Known Unknowns review: Paintings by Female Artists form the Heart of this Impressive Saatchi Show

Reviewed by MATTHEW COLLINGS

The premise of Known Unknowns is that the 17 featured artists are obscure to most people but in the different milieus in which they work they are respected and influential.

The success of the proposal is that it frees you from worrying where everyone stands in today’s pecking order of great artists. You’ve been told it isn’t anywhere yet. The implication is that maybe it will be somewhere, soon, but in the meantime status does not matter and you can engage at a different level, maybe more directly.

Most of the artists attended London art schools at some point, and they are ranged in age between thirtysomething and early middle age. The work of three painters constitutes the heart of the show. Tamuna Sirbiladze, born in Georgia in 1971; Mona Osman, born in Hungary in 1992, and Stefanie Heinze, born in Berlin in 1987, all work with imagery that can seem both meaningful and meaningless. There is a balance between this ambiguity and a sensuous indulgent play with materials for the sake of play.

Sirbiladze, who died of cancer two years ago aged 45, painted her pictures quickly but with clear visual intent. The imagery comes in and out of focus and consists of stretched female bodies, as well as every kind of spurting effluvia. There are also bright flowers and scrawled words. The colours are not much more than contrasts against each other and
against the sheer white ground. It doesn’t seem to matter otherwise what pot she stuck the brush in. The paintings are powerful in their play-off between bright lightness and a mood of disgust. An approach to materials that causes thin washes of paint to seem like stains also carries a deliberate association with bodily fluids. The theme seems to be occlusion, personal and perhaps societal, a divided self and a divided society.

In Heinze’s paintings of fragmented objects, colour is inflected in many ways, giving a sense of volume as a particular hue is reiterated in different tones.

Stefanie Heinze, Ain't St. Nobody, 2014

You see bits of very ordinary drawing but on a large scale, where an elephant’s trunk and tusk, or a very large human finger, might be recognised. The imagery as such is less interesting than the way it is done. There will be a bright line that comes and goes,
surrounding and melting-into a dark shape, and the flickering brightness gives the whole painting a pulse. You don’t look at the painting and immediately get it, instead it keeps on revealing itself.

Osman maintains a balance between taking you through a painting with little pattern notes she keeps establishing, so you are in one area and then in another, in a continuous flow, and she manages to synchronise everything so you can believe it really is a human situation you’re looking at, albeit a dreamy one: a vision of floating eyes and bearded demons.

It doesn’t always work. An imposed severe horizon line in Under the Rug (2015) undoes the swirling complexity of the space, its ambiguity of things coming and going. But a standing-up rectangle in Oppressed Oppressors (2017) is a door to the painting. Free curving lines break it up and it seems one with everything else.

Intermittent excitement in the rest of the show keeps the energy going. A spectacular video by Saskia Olde Wolbers is about different types of disorientation: visual, literary and bodily. Computer graphics run on a loop for six minutes with an accompanying story read by a male actor. The fictional narrator could be a mother giving birth or a careless surgeon performing an operation who suddenly remembers he’s got a phone call to make. On screen, the visuals go back and forth between blobs and membranes and an aerial view of a bed in a bleak cell. Word and image never totally either connect or drift apart. The work adds little to the now venerable tradition of video art and yet is satisfying and seems giddily right, because everything has been thoughtfully and exactly followed up in every detail, and if the theme is madness nothing is overdone or arbitrary.
Alida Cervantes, a painter from Tijuana, Mexico, slaps together fairly large scenes of doll-like figures. Done on wood and in the style of popular signs, they make a brutish impact. But they can cause you to stop and stare carefully. Not just at insanely violent sexual imagery but also the surfaces that the imagery rides on.

Cervantes’s loose dragged marks, the spatters and swirls, and the sometimes clever and knowing visual references to art history — Gypsies in Goya and fancy brocades and laces in Velázquez — are summoned up by textures created with confidently stabbed dots and blips of thick paint. These go with narratives of lust, murder, bloody castration and mind boggling child abuse. Cervantes could be passed over for being too sick, but also, despite some sophistication, overall too fast and direct.

It’s the three women painters already mentioned who ground the show. Although each has a quite different mood — Sirbiladze is by far the most serious — all are subtle. There is a feeling of being able to come back to each painting and find fresh content. So these painters are probably the best examples of the show’s premise, if you’re thinking about appreciating art just for what it is, without much background contextual information.

Anyone impressed by paintings without necessarily caring about the big ideas, the “isms” and the arguments about past and present that talking about art, especially painting, often involves, might happily spend hours in just these three Saatchi spaces alone.

Known Unknowns is at the Saatchi Gallery, SW3 (saatchigallery.com) until June 24