

# There's many a pig wears cufflinks

Cian O'Neill visits the Gauguin exhibition at London's Tate Modern

Paul Gauguin may have been a cad, but in colonising the iconography of 'the savage' he played a useful role in the opening out of painting from the confined and bourgeois visual language of the Academy to a more daring art of fresh ideas and unknown worlds that heralded the dawning of another century of human savagery: this raw technocratic. For Gauguin's 'savage' read the tribes of the South Pacific, as also the traditional peasant communities of Brittany that he and others looked and went to for their less sophisticated and so adulterated visual culture. Without him, Picasso might conceivably have not gone to the Ethnographic Museum of the Paris Trocadero that in conjunction with the Cubist breakthrough of George Braques inspired him to create 'Les Femmes d'Alger' (1907). Without him, ex-law student Paul Cézanne might have remained the most famous artistic escaper from the professions amongst the significant French artists of the era, though the two differed hugely. Paul Cézanne was left a great sum of money by his banker father, whereas once Gauguin the stockbroker and Sunday painter gave up the security of the Consumer to try out as a Maker he fairly quickly found himself in trouble that he never really left – be it because he was not providing his effectively abandoned wife Mette with the means by which she might feed his five children, because he insisted on treating every person as a mere witness or midwife to his self-professed genius, or because he managed to wear out even the patience of the gentle people of Tahiti with his lechery. If there is a moral lesson to his life and work, it is that in modernity the savage is not only marked by his loincloth, he may also speak impeccable French.

This show is subtitled 'Maker of myth' and the rooms are subcategorised, so one enters first 'Identity and self-mythology', which provides the personal narrative with some self-portraits – the aspiring painter, bold of eye (1875); the more cir-



Self portrait

cumspect, struggling artist in his garret (1885); the increasingly confident, assured artist (1888-9); the piratical voyager returned to that same garret, showing off a 'Tiki' statuette depicting a Tahitian guardian spirit of the dead known as *Manao Tupapau* that featured in many of his contemporaneous works (1893-4). In this fourth study the face is striking but the garret positively electrified – colour has erupted in the gloom like an angelus bell over an empty town of winter, the sensibility changed, as it is in the last self-portrait here shown, dated 1903, which shows a man altogether dissipated.

It was not domestic bliss which wore him down. The room entitled, 'Making the familiar strange', shows in some way the great fissure he sunk in his life when he rejected propriety and security for art. Two of his children, Clovis and Aline, are shown in various in/somnambulist scenes about which looms a darkness. Perhaps Gauguin knew that he could not stay and protect them, and the puppet of Punch at the head of his son's bed ('The little one is dreaming, study', 1891) is really the painter's ambition, mocking the part of the man that cared more for his family than his legend, but who can say. This is one of the few of his images to refer to the canon, in this case Goya's 'The sleep of reason breeds monsters' (1799), and it makes one wish that it were not so singular, i.e. that the stockbroker had taken some proper weekend courses and knew the rules of visual logic fully before he set out to devise his own.



'Clovis asleep'

Some cartoons here, such as that showing the great Roderic O'Connor (the first internationalist Irish artist, well before Joyce), are adolescent. The 'Tahitian head studies' [1894] are also back-of-exercise-book, study-hall idlings which make one wonder why the curators have set aside a whole room for such weak draughtsmanship. Poor 'Clovis asleep' [1884], for her part, doesn't look real enough to ever wake up.

Paul pushed on though, unperturbed by any doubt in his abilities, and in works such as that of the 'Two children' [1889] of his painter friend and supporter Emile de Schuffenecker, one finds very clear modelling, vibrant colour and strong composition (including a strong arcing diagonal from top right to the bottom left of the picture, which device recurred elsewhere). Fine painting, in sum, yet painting alone could not quiet his ambition and in 'Head with horns' [1895-7], wood with traces of polychromy, one finds a distinctly unscary portrait bust of the artist as daemon that occupies the same bland territory as the ceramic 'Self-portrait jug in the form of a severed head' [1889], suggesting that what made Gauguin so difficult was a neurosis about being middle class. You see, despite putting exotic photographs of negresses on show in his home to test how starched his visitors' collars were he knew too much about Marsala to be truly of-the-earth, so in both society and his work he often seemed to be posturing, and not paying sufficient regard to the fundamentals, resulting in serial disappointments like 'The ham' [1889], wherein the arresting contrast of a mustard yellow background and a dull, pinkish subject is undone because the scene has not been fit to the frame, like several other still lifes here included. With others, what could have been a damn fine painting is left half-done. 'Breton girls dancing, Pont-Aven' [1888], to name but one of very many candidates, has a delicately Millet-esque, roscate sky, dynamic, animated figures, fine corn blue houses – and a sketchy dog sniffing around on the ground, probably trying to find out where the underpainting went.

Rare it is to find an artist so popular, yet so inconsistent. His 'Vollard suite' does not simply pale in comparison with Picasso's own traumatic commission for the eponymous art dealer, it just looks ugly. His woodprints, for all their innovation in using individual blocks of wood on very fine Japanese, or tissue paper, were often visually awkward. 'Haystacks in Brittany' [1890] has the flattest cows this writer has seen since



'Breton girls dancing, Pont-Aven'



'Aha oe fei'

he last imagined slicing Bresaola in an Italian deli, and 'Breton shepherdesses' [1889] shows marked uncertainty about the business of depicting mass in two dimensions. Sometimes the mysteriousness seems forced, be it through the inclusion of idols whose tulous significance the artist hardly understood ('Oviri', 1892), visual non-sequiturs that do not convince [like the dog emerging nonplussed from the shoulder of an ivory-white, supine woman, in 'The loss of virginity' [1890-1], or the random, inapposite deployment of Tahitian phrases for titles, e.g. 'Ihina tefatou' [1893], meaning 'the moon and the earth', which is a portrait of a man and a woman amongst some dubious foliage, neither of whom one would pick out of a line-up for an earth, or a moon. In seemingly playing along with Gauguin's self-mythologising whilst laying bare the conceit at work, the curators are playing an interesting game with his reputation that makes experiencing the show oddly reflexive. The persisting controversy about the artist having taken advantage of the innocent and amenable girl natives in and around Tahiti is largely passed over, so at least the large crowds of visitors won't leave foaming at the mouth, thanks also to a handful of genuinely beautifully structured, painted and coloured works, such as 'Aha oe fei' / 'What! Are you jealous?' [1892] and 'Two Tahitian women' [1899], that make one remember how the enormous value of a genuinely good Gauguin (up to tens of millions) makes it difficult for galleries to secure really worthwhile exhibition loans, leaving the seesaw in this instance swung down on the side of quantity of material, as opposed to quality.

Working to a theme as opposed to a timeline, this exhibition befits the work of the artist, being as it is sporadic and of inconsistent discretion, though some appeal. Whether it makes any greater myth of the work or the entwined myth of the uxorious Frenchman rutting his way through Polynesia is less certain, for one doesn't leave these eleven full to bursting rooms any more sure whether or not this man was a great artist. For all its occasionally deeply lovely colour and assured modelling of flesh, the work is very often badly composed, under conceived and unfinished and while he did get a fair deal done, but a share of it was good through and through. It may be then that Gauguin's one complete creative achievement was that of his fame, in which wise he was truly, if not entirely reliably, a very artsy brute of a man indeed.