

Opening shots

As the autumn fine art season begins this month, *Catherine Somzé* discovers that local galleries are getting political

The first exhibition of the autumn art season is, for a gallery, the equivalent of what an opening sequence is to a film. It's a statement that should trigger viewers to keep a close eye on what happens next. It should offer a sense of the coming plot, the key players and the quality of the content ahead.

On Saturday 4 September, from roughly 16.00 to 19.00pm, art aficionados will be able to travel from gallery to gallery throughout the city to get their first glimpses at those 'opening shots'. The exhibitions that open that night – and which will stay open to the public throughout the month – reveal that this art season in Amsterdam may well be marked by playful social critique. Just as in the days of pop and dada, emerging artists and dealers are seeking to startle us with wry humour and to make poetry out of trash.

'As a result of the financial crisis, many artists demonstrate a need to address social and political issues with their work,' says art dealer Nieck de Bruijn, owner of Upstream Gallery in De Pijp. 'The trend is definitely towards the political.'

Let's start, perhaps aptly, with a show named after a film: 'A History of Violence' by artists Hans van Houwelingen and Jonas Staal at TORCH Gallery. Both artists will present recent work: Van Houwelingen a series of photographs and Staal a selection of ink drawings.

Staal, who turns 30 next year, has already been the subject of controversy in the Netherlands, most notably by placing in the public space fake death memorials to the right-wing politician Geert Wilders. Staal was accused of making a death threat against the anti-Islam legislator but was released from jail after a couple of days.

Van Houwelingen, a familiar name in the Dutch art world, puts together private and historical photographs taken in Hiroshima and Nagasaki shortly after the bombing, as a way to explore Japanese victimhood.

In De Pijp, the Upstream Gallery is presenting new works by an established Dutch artist, Marc Bijl, who's made a name inside the Netherlands and abroad with overtly nihilistic and Gothic-looking sculptures, installations and paintings. The centrepiece of



Image from the making of the sculpture 'Relics, 2010' by Marc Bijl. Ink drawings by Jonas Staal

this show is a spectacular burning Christ reminiscent of kitsch Catholic memorabilia and inspired, says Bijl, by the events of 9/11. The show might be the first in a series of shocking exhibitions for Upstream, which will fuse youth culture with topical social issues.

Witzenhausen Gallery seems to be making a more politically-minded turn this season as well, by presenting work by Amsterdam newcomer, Saudi Arabian photo-collage artist and draughtswoman Jowhara AlSaud. Her sharply minimalist and graphic style is reminiscent of Julian Opie's neo-pop figures; she takes snapshots of friends and family but then erases their faces when she translates the photographs into her signature black-and-white cartoon-like drawings.

Her work, she says, is in part a

reaction to censorship as it is practised in Saudi Arabia, where fashion images are crudely altered with black markers to lengthen skirts and sleeves and where faces on billboards are sometimes blurred out. The work is utterly moving

by virtue of the discrepancy arising between the intimacy of the poses and the anonymity of her defaced characters.

At GRIMM, American visual artist Nick van Woert, who tends to combine art historical references with products

from daily life, also responds to media culture from his home country, presenting a series of sculptures that explore America's conspicuous consumption. In the sculpture 'Haruspex', for example, Van Woert replaces the torso of a classical statue with strata of trash. Here, postmodernism meets the best of pop art. As usual, director Jorg Grimm flavours

his brand of contemporary modernism with a touch of comedy.

Elsewhere, Galerie Juliette Jongma introduces the work of American artist Melissa Gordon, who reflects on the politics of mediated images with a series of process-based paintings; and Motive Gallery gives space to fast-rising French artist Aurélien Froment with a show suggestively entitled 'Langue étrangère, langue maternelle, seconde langue' (foreign language, mother tongue, second language). Also definitely worth a look are the exhibitions at Ron Mandos, featuring new works by Anthony Goicolea, who came to fame a decade ago with trademark staged photographs featuring himself as a horde of young boys. His new show, 'Home', is inspired by the artist's double allegiance to America and Cuba. 'Home' will feature staged photographs as well as drawings, films and installations.

This may not be the easiest of art seasons, but it'll certainly offer food for thought. Wherever you look, you're sure to find something meaty to chew on. See *Galleries listings* for details.

