Life & Arts

Tate director Maria Balshaw on art, inclusivity and rebellion

Over Cornish crab, she argues that connoisseurs are out — and London is not the only place that matters

Lunch with the FT

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When it opened in 1927, the Rex Whistler Restaurant was named “most amusing room in Europe” for its immersive, fanciful mural “The Expedition in Pursuit of Rare Meats”. Beneath Whistler’s hills, forests and Palladian villas, bright young things posed alongside their painted counterparts cavorting with unicorns and truffle dogs in search of fresh culinary delights.

Today the Rex Whistler at Tate Britain — boasting white tablecloths, formal British menu, rare wine cellar and the gleaming, recently restored mural — is quaint, quiet, forgotten. On a Monday lunchtime, the few diners are suited, sombre, and mostly as old as the restaurant. A pair of white-haired politicos are trying to construct a viable dementia tax, an architect and his wife discuss whether it is worth manoeuvring his wheelchair into the gallery's *Queer British Art* exhibition.

Then Maria Balshaw, Tate's new director, walks in, and mural and restaurant instantly come to life. Wearing orange silk trousers, a pink silk top with scalloped neck, floppy cuffs and flame stripes, and glittering pearly trainers to match her silver pixie crop, Balshaw, 47, looks as if she has dressed specially to offset the emerald and chestnut hues of Whistler's painting. She greets the staff, hugs the architect — a friend, it turns out — and with a broad, warm smile joins me at a corner table.

Indicating the emptyish restaurant, I ask whether Tate Britain, languishing since Tate Modern launched in 2000 — 1.1m visitors last year (a 16 per cent drop from 2015), compared with the younger museum's 5.8m — is the greatest problem of her empire of four galleries. "I see it as the greatest opportunity," she returns sweetly. Her manner is easy, engaging. "It was necessary for Tate Britain to stand back for Tate Modern to open. Now it is perfectly poised to step out in its own light."

I counter that, apart from the Turners, the exclusively British displays — shoals of Victorian narrative pictures, 20th-century holdings stripped of international masterpieces by Picasso or Matisse, which went to Tate Modern — are uninspiring.

"You don't have to like everything," Balshaw answers affably. "People have an intimate room-by-room relationship with Tate Britain. Tate Modern is a warehouse; Tate Britain is London's living room, where you can find your own favourite picture. Different people and tastes coexist in a strong civic space." The domestic analogy works, she believes. "Tate Britain has a front

garden which we will use, expanding our visible presence. And we're going to rehang the collection telling the story of British art from the point of the London where we are today."

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The cuisine — Hampshire trout, roasted Swaledale lamb, British seafood — will have to catch up, too: it is patriotic but old-fashioned. Balshaw reaches for the menu — big rings on each hand flash across the table — and asks: "Would you like one course or two?" We agree on two because "we open Fahrelnissa Zeid [at Tate Modern] tonight so I won't get home to have my tea till 9pm," Balshaw explains, scrutinising the starters. "It's a toss-up between asparagus or Cornish crab: I'll go for the crab in honour of St Ives!" She chooses pearl barley risotto as a main; I opt for British asparagus followed by Gressingham duck.

If the crab nods to Tate's regional galleries in Cornwall and Liverpool, the word "tea" is also a giveaway. Not only is Balshaw Tate's first female director; she is Midlands-born, into a "family of public servants, social workers, community workers, teachers, that sort of thing", state-school and non-Oxbridge-educated, and forged her career in the north of England.

As director of Manchester Art Gallery and the university's Whitworth Art Gallery, which she transformed into a state of the art contemporary venue, she made her name globally as Manchester's unofficial cultural attaché and an intellectual heavyweight of the northern powerhouse.

"What holds the country back is if you have a sense that what's happening in London is the only thing that counts," she says. "London is exceptional but not everyone can afford to live there. It's vital that other cities are vibrant. In Manchester or Liverpool you can take risks, you're not constrained by the tourist audience. London can learn from the regions."

At a time when the cultural divide between metropolitan privilege and the rest of the country feels bitter, Balshaw's appointment is a vote against elitism, and for both unity and change.

"I went to an unprepossessing comprehensive in Northamptonshire," she says, "and one of my first letters of congratulation was from Mr Cartwright the drama teacher, who wrote, 'I'm so proud of you — and I remember that your socks always matched!' I was rebellious but I didn't want to break all the rules. The only items of uniform not prescribed were socks and gloves, so I wore dayglo or bright orange ones — I wanted to not conform, but not get into trouble. Mr Cartwright also said it was 'not very usual for someone from a school like that to end up director of Tate'. Hence my vision for any child coming to Tate is that we are open to them in whatever way they need."

Balshaw's career has been full of nonconformist moments, none getting her into trouble — from serving takeaway curry at the Whitworth's inaugural dinner to rethinking global collaboration in her New North South initiative this year, linking northern English arts institutions with South Asia. And she tweets on everything: her Christmas gold brogues, her cracked wrist ("from a big man falling on me in yoga class"), Nigel Farage.

Her drive, she says, is for art to connect with the widest range of people, but she admits, "We have a long way to go to reach people who might not think any of the art is for them."

Can a wider reach sit comfortably with high art?

"It's not losing the artistic adventure to speak to a whole spectrum of people. Our museums have better-educated audiences, more white than non-white, which don't reflect their cities' demographic. We can afford more ambitious targets. It's less about what you show, more about how you connect. We used to think museums were irrelevant to 16-to-26-year-olds, but you have to be open at different times of day — then they come. At last Friday's LGBTQ Late at Tate, they were there in their thousands: they effectively took ownership of that time and space. Tate at 10pm on Friday night feels very different from 10am on weekday mornings."

Balshaw salutes Tate Britain's current *Queer British Art* show — "telling incredibly compelling new stories about the art which people think they know", curated with help from LGBTQ groups — as a model of "different ways for institutions to work with diverse communities". I thought the show flawed — social commentary at the expense of significant work. As we begin our starters — brown and white crab with a poached peach and almond mousse, asparagus with crisp polenta and softly boiled duck egg, both pronounced delicious — I overhear the architect and his wife express my own old liberal reservations. "Art shouldn't be defined by an artist's sexuality, should it? Unless it's prurient — and then I don't want to see it!" But they decide to give it a go: "Homosexual art, here we come!" they cheer, and the wheelchair sets off.

If Balshaw can even energise the over-90s, she is winning. "I want Tate to ask: what is the history that we want to tell from now?" she says, arguing that cultural studies, now standard in academia, have had a profound influence on artistic practice. She points to museums and galleries that have a firm grasp of this fundamental shift — Nottingham Contemporary's "terrific" show of black British art in the 1980s, for example. "Young people today have a sophisticated grasp of identity, its fluidity, how it is culturally defined," she says, adding that her own children — her son and daughter with her first husband are young adults; she married Manchester Museum director Nick Merriman in 2010 — "don't understand it as post-structuralist theory but as lived reality, and that's tremendous."

Balshaw's career began in academia. She has a degree in English from Liverpool and a doctorate in African-American art and literature from Sussex, where "queer studies, post-colonial studies, were on fire in the 1990s, Shakespeare scholars were teaching sexual dissidence". Her lightning moment in visual art was seeing Cornelia Parker's "Cold Dark Matter" at Chisenhale Gallery in 1991: "I walked in and there was an exploded shed, it's pretty memorable. Until then most things I'd seen had been in a

frame. I appreciated the daring, the sense of jeopardy, which gets to something I'm drawn to: the pull of terror and joy."

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A quarter of a century later she opened the new Whitworth with Parker's piece: "I kept having to pinch myself, I remembered being 21, then I was 46." There have been other completed circles. Tate Liverpool opened in 1988, the year she became a student, and was the first gallery she came to know — "I remember a Richard Long piece, feeling comfortable enough that I could sit on the floor and just be with it".

Being steeped in this background distinguishes Balshaw from her predecessors, traditionally-trained art historians Nicholas Serota and before that Alan Bowness (both Cambridge then the Courtauld). Serota embraced conceptual art, building a whole new museum, the Switch House, to display it. Balshaw, a quarter of a century younger, brings the concerns of the next generation, a desire to understand how history has been written and shaped. "It's not that there weren't women artists in the 1920s or 1950s, it's just that history hasn't focused on them."

Is she a feminist?

"How can you not be a feminist today? I'm often asked of an artist, 'Do you show her because she's a woman?' — the answer is, 'No, we show her because she's really brilliant.' I don't strive for shows 50 per cent by women because that's a feminist gesture, but because we want to refer to the world we live in."

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The mains arrive: Balshaw's rice and barley is colourfully dotted with radishes and preserved lemon, my plate a concoction

of duck breast slivers curling among garlic cloves, baby turnips, pistachio crumbs, succulent in orange sauce.

I admire Balshaw's straight-talking, clear-sighted vision, and the non-confrontational way it is delivered. But I find the post-1960 art in Tate's Switch House worthily dull, aids to sociology — and where are the paintings? I ask if museums are now more about concepts than objects.

"It's not either/or," she says, explaining that social context shouldn't come at the exclusion of artistic excellence. "An object can be slight but its back-story can be extraordinarily illuminating. On my first day, I met the staff team by team; seeing Turner's tiny leather sketchbook, small enough to be carried in his back pocket, moved me to tears." Curators have immense scholarship, she says. "They become champions, telling the story and context behind an object."

Are they 21st-century versions of connoisseurs?

For the first time, Balshaw looks horrified. "That's not the right word: it's a word used to terrify people." For her "every visitor — a small child looking for the most colourful painting, a Yale scholar in the print room, a Sunday visitor wanting to find a painting to make their heart beat faster — is curious and wants to find something out".

Still, the largest numbers come for exhibitions of white male European painters: chart-toppers are Matisse, Picasso, David Hockney's recent show (478,000 visitors versus, say, 63,000 for 2016's post-colonial themed *Artist and Empire*). Where is individual genius in Balshaw's inclusive reading?

During Hockney's Tate Britain show, Balshaw says carefully, "the building felt full of joy all the way through, for all ages, Londoners, tourists. It's not about kicking the greats out: at Tate Modern we will be expanding the canon — not throwing the canon out. There has been an over-dominance of white European work. We have to understand the diverse way genius expresses itself across the globe."

Her example is the late Turkish artist

Fahrelnissa Zeid, currently showing at Bankside. Here one can only register subjective responses. I see a derivative east-west fusion artist, neatly ticking Tate's global/feminist boxes, hardly to be mentioned in the same breath as Matisse. Tate curators proclaim Zeid a genius whose "insistent" quality demanded an exhibition.

Nevertheless, I persist: the new order must bring losses as well as gains.

"There will be losses," Balshaw answers slowly, almost painfully. "I can't say what they will be."

Tate's new director has unquenchable optimism, I conclude. "And energy! You get things done that way," Balshaw says. "I don't work crazy hours at all, therefore I'm energetic."

I call for the bill. She thanks me, then, making for the door, a vanishing silhouette in orange and pink leaving the restaurant a duller place again, she adds: "Richard Leese, Manchester City Council leader and one of the best men I've ever worked with, said, 'It's not just about the art, it's about the world we live in, because who would want to live in a world without art?' This is about the London, the world, I want to live in."

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Illustration by Luke Waller
