Burn Inside Britart

Brixton Breakers was a rubbish-strewn, rat-infested junkyard in south London, over-run by bikers and drug dealers. So how did this squalid patch of land become the cradle of the most exciting new art movement in recent years? Continuing his week-long series on Britart, **Gordon Burn** heads for Minet Road

Off the scrapheap

There's romantic squalor, the *nostalgie de la boue* kind of squalor: Soutine and Modigliani in their shitpile in Montmartre in the first world war, pawning their clothes for rotgut wine and ether and opium; Francis Bacon shuffling around among the rag-piles in his mews studio in south Kensington, living like a poor man with lots of money. There's picturesque squalor. Champagne and mousetraps. And then there's squalor that transcends the merely squalid.

Brixton Breakers fitted into the last category. Oh, it was brutal. It was a breakers yard in London SW9 that did exactly what it said it did on the board by the gate: it broke things; bent and totally totalled them. Mostly these were cars connected to some insurance fiddle, stripped and crushed and cubed. They also did re-spray jobs on stolen cars ("hot motors"). And that wasn't the half of it.

They dealt drugs in the Breakers at night, hooded figures in the dark; and some nights had all-night, yard-style parties. Booma-booma-booma. Gerry, the guy who ran it, was a biker, and other bikers from his gang or chapter or whatever would zoom over and hang out. Gerry's clothes were black with sump oil; they were slick and ebonised. His nails were black, and his eyelids and scalp. The artists speculated on whether the chairs in his house were also like that, and his cups, and his children.

Gerry had a sidekick called Chico. Chico wore a greasy mac and bred puppies and was dubbed by the tabloids The Most Evil Man in Britain. He ran a puppy farm in Brixton Breakers, right in among the totalled Toyotas and hot motors. Feral dogs. Now and again, he'd throw them a bootful of raw chicken. Oh, man. Sometimes the feral dogs would escape from their compound and set about people – chase and bare their teeth at the artists.

People using the alley down the right side of the yard were particularly susceptible. This was the way to the studios. It was a rat-run, pitted and cratered. The craters were full of oil and ooze. The rats came to feed on the heaps of crap dumped at the top of the alley by the fly-tippers. Heels of bread and stiletto shoes and burst mattresses. Rats the size of cats. It was bleak and cold and weird. With all this going for it, naturally it was going to attract some of the best artists and finest sensibilities of their generation.

Damien Hirst made all his formaldehyde pieces at Minet Road: the cows, the lamb, the bulls' heads, the pig. He did the spots there and the giant spin paintings with the mad Minet Road titles: "Beautiful, cheap, shitty, too easy, anyone can do one, big, motor-driven, roto-heaven, corrupt, trashy, bad art, shite, motivating, captivating, over the sofa, celebrating painting." Marcus Harvey made one of the most powerful and notorious paintings of the 90s there – his billboard-size portrait of Myra Hindley daubed in childrens' hands.

And after the artists came the collectors, dragging their Lobb and Gucci through the mire, braving the verbals. "Oy, where'd you get your driving licence, on a milk carton?" It became a compulsory stop-over on the international collectors' circuit. People came with chauffeurs. David Bowie came to fling paint on a spin painting with Damien. You wouldn't leave your car to go round the corner for a coffee. There were muggings. A woman artist was mugged twice, both times in the morning. It was scary.

Daniel Coombs spent six weeks clearing car parts out of a space behind Brixton Breakers with Richard Clegg, another former student from the painting school at the Royal College in London. Clegg had always been a bit iconoclastic. He'd been the singer with an anarcho-punk band called Monkey Island and had wrecked the floor of the gallery at the college with a degree show piece made from 2,500 bars of Sunshine soap and cataracts of sump-oil. So he fitted right in.

Coombs, though, had stuck to conventional painting. In 1994, the year before he moved into Minet Road, he'd sold a group of surreal Bauhaus-meets-Butthead canvases to Charles Saatchi. In 1996, Coombs was in Young British Artists 6 at the Saatchi Gallery and then saw his work being shoehorned into the new art movement Saatchi tried to launch just last year: New Neurotic Realism.

But the very particular circumstances at Minet Road soon got to him. It was a wart of land and a jumble of old clapped-out buildings in the middle of a modern council estate; the last remaining trace of a life that had once been lived there. He stopped making paintings and started making assemblages from the rubbish heaped outside the studio door instead.

"It felt like a quite alien environment, in a way," he says. "I felt alien and isolated, and didn't quite know what was happening at first. I found it hard to use a brush and do sensitive paintings. But the strangeness of the place drew us together more. It made us all take quite a hard attitude to our work. It made us want to do something quite brutal. Everybody who produced beautiful work there was influenced by the surroundings. Marcus [Harvey] definitely. He was just starting the Myra piece when I moved in, and I remember being impressed by this giant canvas laid out on scaffolding. It was exciting to think of Damien Hirst making his stuff there. If somebody produces something really outstanding, it gives you an impetus to compete with them."

In his book, The Conditions of Success, the former director of the Tate, Sir Alan Bowness, puts forward the view that most truly original new work is the result of group activity: "I do not believe that any great art has been produced in a non-competitive situation: on the contrary it is the fiercely competitive environment in which the young artist finds himself that drives him to excel . . . Pollock, Rothko, Newman, Still and de Kooning were all linked together in friendship and rivalry. A post-expressionist generation of distinction – Johns, Lichtenstein, Rauschenberg, Warhol – was to follow them. Artists who emerge from such a situation do not have a consistency of style . . . but there is a consistency of purpose. They want to get to the top."

Daniel Coombs, Richard Clegg and their contemporaries from the Royal College who followed them to Brixton – Ian Dawson, Martin Westwood, Chantal Joffe – were the second tribe to colonise Minet Road. The first settlers came from Goldsmith's College, and included Damien Hirst, Marcus Harvey and Hugh Allan. In fact, these three were the core of a tribe within a tribe: the Leeds lot.

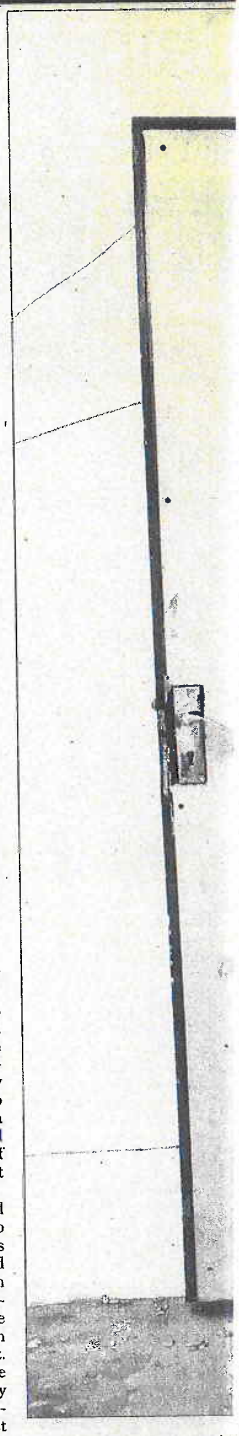
Hugh Allan, who now runs Damien Hirst's studio and is his business partner in Science, had grown up next door to Marcus Harvey in Leeds and they remained best friends. Hirst, who was a few years younger, had been a friend of Allan's brother. They all went to the Jacob Kramer college of art in Leeds, and then, at different times, to Goldsmith's in London.

Harvey was the trailblazer, and once he was settled Damien came to check it out. "I'd led the way in terms of a career – of going to college and becoming an artist. I showed Damien what to do, in terms of it being possible to do this. I think without me being there, he might not have chosen the same path. I really do think that. But he came down, tapped into the actual mechanics of the art world by getting a job in a gallery [dogsbodying at D'Offay], and then just took off in the inside lane. When I had these very kind of religious ideas about how you proceed in the art world – you sweated and suffered, and if you were lucky, when you were old and wispy, you might sell a picture – he just did not do shit like that. He just got on with life, you know; making life comfortable.

"He's the most guilt-free man I ever, *ever* experienced. That's what the contrast between the two of us is. He just went for it. And he didn't have a plan before, or a model. Damien's his own model. Fearless. He found out that, if you are your own person, you've ing to fear in life. Especially [art] world. Being, you know, a of a geezer, and such a great per ity and sense of humour, se adventure in life and death and thing, he just knew, 'I can't go There are so many fucking t Whingeing neurots. I'm like a a stormy sea.' And then sudde blazed away. He ripped the air everyone's lungs."

By the time he discovered I Breakers and Minet Road in th 90s, Hirst was already in the

The second tribe ... (left to right) Martin Westwood, Richard Clegg, Ian Dawson



'They're quite a macho group' ... (left to right) Daniel Coombes, Chantal Joffe and Ian Dawson

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the kind of celebrity that hadn't been seen in the British art world since the days of David Hockney. He needed somewhere rough and ready because he was about to extend the Natural History series of sculptures that had started with The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living – Saatchi's 14ft tiger shark.

To all the other noxious odours at Brixton Breakers was added the stench of formaldehyde. In a scenario that recalled the heyday of *la vie bohème* in Paris, when the stink of a side of beef that Chaim Soutine was painting had his neighbours running for cover, the people in the flats on the nearby Loughborough estate complained that formaldehyde fumes were seeping in their windows. Looking down from the balconies they could see figures in dry-suits and face masks pumping formaldehyde solution into bits of animal carcass using 24-inch syringes.

Over time, the bleakness of the surroundings – the damp and coldness and lack of even basic amenities (black fungus would creep up over the surface of a picture very quickly), and the operatic scale of the squalor – seemed to encourage an unorthodox approach to methods and materials. It was as if the toxic nature of the landscape in which they were working gave them permission to do things a politer set-up would have withheld.

Among the younger group of artists – the second wave – Richard Clegg started working with stainless steel sink units and then, in The Unknown Collaboratives, with a hard-setting polyurethane, while Daniel Coombs went on piling up his detritus. At the RCA, Ian Dawson had worked fairly conventionally with wood and metal. In Brixton, he built everyday household objects into heaps – dog bowls, bins, baby baths, picnic chairs – then took up an oxy-acetylene burner to fondue the plastic into free-standing Jackson Pollocks. Saatchi took three. Even Martin Westwood, whose work has a marvellous Jasper Johns stillness to it, a steely cerebral quality, started mutilating his canvases and winding the painted strips into spheres, which were then mounted, fungus-like, on the wall. Only Chantal Joffe kept more or less obdurately to the path she had been travelling before she arrived at Minet Road.

The only change was that, perhaps as a reaction to all the gigantism and physicality going on around her, her already small paintings of children and adult pornography got even smaller. "They're quite a macho group of people," she says, "and those studios were really open. They made each other more ambitious: 'Oh I did an all-nighter.' They were going for that kind of mythical bonding. Which they could laugh at as well. The music went with that. Loud and hard. You know: 'We're here because we're hard.' I like to work silently. But even I was aware of making work that would stand up in that space."

At the beginning, they split into two camps: the Leeds lot and the Rest. "It wasn't easy to move into the Amish," Hugh Allan says. The division was acted out in the arena of The Hero of Switzerland, the nearest pub: if you were Leeds, you turned left into the poolroom; if Royal College, you turned right into the lounge. But then, largely through Richard Clegg and Marcus Harvey, the demarcations disappeared. Hirst had already taken his dangerously anarchic sense of mischief to the West End by then, and was cavorting with a new group of friends at the Groucho Club.

You wouldn't leave your car to go round the corner for a coffee. There were muggings – in the morning

By chance, Ian Dawson was taken on as a construction worker at Pharmacy, Hirst's restaurant project in Notting Hill. He'd put in an eight-hour shift, then do a few hours down at Brixton Breakers. It was sheer economics, he says, that drove people there. "It was the cheapest studio space in town, by a mile. But there was a grimness to it. I'm fucking glad that place is over. We were all just waiting to get out of there at the end."

The end, when it came last summer, came quickly. A fire spread through the breakers yard, and a week later, Gerry, the gaffer, was found dead in the alley among the rubble. The forklift he had been using to shift the burned-out cars had flipped over and crushed him. As a spectacle in a place that had seen the production of so much (museum quality) art whose theme was catastrophilia, it must have seemed grotesquely appropriate (catastrophilia: the longing for something terrible, for something that is terribly high, sad, or far, terribly mean, dangerous or lovely, as long as it's terrible).

"It was all very odd and very tragic," Dan Coombs says. "It was just like the last . . . it was like the finally horrific thing that could have happened."

Tomorrow: the godfather of Britart

Daniel Coombs is showing new work at the Zwemmer Gallery, Litchfield St, London, until May 13. Richard Clegg's The Unknown Collaboratives will be the inaugural show at the Henry Peacock Gallery, Foley Street, from May 13. Martin Westwood is with the Approach Gallery.