

Between The Human And The Animal: Gee Vaucher At Firstsite

Rebecca Binns reviews Gee Vaucher's exhibition, Introspective, at Firstsite, Colchester



Rebecca Binns
Published 11:00am 15 January 2017

Gee Vaucher's reputation as part of anarcho-punk band and collective Crass (1977-84) has preceded her renown as an independent artist in the past. This major exhibition, currently on show at Firstsite, Colchester, succeeds in bringing her far wider body of work to the gallery-going public. Vaucher's work for Crass appears as just one of several powerful, engaging and interrelated bodies of work, in media including illustration, collage, painting and installation, which she has produced, largely as a solo artist, over the last five decades.

Serendipitously Vaucher's profile was raised just two days before the opening of her show through the inclusion of her image, *Oh America* (originally the cover for the Tackhead LP, *Friendly as a Hand Grenade*, 1989), on the front cover of *The Daily Mirror* to illustrate despair in the wake of Donald Trump's US presidential election victory. The newspaper was alerted to the image from its widespread use as a visual meme on social media profiles following the news.

Vaucher's work being influential without its audience necessarily having knowledge of its creator is nothing new. Crass subsumed their identities as individuals into a largely anonymous collective, which put into practice the anarchist principles they promoted. Nevertheless, her iconic designs critiquing political power, corruption and war – as well as Thatcherism and its harsh impact on society – came to define the oppositional and politicised punk aesthetic of the 1980s.

Seeing the original paintings and collages she produced for Crass and her self-produced publication, *International Anthem* (1977-) is one major highlight of the show. The small, gouache paintings show incredible deftness in their brushwork and the collages are meticulously constructed. Having these works here also reveals the process of their original construction, after which they were reproduced as record sleeves, inserts and ephemera or fanzine illustrations respectively.

Don't miss The Quietus Digest

Start each weekend with our free digest of the very best music and cultural criticism.

- ✓ tQ best bits in your inbox
- ✓ Free every Friday
- ✓ No spam just great writing
- ✓ Support cultural criticism

SIGN UP

You can unsubscribe any time. [Privacy Policy](#)

The exhibition also showcases her early, pre-Crass illustrations, which she produced for major magazines, including the *New York Times*, *New York* magazine, *Ebony* and *High Times*, while living and working in New York (1977-79). It is here that we can see the nascent development of her satirical design language, which was extended through her work with Crass (1977-84) and *International Anthem* (1977-). Vaucher enjoyed the supportive artistic environment that grew out of the economic downturn and leftwards political orientation of 1970s New York. In particular she cites the open relationships she was able to foster with arts editors and cheap living costs. Her illustrations comment on contemporary issues: family breakdown and problems or the excesses of a rock 'n' roll lifestyle. She also spoofs societal aspiration and idealised representations of domesticity in the media as-well as commenting on political news.



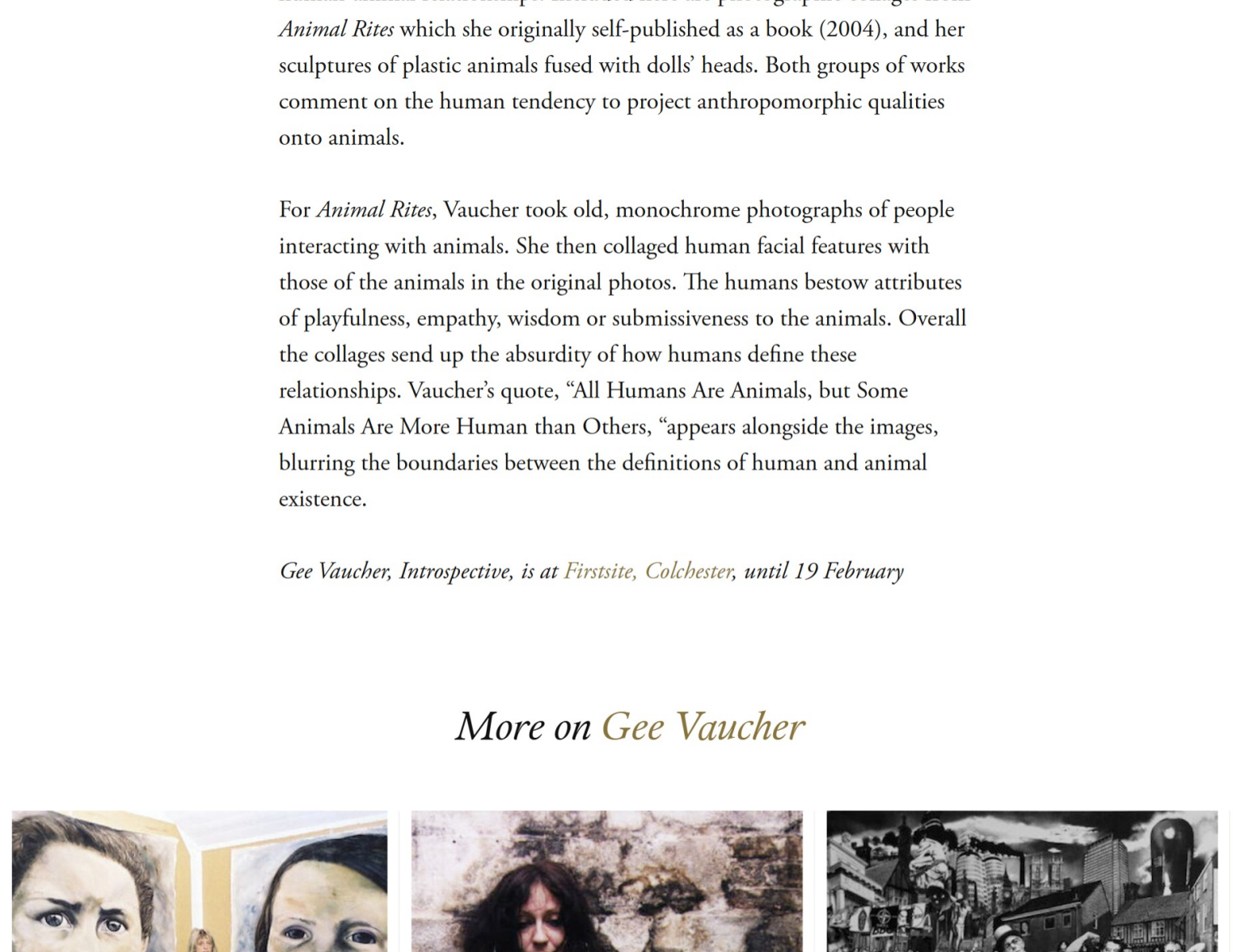
Vaucher, G, Sunday, A Week of Knots, 2013

The exhibition includes her last job for the *New York Times* entitled *Attack on Gays – Central Park* (1978). The magazine refused to publish this image due to its perceived offensiveness. Having already had to alter one image a magazine had considered inappropriate, this led Vaucher to resign, and ultimately return to the UK.

It is this distinctly rare unwillingness to play the game of art-world or commercial success which Vaucher has consistently maintained throughout her life's work. This has affected the development of her design language, critiqued from a position she has continually sought not to compromise. This autonomy was a feature of her early avant-garde experimentation with performance-art group EXIT, which she set up with art-school friend Jeremy Ratter (Penny Rimbaud) in 1968 (Rimbaud later went on to found Crass with Steve Ignorant aka Williams).

The exhibition includes photographs of EXIT art performances to illustrate Vaucher's early creative development. This autonomy facilitated the development of a politicised critique, which she developed through her early illustration work for mainstream publications and found a particularly vehement outlet through her work for *International Anthem* and Crass (1979-84).

Following this period her work took a more introspective turn. The exhibition includes a series of her portraits in pastels from the 1990s. All the portraits feature female subjects whose figures or faces are partially altered or abstracted.



Vaucher, G, Drawing in pastels, 1994

Despite the term 'introspective' in the exhibition's title, there is very little solipsism here. Vaucher only includes three self-portraits from her collection. Much of the show is instead focused on the psychological dynamics of human interaction within various contexts of power imbalance.

Vaucher has maintained a commitment to animal rights and vegetarianism throughout her life, which is a key component of her wider politicised critique of societal power inequity. One room features her work exploring human-animal relationships. Included here are photographic collages from *Animal Rites* which she originally self-published as a book (2004), and her sculptures of plastic animals fused with dolls' heads. Both groups of works comment on the human tendency to project anthropomorphic qualities onto animals.

For *Animal Rites*, Vaucher took old, monochrome photographs of people interacting with animals. She then collaged human facial features with those of the animals in the original photos. The humans bestow attributes of playfulness, empathy, wisdom or submissiveness to the animals. Overall the collages send up the absurdity of how humans define these relationships. Vaucher's quote, "All Humans Are Animals, but Some Animals Are More Human than Others," appears alongside the images, blurring the boundaries between the definitions of human and animal existence.

Gee Vaucher, Introspective, is at Firstsite, Colchester, until 19 February

More on Gee Vaucher

Undermine The Whole System: Gee Vaucher In Conversation

With her new exhibition, Introspective, just opened at Firstsite, Colchester, Gee Vaucher of Crass talks to curator Stephen Shukaitis ab...

Books
Yonkon Honk: Annie Bandez Interviewed

Val Siebert speaks to the multi-talented but too often overlooked singer, songwriter and artist about the anxiety of youth and the record la...

Books
Something From Nothing: The Crass Art Of Gee Vaucher

Alongside Peter Blake, Storm Thorgerson and Jamie Reid, Gee Vaucher's record sleeve artwork is some of the most iconic and...

More from Art

Art
Live the New Slop: An interview with Zaron Mizmeras

Harrington and David Moats submit to ete dissolution of context while speaking Sheffield-based transhumanist artist...

Art
Dancing on Moonbeams: Artist Luke Fowler on Electronic Music Pioneer Janet Beat

Derek Jarman award-winner and Turner Prize nominee Luke Fowler speaks to Claire M. Holdsworth about his latest film, A Sensatio...

Art
Intimate Noises: Kim Gordon Conjures the Morning After at Amant, Brooklyn

A new exhibition of the Sonic Youth co-founder's visual art reveals a lush hunger for connection – even as the work is marked by ...

More from Subscriber Area

Interviews
Intelligence
Intelligence LVIII: Luke Haines on Vinyl

With her new exhibition, Introspective, just opened at Firstsite, Colchester, Gee Vaucher of Crass talks to curator Stephen Shukaitis ab...

Subscribers
Monthly Playlists
The June Subscriber Playlist is Here

Our subscribers can tune in to nearly five ours of music from the past month

Subscribers
Low Culture Podcast
Low Culture Podcast: Altar by Sunn O))) and Boris

In this month's pod, John Doran and Luke Turner discuss witnessing the glorious evolution of the doom titans in the early...

Most Popular

1

Albums of the Year so far
The Quietus Albums of the Year So Far 2026 (In Association with Norman Records)

2

Baker's Dozen
What's Important: Syd's Favourite Albums

3

Baker's Dozen
The Reinvention of the Guitar in 13 Albums, by Simon Reynolds

4

A Quietus Interview
Independence Day: How Ramones Changed the World

5

Baker's Dozen
Party Pieces: Andy Burnham's Favourite Albums

6

Album of the Week
The Expanding Universe: New Avatar by Kelela

7

Reviews
Madonna
Confessions II

8

Live Reviews
The Fading of the Sun and Gloom of the Dusk: Metallica Live in London

9

Baker's Dozen
The Sound of MDMA: Matthew Collin's Ecstasy Tracks

10

Black Sky Thinking
'Ghost Town', 'At The Club' & Britain's Summer of Discontent

11

Reviews
Luke Haines
Izzy Wizzy Let's Get Buzzy

12

Baker's Dozen
Ritual Listens: Jacob Bannon's Favourite Albums

13

Reissue of the Week
Reissue of the Week: Cat Power's The Greatest (20th Anniversary)

All Most Popular