

# Scent of fresh air

JUDITH AMANTHIS discovers a remedy to the British art scene.

## EXHIBITION

### MIXED BLESSINGS

Signal Gallery  
London EC2A

**I**F YOU'RE looking for an air freshener to dispel the faint smell of corruption that hangs around the British art scene, then visit Signal Gallery's latest show, featuring five artists with a powerful critical, quirky take on the world.

Alke Schmidt's collages, "readymade" fabrics printed with scenes of idyllic natural beauty, seduce and soothe the eye. Then grey destruction forces its way into the foreground — wilting ice poles in *Tipping Point*, a charred tree trunk in *Growth Economics* and bellicose CO2 chimneys in *Remember Your Origins*.

While Schmidt's connection to 1930s anti-Nazi John Heartfield and his photomontages is clear, she's



**NATURE AND INDUSTRY:** Alke Schmidt's *Growth Economics*.

moved both technique and debate way forward. Beauty, so much embodied in nature, has to be saved, but one problem is that tools of destruction, like the bitumen oil extractor in *The Great Tar Rush*, can look weirdly wonderful.

The *Vector Of Volitation*, *The Analogous Anagram Of The Leanest Alpha* — artist Replete's mocking titles position his spray can accurately.

Conceptual art's claim to the mantle — or kagool — of brilliant surrealist Marcel Duchamp, whose famous "readymade" *Bicycle Wheel* was exhibited in 1913, sounds tired. That the idea initiating a work of art is as important as the idea's vehicle now appears obvious and Replete's canvasses, all eyes of the black abyss and slashes of white streaked colour, point to the computer game graphics and graffiti tags that animate his astonishing and regenerative urban wall art.

Jonathan Darby's baby faces, mixed media on large-scale canvases, horrify. He maybe a blue-eyed, pink-lipped cherub, but Jacob's skin is peeling off. Beneath it swim corporate consumer logos — Gillette, Adidas, Stella Artois, Marlborough. Scratch the surface to get at the truth, tattoos are for life not just for skin, how flaky is modern life, we are what we're poisoned by — all these ideas come screaming through and that's just scratching the surface.

SPQR's *Die On Your Feet 1-5* use aerosol and marker to burn deceptively simple black and white images of high-tech destruction onto canvas. But, backgrounding a ghoulish crowd of skulls, a figure shrouded head to toe in decontamination gear or anarchist disguise holds up a board: "Do something, even if it's wrong."

Foreign Policy offers only scarlet paint dripping vertically over hand-



**WINDOW ON EMPIRE:** *Business As Usual* by Alke Schmidt.

cuffed wrists. Blood is simple, however high tech the torture.

More jokey, David Le Fleming's

*Shuttle Cock Grand Prix* in oils and enamel floats peachy orange, lemon yellow and lime green images together on a Morris Minor car bonnet.

Black outlines separate a man sitting behind a disembodied sky blue steering wheel from a woman clutching a cockerel and there's plenty going on in the further reaches of the bonnet, like faded wallpaper, baroque arches, Victorian lamp-posts, the odd letter.

If a shared story isn't holding the bitter-faced couple together, is it their shared background?

Certainly, all of the five artists on display here demonstrate that beauty and the aesthetically satisfying don't always overlap.

Exhibition runs until December 20. Phone (020) 7613-1550 for more details.