

## Absolute excrement

Santiago Sierra is the king of shock art. But Adrian Searle wonders if his new show, featuring slabs made of human faeces, really hits its target

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**Adrian Searle**

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Harmless, at least from a sanitary point of view ... Sierra's 21 Anthropometric Modules Made of Human Faeces by the People of Sulabh International, India. Photograph: Martin Argles

Santiago Sierra's new sculptures are cast from human excrement. This dismal fact is enough to get the Mexico-based Spanish artist's latest exhibition at London's Lisson Gallery noticed. Almost everything Sierra does has been designed at some level to provoke, to upset and to attract attention. His first London show, in 2002, closed off the gallery entrance with corrugated iron; the last time he was at the Lisson, in 2004, he sprayed a number of Iraqi volunteers with quick-setting polyurethane foam.

Writing about Sierra, one is wearily obliged to remind readers of the well-publicised and often troubling exploits that have given him a lucrative career: paying drug-addicted prostitutes the price of a shot of heroin to have a line tattooed across their backs; employing people to remain hidden in cardboard boxes in the blistering heat of an unventilated warehouse. Last year, he piped the exhaust fumes from a number of cars into a former synagogue, now an arts centre, in a small town in Germany; one could only enter wearing breathing apparatus and accompanied by a fireman. Predictably, this action angered Jewish groups; the artist insisted that he was protesting against "the banalisation of the Holocaust".

Unsurprisingly, Sierra's work is itself sometimes accused of banality and of being exploitative, of careerism masquerading as a mission. His art has also been seen as social critique, as Marxist nihilism, as an attack on capitalism in general and the art world in particular, as irritant, as analysis. Like many artists now, he is a skilled manipulator of people and situations as much as of materials and ideas. Exactly where he stands - morally, ethically - and what he stands for is harder to define, but that is true, often purposely so, of many artists and writers.

One of the chief defects of Sierra's art is a humourlessness that is mistaken for gravity. A plaque on the exterior of the gallery announces that access to the building is prohibited to anyone who falls into any one of a number of categories, including "untidy or smelly people, smokers, alcoholics, drug addicts, deaf, mute or disabled people, pregnant women, women with children, senior citizens, beggars, asylum-seekers, people carrying

sharp objects, forgers, liars, jokers and cynics". There are dozens of categories; it is difficult not to fall into one, if not several. Oh Mr Sierra, you are a one. The sign does, I suppose, conflate the officious with the offensive, the politically incorrect with the fascistic, but as satire or agitprop it is mild stuff. I can imagine students fixing a sign like this to a loo door.

Which brings us to the matter in hand. Or rather the shit, which one can only recognise by being told what it is, so innocuous is the smell, so unrecognisable are the rectilinear slabs manufactured from it. The title, *21 Anthropometric Modules Made of Human Faeces By the People of Sulabh International, India*, is a bit of a mouthful; luckily, the press release reassures us that this dried ordure, compressed and mixed with plastic resin, is "harmless from a sanitary point of view" - though not, one supposes, from an artistic point of view.

They look like oversized garden-centre trays for growing tomatoes. One might think of them as wholesome examples of recycling in action, although why anyone would want to manufacture all these unwieldy blocks in the first place is more the issue. They all stand on their longer sides, in the opened wooden crates in which each was shipped. One side of each slab is flat, the other is a shallow lidless box, into which, as the title suggests, a human being might fit. As with much of Sierra's work, what counts is the story as much as the objects themselves, which are an unprepossessing sight. The rows of slabs standing in their crates, the lids against the walls, packing material and rubbish lying about on the unswept floor - it all gives the air of interrupted labour, of things in transit.

The excrement was collected in New Delhi and Jaipur by the low-caste poor who, atoning for their deeds in previous lives, scavenge human faecal matter for a living. The ordure collectors in this case work for Sulabh International, a group dedicated to improving the appalling sanitary conditions in India and bettering the lives of those forced to earn a living by manually collecting and disposing of human waste.

According to Pilar Villela Mascaró, writing in the catalogue, Sierra "will be selling shit to art collectors and explicitly stating that its surplus value has been provided by labourers who sponsored the piece by working for free". Mascaró makes this argument only to dispose of it, as it were, later. The point is that Sierra is doing as much as he can to dramatise both how the work came about and where it might end up. Works of 1960s minimalist art often looked as if they were made by machines, or were so pure and immaculate that they had surely been beamed down by superior beings from outer space. Sierra's blocks, on the other hand, are the result of deeply unpleasant, though unseen toil, and can be bought by anyone who hands over their filthy lucre.

But we are still left with the excrement, the latest in a long and sometimes distinguished trail of artworks made of or alluding to this most base of materials. The precedents - Piero Manzoni's tinned caca (which turned out to be plaster, when one curious collector reached for the can opener), Chris Ofili's balls of elephant dung, paintings by Joan Miró or drawings by Mike Kelley - have all in a sense turned poo into gold. In any case, every farmer and gardener knows the value of manure.

In the end, one cannot even paint a watercolour without someone somewhere being exploited: the collectors and refiners of exotic pigments, the gatherers of the natural gums and ox gall used in watercolour mediums, the rag-pickers who supply cotton fibre for handmade artists' paper, or the indentured infants whose dangerous task it is to pluck the pubic hair from live badgers for the manufacture of specialist brushes.

Which doesn't make Sierra's *21 Anthropometric Modules* any less problematic, but does perhaps point up that his work, like any artist's, exists in a complex web of mostly unacknowledged relationships. This is what he constantly sets out to reveal, generally

via formal appeals to the artistic manners of late 20th-century art: minimalism and conceptual art, performance, happenings, process art, installation and land art. In this, Sierra is a highly orthodox and even conservative artist.

The Lisson's second gallery contains several other recent Sierra works. There's more rubbish littering the floor. A slide show documents an intervention in Caracas, Venezuela, earlier this year. In a gallery stand shiny black cars with their engines running; plastic hosepipes vent the exhaust fumes into the atmosphere outside - surely something to do with consumerism and inequality, the Venezuelan petroleum industry and global warming.

From another empty space in the gallery, names are read out, over 72 hours, of the 1,547 people who, by order of the state, were killed or "disappeared" in Mexico between 1966 and 2007. It is chilling to stand and listen, though the voices are often drowned out by the blasts of noise coming from a video recording of Concert for a Diesel Electric Plant, which Sierra recorded in Caracas last February. The amplified generator judders and whines; sometimes it modulates to a hollow, mournful moan. There are unexpected harmonics, overtones and a sizzle like a snare drum, as well as sickening waves of white noise. At times, I thought I was listening to Throbbing Gristle or Lou Reed's Metal Machine Music. On the blurry black-and-white video, people walk past, hands over their ears, or bang the ground with sticks, searching for a beat. Moths swirl in the light. There are screams from the audience, but not perhaps of pleasure. It is a complex assault, a self-portrait of the artist as an angry man on a hot night.

**Santiago Sierra: New Works** is at the Lisson Gallery, London, until January 19.  
Details: 020-7724 2739.

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