



Photographs courtesy of Marcus Leith

Inside an icon

Since opening in a blaze of publicity, Tate Modern has welcomed over 3 million visitors. Much of the coverage to date has focused on the building itself and the art contained within it, so we asked **Eve Peasnell** of *The Times* to deliver her own verdict on what experience Tate Modern actually offered her as a young visitor.

Tate Modern has received sensational publicity. It's been a subject of conversation at dinner parties and in trendy Hoxton bars, and has been a welcome icebreaker on several occasions. People who don't normally go to art galleries have travelled to see it.

This 'appeal' was sufficient to make me eager about my first visit, but I went with slight trepidation. Despite having studied a subject at University that demanded numerous trips to galleries, I have never been a fan. I am haunted by childhood memories of being hauled past De Koonings and Rembrandts dismayed, tired, headachy and bewildered by an attraction that, for me, held no joy. Galleries, as an adult, if more interesting, are still short on fun. There is, or has been, a seriousness surrounding art which demands a puritanical silence in its presence, the same silence one finds in libraries and cathedrals. I laughed at a Pollock drawing (it was funny) in a recent retrospective and was condemned by shocked and irritated looks from my fellow viewers. Laughter – pleasure, in fact – is not the done thing in a conventional art gallery.

Added to this, I had been looking forward to walking across the Millennium Bridge. As with so many millennium projects, it was tainted with disaster, and forced to close immediately after opening. Would Tate Modern also be disappointingly ill-conceived, comic in the wrong way, its ambitions undermined by bad planning?

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Entering from the runway, I was immediately overwhelmed by the enormity of the old power station. *That* night-time photograph of Tate Modern looming illuminated on the Thames (endlessly reproduced in the media, and already reaching a kind of iconic status) gives no sense of the building's true scale or any indication of the kind of space one might expect inside. Discovering on entry that this two-dimensional image conceals a colossal atrium with Bourgeois' metal spider crouched menacingly in the middle is as disconcerting as it is awesome.

On a single visit it is impossible to take in the extensive circuit of rooms. After numerous visits, I am still amazed that the galleries only occupy two floors, the temporary exhibition one floor. In fact, the layout is dramatically simple. There are seven floors, three of which are devoted to exhibition space. The shop on the first floor is immediately accessible, so if you are looking for an art book, this is the place to come, and thanks to its situation you don't have to trawl through the gallery to get to it. The glass top-knot is a restaurant seating approximately 80. (Queues are a problem, although I was assured that a fifteen-minute wait is average.) Eating gourmet food at a reasonable price surrounded by the London skyline sounds so chic it's almost inconceivable that it's in a museum. I find myself rapidly rethinking the art gallery as a frumpy childhood nightmare with overpriced inedibles and no natural light.

There is a majestic quality to this giant edifice, but it is the intelligent reconciliation of space and content which makes this museum so successful. Its size is directly related to the art it aims to house. Louise Bourgeois' installations (*I do, I undo, I redo* and *Maman*) rightly deserve the space they occupy. You

can see them from below, above, walk on them or sit beneath them. On one visit a family with small children was spread out in the spider-canopy indulging in some doodling of their own. People mill in and out of the eight metal legs looking up and around. From the Turbine Hall, the upper levels are demarcated by luminous green lozenges, sort of viewing pods. Immediately I wanted to see where I was from above, and took the escalator to the third floor. Looking down, giant *Maman* functions as a sort of sophisticated signpost. The spider appears grossly oversized when you're underneath, from above she appears vertiginously small. There is a thrill in apprehending the dimensions of this space. The combination of the dramatically large Turbine Hall and the galleries, which are relatively domestic in size, creates an exciting contrast echoing the multiplicity of the collection itself.

The intimacy of the galleries allows the artworks to assert themselves. The permanent collection is organised thematically, the categories into which it is divided being derived from the seventeenth century salon 'genres'. The appropriation of these groupings (Landscape, Matter, Environment; Still Life, Object, Real Life; History, Memory, Society; and Nude, Action, Body) reveals an ambition to subvert conventional displays of art and create 'climatic zones' where a dialectic emerges between works. Rather than being wheeled passively along the 'conveyor belt of history', you are forced to engage with familiar paintings or objects brought out of context. Donald Judd sits happily next to Cézanne and then again amongst his fellow Minimalists. His work, like that of many others, can be understood in various contexts, and it is admirable that Tate Modern has made this apparent.

The experience of the art is contrived, and rightly so. To be made aware of choices in presentation is a good thing. So often these choices are hidden beneath the veil of familiarity: a chronological display is no less contrived. But the arrangement of the galleries means that a profitable dialectic is thrown up between works separated by time but not necessarily by the concerns with which the artists have sought to engage. A particularly poignant example is Sam Taylor-Wood's video installation *Brontosaurus*, occupying a chamber of its own but flanked by rooms hung with nudes by the likes of Stanley Spencer and Lucien Freud. Walking into this first room of paintings one is struck by the distinct vision of each artist faced with a similar subject. Some are nudes for nudes' (or painting's) sake; some are intimate portraits utilising nakedness. Whilst absorbed, one is also seduced by the music emanating from an antechamber. *Adagio for Strings* lures one into a darkened room with Taylor-Wood's projection of a man dancing in slow motion for a fluffy dinosaur toy. A humorous piece, this sheds a quirky light on the paintings one has just seen, demanding that we think about the body, its representation, what it can be made to do and the separate histories on which its representation is contingent. Modern art looks surprisingly old next to Taylor-Wood's rapturous projection, and rightly so. These art works are not out of time but situated in time, to be understood in their proximity to and distance from one another.

One is urged through the rooms in an almost circular motion, returning each time to the central cavity. This works well when the gallery is empty. When full, there is a frustrating crush (I gave up one Sunday afternoon when I couldn't get through the first room of Nude, Action, Body). So choosing the right time to go made all the difference. Weekends are, naturally, the busiest times, but early morning and evening are less popular. The gallery is open until 10pm on Friday and Saturday, so you can go for a peaceful tour before a night out on the town. This plan is facilitated by Tate Modern's proximity to central London. It is serviced by several Tube stations within walking distance, notably Southwark, a worthy destination in itself whose ambitious architecture whets the aesthetic appetite.

In the introduction to the exhibition currently showing on the fourth floor (*Between Cinema and a Hard Place*), Frances Morris describes the experience of certain works: 'We become participants in unfolding dramas, rather than passive observers.' All areas of this expansive and exciting gallery afford one



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the pleasure of engagement rather than passivity. This holds for the exhibits as well as the Tate Modern's renovation and transformation of an old industrial space, its part in a regeneration of the area in which it is situated (in which the Millennium Bridge, despite its current state of repose, will participate in time), the inexpensive and appealing café, restaurant and espresso shop, its provision of portable seats that allow you to sit comfortably in front of exhibits, and the reading rooms, which offer a textual context for the work on show.

Tate Modern is a place you can go once, for a day, for an hour, every day or once a month. You can take your grandparents or toddlers and each will find something that moves them, be that the building, a specific artwork or the experience itself. Tate Modern with its numerous events and lectures, screenings (the Turbine Hall doubles as a cinema), exhibitions and its sophisticated collection is an inexhaustible resource of entertainment.

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