

IN SICKNESS AND IN WEALTH

AMANDA SEBESTYEN
on art, illness and survival

Although **Egon Schiele** is seen as an adolescent prodigy, there's a definite progression in his drawings over a few short years of World War I, to something so distinct and beautifully weird that you realise how much we have missed by his early death. He was killed at 28 in the great flu epidemic which carried off more dead than all the battlefields combined. Many of his contemporaries led equally short and turbulent lives, none of which you can learn about from the Royal Academy's exhibition. (By omitting all information from the walls and printing no cheap gallery guide, the RA's profiteering badly misfires; instead of forking out of £16 for a catalogue most visitors just got turned off.)



'Abiku' by Rotimi Fani-Kayode. In West Africa an Abiku name is given when parents fear their child will die young. The Abiku name Rotimi means 'stay with me'.

When **Rotimi Fani-Kayode** died a year ago at the age of 34, he was already a legend among Black artists in Britain, and beginning to be known more widely. His photographs were so dazzling that you could call him a prodigy too.

Rotimi wrote with Wildean wit of his progress, from Nigerian prince to Brixton squatter, and in his pictures the masked tribal god meets the modern gay with bonds and rubber. A comparison with Robert Mapplethorpe shows a global distance from New York salon fetishism; these are

journeys into healing and purification through sex, food, smell and all the lusciously coloured senses of life. I only met him once but will not forget his rare technical perfectionism and gentle personality.

Claire Collison's photo-collages are 'dedicated to any woman who thought she was invincible'. Self-taught, she evolved an impeccable hard-edged 1940's black-and-white technique for feminist 'Domestic Nightmares': self-portraits haloed with forks, teacups and tampons or rocketing towards a galaxy of suspended milk bottles. All the dozens of tiny components, plus herself, had to be caught in one shot. It was during the shooting of the milk bottle saga—There were three shows in one Women's Photography Fort-night, and you had to go for it while you were flavour of the month—that Collison collapsed.

She now has ME. She has had to delegate her former start-to-finish control over production, and has ended up with a unique style of life-sized colour photocopying. Dense patterns remain (the artist's flat is a rococo riot with shells round the bath and a plastic flower-bower toilet), but now she photographs each object and sticks it to the background before putting herself inside. Then the picture goes to a photocopier who can blow it up onto nine sheets of A4 paper. Nothing comes out exactly as expected, and her own image in these pictures has changed too, from a rather glamorous satire to a vulnerable naked person curled among peeled potatoes or reaching out to help a second self get well.

Donald Rodney, a founder of the Black Art movement in the early 80s, made news last autumn with his installation inside the ramparts of Plymouth Battery. In a dark gun emplacement Rodney lit a medical pump system, coursing blood around the coat-of-arms of Plymouth buccaneer and slave-trader Sir John Hawkins. The City Council insisted on fake blood. The artist had offered his own.

Since early childhood Rodney has had sickle-cell anaemia, an illness confined to Afro-Caribbean people. At his physically handicapped school he saw Kirk Douglas in 'Lust for Life' as Van Gogh and Charlton Heston in 'The Agony and the Ecstasy' as Michelangelo: 'It was a totally distorted view of an artist's life transcending suffering, but at last I felt there was something I could do. In those days special schools didn't teach you any O Levels or CSEs, just how to handle your allowance'. He worked through the exams later, with interruptions in hospital.

In his second year at art college his joints deteriorated overnight. 'Suddenly I couldn't walk. They've got photos of me in medical textbooks.' He could no longer raise his arms above shoulder level without pain, but still loved pictures on a heroic scale. Thus evolved the huge blue-black silhouettes cut from x-ray slides, which distinguish his work at a glance.

'I needed to have an art form that would not only be personal to me but would also have a certain poignancy for the times we were living in'—times when British and American governments were talking almost of surgical strikes on the black underclass. 'Whenever poor communities gather together—Blacks, Jews—they're seen as a disease on the body politic.'

'All the stereotypes of the black male came out—£25 million was spent on Brixton sports centre, not on a college or employment.' Rodney's coming show, 'Cataract' (the barrier that descends over the human eye) deals with this stereotype. It will be the artist's last exhibition for some time. He is going into art administration, for economic and political reasons. At 29 and a well-known name, he is still living on the dole and has to fund all his own exhibitions.

He's not alone among Britain's Black artists. Sonia Boyce, with pictures in the Tate and the Hayward, has at times been reduced to cleaning floors at Pizza Hut. Is this to be our fate?' asks Donald Rodney: 'The worthy artists at the top of everyone's list for school residencies not art school lectures, known for our sociological interest not the quality of our work?'

'Now curating seems exciting: I could show, and record for history, not only Black but women artists and all who deal with subject matter excluded by the New Modernity'.

EGON SCHIELE AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES are at the Royal Academy until 17 February.

ROTIMI FANI-KAYODE's retrospective was at 198 Railton Road, Brixton and his work in collaboration with Alex Hirst is in 'Ecstatic Antibodies', Battersea Arts Centre 24 Jan - 28 Feb. **CLAIRE COLLISON'S** photographs (with others including Melanie Friend) are in 'Silent Health', Leeds Polytechnic gallery 4-28 March; for future venues ring 081 980 6256. **DONALD RODNEY'S** 'Cataract' is at Camerawork, 121 Bethnal Green Road, London E2, 13 February - 6 March.