Victorian star shines bright

By Jackie Wullschlager
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Can art change politics? In Virginia in 1990, pastor Jeremiah Wright gave a sermon around G.F. Watts' painting of a ragged, blindfolded girl crouched on a globe, playing a lyre on which all the strings save one are broken. Watts called the work "Hope"; critics countered that "Despair" was a more appropriate title. But Wright saw in the depiction of a vulnerable woman lying atop a world "of famine and greed, apartheid and apathy", trying to make music, a metaphor for an American underclass who had "the audacity to hope". Barack Obama was in his audience, took Wright's title for his keynote address to the Democratic Convention in 2004 - and the rest, as they say, is history.

Two versions of "Hope" exist. The second, grimmer one, is at Tate Britain, on show with other Watts allegories about fallen humanity including "Eve" and "Mammon". The first is lighter because a hint of a smile plays across the features of the beleagured girl, and the paintwork is looser and more textured, bringing to life a surrounding, glittery firmament in which Pastor Wright detected notes of spiritual music. This version hangs at the heart of a new exhibition at the Guildhall Art Gallery, *G.F. Watts, Victorian Visionary* . Featuring the canvases Watts kept for himself in his Surrey home, along with key private loans, it relocates him to the city and makes a case for him as the most instinctively urban of the main Victorian painters.

A star in his day, Watts fell furthest and has recovered least from the 20th-century plummeting of Victorian reputations. Yet he could paint beauty with a chiselled virtuosity rivalling any of his peers. "Ophelia", modelled by teenage actress Ellen Terry during the few impossible months when she was Mrs Watts, is fresh, rapt, fluid. The full-length portrait of his sober, dark-eyed patron "Sophia Prinsep" in Indian costume has exotic flair. "Lillie Langtry" in profile, half turning away in thought, is delightfully unposed.

None are standard likenesses: the melancholy and staginess of Watts' portraits brings them close to symbolism. Significantly, his debut, painted in 1834 when he was 17, depicts a grey-white dead heron. During a career spanning the Victorian era - Watts died in 1904 - he never lost those silvery opalescent tones, refined as he aged in more open, broken brushwork, or the morbid undercurrent. They inform social realist work such as "Found Drowned", "Under A Dry Arch", "Irish Famine", as well as giving a metallic metropolitan sheen to fantasies such as "The Court of Death", with its aura of silence and cast of pallid woman, faltering old man, warrior renouncing his sword and baby held in the arms of the grim reaper - because, wrote Watts, "even the germ of life is in the lap of Death". This is the first show in 50 years to encompass such a range of his work: it reveals a uniquely pessimistic vision for a Victorian artist, close in fin de siècle tremors to Thomas Hardy and, though it does not make Watts our contemporary, it offers intriguing insights into the possibilities and reverberations of religious art in secular times.

Where is the art of 2008 to inspire the Obama of the next generation? The most politically charged yet poetically resonant new work on show in London now is Tim Shaw's *Casting A Dark Democracy* . Shaw works in the late Kenneth Armitage's studio in Kensington, and for this theatrical installation he has transformed the lovely light-filled space into a black desert horror. You enter to the sound of a thudding gong suggesting both a heartbeat and the glug-glug of oil seeping from a barrel - life force versus greed and war. Then you trudge through sand in a dirty graffiti-scrawled room with open pipes and scaffolding. Above towers a five-metre hooded figure, constructed out of welded steel and barbed wire, over which black polythene is stretched, stands on a burnt wooden box and casts a shadow in the sand in the form of a glistening black pool of sump oil.

Based on the infamous 2004 photograph of the Abu Ghraib prisoner tortured by US soldiers, this contemporary figure also looks ancient, timeless, reminiscent of Bosch and Goya. The hung head, downcast big hands and tendril-like legs are exaggerated and emotive as expressionist drawings. But move close and the figure changes: solidity vanishes in the voids between entwined wires and flimsy polythene and it becomes a phantom form, dread creature of the Gothic imagination, of barbarous recesses of the mind come to the fore in wartime atrocities. Empathetic yet implicating us all, "Casting A Dark Democracy" is one of too few works to engage unequivocally with the reality and human cost of the Iraq war. It ought to stand on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, or in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, or in Tate Britain's Duveen Gallery, where Martin Creed's runners now make a trite mockery of public art.

Smaller scaled, Shaw's detailed "Tank on Fire" and "Man on Fire", also based on newspaper photographs, share the same force of conviction and spare, bold imagery. Modelled in wax around metal armatures, coated in black oil and plastic to give a sprawling, metamorphosing quality, they are tough, just controlled, angry: "Man on Fire"

lunges on an oil-splattered plinth inscribed "What God of Love Inspires Such Hatred in the Hearts of Men". Upstairs, aggressive little bronze casts depicting Silenus, tutor of Dionysus, as an old masturbating fool, have tragi-comic energy; a larger example shown at a group exhibition in Vyner Street was destroyed by a vandal shrieking that Shaw "worshipped the wrong God".

I have no idea if he worships any God, but "Middle World", the other major sculpture here, confirms the political-religious sensibility of this Belfast-born artist. Made between 1989 and 1995 and still, one feels, open to change, "Middle World" crosses a huge, intricate stone altarpiece with a pinball machine. On its surface wander crowds of tiny Chapman-like bronze soldiers - the work predates "Hell" - mythic half-animals, headless creatures, a sedan chair whose occupant's delusions of grandeur are offset by cathedral-like gargoyles, a flight of bombers, a crucifixion, soaring above him. Walls are gorgeously carved with skeletons and skulls; stalactites hang down, heavy and primitive. What does it mean? I don't know, but it enhances the mood of spiritual limbo, at once archaic and contemporary, of this compelling show.

'G.F. Watts, Victorian Visionary', Guildhall Art Gallery, London EC2, to April 26, tel 020 7332 3700; then at Mercer Art Gallery, Harrogate, autumn 2009

Tim Shaw, 'Casting A Dark Democracy', Kenneth Armitage Foundation, London W14, to November 29, tel 020 7603 5200