

# Shows about art and science rarely add up

Galleries often try to bridge the great divide with laboured, text-heavy exhibitions. Is High Society a Wellcome exception?



Poppy appeal ... Afyon by Mustafa Hulusi, currently on show at the Wellcome Collection's High Society exhibition. Photograph: Kirsty Wigglesworth/AP

Art and science ought to be perfect bedfellows. That's a funny old phrase, isn't it? But oddly, when you put art and science in (um) bed together in an exhibition, the fireworks are often lacking.

One problem is the gulf between art's instantaneity and the complexity of scientific understanding. A genius whose mind really did straddle art and science, a certain Leonardo da Vinci, argued that visual art is greater than the written word because a single image can communicate an idea more intensely, rapidly and emotionally than many words. The image grabs us; words we can take or leave. So thought a man who filled his notebooks with both.

High Society is the latest in a series of exhibitions at the Wellcome Collection in London that seeks to explore medical themes with a rich and sometimes baffling mixture of art, artefacts, books and, oh, stuff. I wish I liked these exhibitions more than I do. Their goal is beyond criticism. Their energy is impressive, and so is their intellectual ambition.

But these shows often fail to find the magic thread that would unify art and science. To me, the visual works in them tend to look like illustration – or worse, decoration – for a thesis which can only be discerned from reading the catalogue or every single wall-text, and could arguably have been made clearer without any art at all. A lot of the contemporary work they show is second rate, and doesn't help anyone understand the theme in question. The designs, too, can be pretentious, especially in the Wellcome's recent shows on Identity and Skin.

There have been some notable exceptions. The Collection's exhibition on medicine and war was superb, and featured some extremely powerful art. And High Society is also a good 'un, on the whole. It still has the feel of a congested body of argument on which the art and objects seem to be overlaid. But it's well worth a visit, because the art is actually rather good this time.

What is it about drugs that inspires good art, I wonder? No need to answer that one. With Richard Hamilton's masterpiece *Swingeing London* and an eerie video of *row upon row of poppies* by Mustafa Hulusi, you cannot accuse the show of glibly celebrating intoxication – both of these works present dark images of drugs and society. But, as one of the wall-texts says (I do sometimes read them), all societies are high societies.

I think the Wellcome project is a worthy one. I believe it can work, and this can become a truly inspiring place for art and science to meet – but, for me, they still need something extra to light the fire.

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