amid the outstanding collection of modern and contemporary art at Tate Modern. Lucas has remained in my pantheon ever since. Her work, which confronts the abject head on, is both challenging and complex. It requires quite a bit of effort on our part to move beyond the striking or troubling surface appearances to figure out why her work is really worth looking at and thinking about.

First encounters matter. I remember my first sighting of a Lucas work in the infamous "Sensation" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. I enjoyed the physicality of her assemblage sculpture consisting of two fried eggs and a kebab placed on top of a wooden table. The sexual implications weren't apparent at first, but in the U.K., a woman's genitalia can be referred to, with extreme vulgarity, as a "kebab." Like most of the YBAs featured in "Sensation," Lucas understood the power of controversial imagery to generate publicity and sales.



**Something  
Changed Raymond,**  
2000.

Wardrobe, hanger,  
bulbs, rabbit  
in jar, and mirror,  
266 x 190 x 93 cm.

Two decades later, *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992) visited New York again in “Au Naturel,” Lucas’s retrospective at the New Museum; fittingly located on the Bowery, this was the perfect venue for Lucas’s imagery of beer, cigarettes, and sex in seedy-looking places (“Au Naturel” also traveled to the Hammer Museum.) It’s a terrific early work, both hilarious and outrageous, with the table turning into a female body, the eggs and the kebab displayed in an anatomically coherent relationship to one other and to the larger surface. The table legs become human limbs thrusting the torso up, parallel to the floor, proffering the vulva and flattened breasts, but we cannot be certain that this naked lunch is not coercive; Lucas’s work is about the power dynamics between women and men—in short, patriarchy. In its wake, it drags in other forms of abuse, including political, judicial, and economic.

Being four-legged, the table underscores our animal nature. With the torso arranged horizontally, the work also offers a particular twist on the reclining female nude of art history—tailored for the male gaze and presented to the beholder as ready to be taken. Then there is the kitchen tabletop fantasy, which entered popular culture through James M. Cain’s 1934 crime novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and its multiple screen adaptations. Lucas’s simple food and plain table suggest a working-class orbit, and the kebab, of Middle Eastern origin, may throw race into the mix—a potent subject, then as now, in London, where Lucas then lived.

The magisterial touch lies in having a photograph of the tabletop, with the kebab and fried eggs in place, arranged almost at a right angle to the leaf of the table and placed along its main axis, situated opposite the kebab and between the eggs and one of the shorter sides of the table. The vertical format of the photograph alludes to a face, with the two fried eggs now functioning as stunned eyes and the kebab as a distorted open mouth, seemingly gasping. An additional orifice for sexual gratification? Or would that be an overly graphic interpretation? Probably not, considering many of Lucas’s exhibition titles: “I SCREAM DADDIO” (2015), “SARAH LUCAS & JULIAN SIMMONS: TITTIPUSSIDAD” (2014); “SITUATION WHITE HOLE” (2012), “SITUATION MAKE LOVE” (2012), “SITUATION CLASSIC PERVERY” (2012), “Penetralia” (2010), “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (2000), “Self Portraits and More Sex” (2000), “The Old In Out” (1998), and “Bunny Gets Snookered” (1997).

***Two Fried Eggs  
and a Kebab,***  
1992.

Table, fried eggs, kebab,  
and photograph,  
151 x 89.5 x 102 cm.





The transposition of “tits” and pudenda into facial features brings Magritte’s painting *Le viol* (*The Rape*, 1934) to the table, reinforcing the reading of Lucas’s sculpture as hovering between still-life and female nude. This breakthrough work contains five features that will continue to play a key role in her oeuvre: photography, furniture as a metaphor for the body, ephemeral organic matter that requires attention during its exhibition, wry humor mixed with outrage, and more or less explicit sexual content.

Furniture cannot fail to evoke the body. Our bodies lie in beds, sit on chairs and couches, and are placed in front of tables. In fact, we spend most of our lives interacting with furniture. Lucas’s great leap was to imagine furniture as bodies, or to graft approximations of body parts onto furniture, thereby giving the latter the semblance of life.

*Au Naturel* (1994)—another work with a substantial serving of humor and crudeness—consists of a battered mattress bent in half by the angle where the floor meets the wall, so that almost half of it is upright. Two large oranges, placed on the right side of the horizontal section, support a cucumber rising at about an 80-degree angle. A metal bucket, facing away from the wall, lies on its side on the left. Two melons emerge from two slits in the upright section of the mattress, on the left. This is all it takes to evoke a woman, on the left, with the bucket simultaneously referencing vagina, womb, and abdomen, and a man, with his member preposterously raised for action. All of this amounts to a school boy’s prank, silly and in bad taste, but then, some of the greatest breakthroughs in avant-garde practice have their roots in such mischievous acts.

The physical interventions in *Au Naturel* are minimal, but the idea comes close to the sublime. Humor and pathos meet here, as do Eros and Tantalus. The French expression means “in the natural state”—i.e., uncooked or nude. Both explanations are true. The mattress—which appears as if seated with its back against the wall—has the flexibility of our bodies, and it evokes the cycle of life. We are born on mattresses, we have sex and produce our offspring on top of them, we spend much of our time sleeping on them (when lucky), and most of us in the West probably end up dying on them (again, when lucky). Lucas’s mattress, with its inevitably rotting produce, is a memento mori, a reminder of our inevitable demise.

***Au Naturel*,**  
1994.  
Mattress, water bucket,  
melons, oranges, and  
cucumber,  
84 x 168 x 145 cm.

“Rabbits copulate through much of the year, but this one drags in the subject of death yet again. Perhaps we have sex to prove to ourselves that we are still very much alive; perhaps we need to prove that state to our counterpart.”

The image of breasts (suggested by two lemons), popping through two slits in the cloth of an armless white T-shirt on a wire hanger, appears in *Sex Baby Bed Base* (2000). The hanger is suspended from the spring of an upright metal bed base. The bottom half of a plucked chicken hangs out of the bottom of the T-shirt, which identifies this figure as yet another “chick,” ready to “be laid,” or already discarded. Was this diminutive babe killed? Did she hang herself? In Lucas’s retrospective, this striking work was propped up against the back of *Something Changed Raymond* (2000), implying a single composition. The latter assemblage consists of a freestanding wooden wardrobe, its doors almost entirely open, with a wire hanger inside supporting three shining light bulbs, which reference—by way of their positioning—breasts and a vagina. On the right, still inside the wardrobe, another light bulb illuminates a rabbit suspended in fluid inside a jar. Rabbits copulate through much of the year, but this one drags in the subject of death yet again. Perhaps we have sex to prove to ourselves that we are still very much alive; perhaps we need to prove that state to our counterpart. The electrical wires running across the floor of the gallery and up into the wardrobe—in Lucas’s typical all-cards-on-the-table approach to producing art—make this work all the more gripping.

In Lucas’s work, sex is rarely about pleasure. It is the product of necessity, with intimations of life or death. It is also about sexism, misogyny, and violence. The male of the species, when present, is reduced to an erect cock (though it might also be limp; the title of Lucas’s first



solo show in 1992 was “Penis Nailed to a Board,” a memorable line gleaned from a British tabloid), and woman is presented as if she were conceived only to be possessed and violated—she is a *Bitch* (1995, an assemblage not featured at the New Museum). There is, however, no stern moralizing here. Instead, Lucas’s weapon of choice is a preternatural ability to generate striking images and convey troubling messages, coupled with compelling form and caustic irony as foils for outrage. This goes beyond feminist, post-feminist, or humanist outcry to enter the ranks of provocative artworks that etch themselves on the eye and in the mind. Lucas takes no prisoners; she does not pull her punches. Her devil-may-care attitude—in an age of political correctness, double standards, bottomless hypocrisy, religious fundamentalism, and growing squeamishness—is one of the most appealing aspects of her creative outpouring.

The works incorporating nylon stockings, whether attached to furniture or not, are among Lucas’s most indelible. *Bunny Gets Snookered #1* (1997) consists of a pair of tan tights stretched around the oval plastic back of a chair, with the extraordinarily attenuated, kapok-filled leggings jutting forward diagonally while just touching the edges of the chair’s pink seat. A second pair of empty leggings stretches across the top of the chair back, falling down either side to frame it, while a third pair, stuffed with kapok, defines two upper arms rising vertically in the place of a head, with the forearms drooping helplessly like two limp pricks. This headless body, alien and monstrous, is undeniably that of a woman, with legs spread apart and arms raised and bent at the elbow.

Picasso’s *Large Nude in a Red Armchair* (1929) and his bronze *Reclining Bather* (1931, cast by 1943), as well as the erotic sculpture of Hans Bellmer (in which the female body is twisted and unfailingly victimized), Hugh Hefner’s cheery, long-limbed, and busty Playboy Bunnies (with their floppy ears), the soft sexual sculptures of Dorothea Tanning (*Nue Couchée*, 1969–70) and Louise Bourgeois, and the elongated hares of Barry Flanagan all feed into Lucas’s remarkable, pliable *Bunny* works. Significantly, Bellmer shot striking photographs of his *poupées* (dolls), and Lucas did the same with some of the *Bunny* sculptures—as if she were recording a crime scene.

In the *NUDs* (2009–ongoing), which consist of fluff-filled tights held coiled by invisible wires, the limbs of the earlier Bunnies are given more than one torsion, so that



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FROM LEFT:  
**Bunny Gets  
Snookered #1,**  
1997.

Tan tights, plastic  
and chrome chair,  
clamp, kapok,  
and wire,  
106.05 x 81.92 x  
81.28 cm.

**Father Time  
(detail),**  
2011.

Tights, fluff, wire,  
and pink foam  
blocks,  
installation view.





they evoke lovers or interlaced wrestlers, all arms and legs and bulging flesh, or intestines—or a pile of their excreted contents. Lucas is not afraid of potty humor: witness the foul-looking toilet bowl of *Inferno* (2000) and its collapsing cousins cast in tinted resin (*Floppy Toilet Twa* and *Floppy Toilet Duhr*, both 2017), raised on top of small refrigerators, which connect to a long history of scatological art and expression while reminding us that, regardless of class or gender, we all eat and excrete, and the end product unfailingly smells bad.

The relatively recent *Muses* (2015) feature the lower halves of naked women cast from life in plaster, then cleanly cut off above or below the navel. These truncated figures bend across a table, kneel over a toilet bowl, raise one knee on top of a stool, sit on a desk with legs splayed, lie on top of a freezer, or sit with legs crossed along the edge of a chair. Anonymous and objectified, they follow orders—the artist’s at the very least. A cigarette—a diminutive phallic symbol, but also an image of death—emerges from the anuses of five of these women, from the vagina of a sixth, and is inserted in the navel of a seventh. The seams in the casts, resembling scar tissue, circumvent their bodies—Lucas embraces the punk aesthetic that if it’s good enough, it’s good, and that one should use whatever medium one

FROM ABOVE:  
*Inferno*,  
2000.  
Toilet, bulb,  
cigar, and walnuts,  
42 x 52 x 38 cm.

*Margot*,  
2015.  
Plaster, cigarette,  
and freezer,  
116 x 202 x 87 cm.

“There is, however, no stern moralizing here. Instead, Lucas’s weapon of choice is a preternatural ability to generate striking images and convey troubling messages, coupled with compelling form and caustic irony as foils for outrage.”

can to get the message across. The cigarette transforms the buttocks into a distant approximation of a face, and the anuses, vagina, and navel into mouths. These sculptures, which express domesticity, ennui, and our subjugation to things, can trace their lineage back to the Renaissance fascination with broken fragments of classical sculptures in terms of imagery and to George Segal’s plaster casts of men and women coupled with actual objects in terms of technique.

Lucas understands perfectly how her work takes on new meaning in different contexts, from Sir John Soane’s Museum (London, 2016) and the Secession (Vienna, 2013) to the Museum of Cycladic Art (Athens, 2010) and the Freud Museum (London, 2000). In the relatively recent New Museum building, her images and ideas were forced to interact among themselves across a span of 30 years, and solid curating assured that they did so in visually compelling and thought-provoking ways.

Lucas’s work transcends the moment of its making; her early sculptures and installations remain relevant right now, in our time of immediate gratification, growing anti-intellectualism, rising intolerance, widening inequality, marginalization, authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, and right-wing extremism. Challenging, disturbing to the eye and mind, provocative and sometimes downright offensive, these works tease, taunt, and demand our attention. It takes balls to look at their naked honesty and all it reveals. ■

*Sarah Lucas’s forthcoming solo exhibition will open at Sadie Coles HQ, Kingly Street, London, in March 2020.*

