

## 'The Condition of England.'

**Exhibition dates:** 29 April – 25 June 2005

**Preview:** Thursday 28 April 6:00 – 8:00pm

### Alice Hawkins

"The real England is the M25; business parks; industrial estates and executive housing; sports clubs and marinas; cineplexes; CCTV; car-rental forecourts." JG Ballard

Alice Hawkins' portrait photographs span fashion and fine art; as well as exhibiting she has published work in magazines internationally including *Pop*, *Harper's Bazaar* i-D, and *Exit*. Hawkins has an exceptional eye for the audacious or arresting image, and her documentary work revolves around discovering aspects of what she calls "the everyday burlesque". Her inflection of this concept differentiates her from previous generations of photographers; her sitters happily combine the theatrical and the prosaic, the exaggerated and the normative. Unlike, say, Diane Arbus, Martin Parr or Tony Ray-Jones, Hawkins frequently works with individuals she knows, in places she knows intimately. There is no implied gap of consciousness between ourselves and the sitters. Accordingly, we can easily be wrong-footed if only undertaking a superficial reading. Rather than adopting Parr's relentlessly acidic approach, Hawkins' work invariably involves us in a play of identification with and alienation from her subjects.

The artist's projects are unashamedly personal – her work here has the collective title 'My England'. Her achievement is to persuade us that we have never encountered such images before. She takes us into virgin pictorial territory by presenting aspects of national life which are seldom, if ever represented. (Although the critic James Wood has claimed that "the English imprisonment in the burlesque" is a national 'occupational hazard', it has been writers rather than artists who have explored such concerns.) It becomes apparent during sustained engagement that Hawkins' performs a tightrope walk between empathetic and ethnographic approaches. Accordingly, our imaginative encounters with her work can take rather parabolic trajectories – after initial humour or even horror, we recognise that Hawkins' vision is sympathetic rather than satirical. The underlying tone she adopts, in contrast to Parr, is compassionate rather than caustic or cynical. Even though her images first strike us as cautionary tales, we realise, in the end, that they are celebratory. Hawkins has a fascination with the limitless possibilities of self-fashioning. Her sitters, whose appearances might best be described as 'singular', seem to undertake experiments in self-realisation: their 'singularity' extends to every detail of their personae from sartorial tastes to expression and posture. The artist has an eye for the outrageous, the unlikely, the extraordinary and the idiosyncratic, and her working process not only draws on a wide circle of friends, acquaintances and colleagues, but in discovering collaborators. She encapsulates her approach as follows: "sometimes I make a friend and photography naturally happens; sometimes photography happens and I make a friend." Her recent portraits are more often of distinctive personalities rather than staged situations. Though many are taken spontaneously the intention is not to capture a 'decisive moment'; rather it is to encapsulate, within a split-second image, how a sitter's personal history is told through the body they inhabit. Since the romantic era, artists' portraits have attempted to 'reveal' the private face hidden 'beneath' the social mask. Hawkins' work operates differently. Her characters' facial contours and crevices appear, at least initially, to be inseparable from their invincible personae.

Women, in Hawkins' world, often appear either brazenly sexualised or unfeasibly genteel. Scanning the series, we bounce between the confrontational and the charming, the demure and the titillating, the luxuriant and the kitsch. A series of portraits taken at Chingford Ladies' Tea Dance Club, for example, reveal individuals whose gentility takes the most exuberant visual form. One portrait of an elderly woman sporting a Thatcher-like wig is taken slightly from below, to underline an already haughty expression. The frontal pose gently underlines the woman's obvious tendency towards straight-laced formality. Lighting the subject with flash exaggerates the contrasts between the artificiality of her red lipstick and the pallor of her face. It also exposes the tense rigidity of the muscles in her etiolated neck, implying that gentility requires considerable exertions. Hawkins has an astonishing eye for the detail which acts as

a 'punctum': whilst the woman's costume is reassuringly expensive and quietly restrained, her large and ornate necklace appears like a giant spider crawling across her spindly shoulders.

Although we might have some ambivalence towards such a character, Hawkins' body of images seen together, embody what she finds attractive – and a set of characteristics not normally represented in fashion or in art. The artist never photographs models, preferring to only shoot “people who enjoy being photographed”, and whose pleasure in dressing up is palpable to the viewer. Her characters can possess such an overwhelming individuality that it can obscure the fact we might read them as emblematic of wider social processes. Though the two sitters illustrated here might seem worlds apart, Hawkins views and presents them as essentially alike. Rather than seeing them as representing bourgeois modesty and decorum and an excessive display of wealth and sexuality, the artist amplifies the sheer creativity they both have invested into their self-cultivation, and their unashamed delight in presenting themselves to their world.