



Review - 20 Nov 2017

Jonathan Baldock and Emma Hart

De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, UK

By [Chris Sharratt](#)

Jonathan Baldock and Emma Hart have been on tour, or at least their three-act 'Love Life' exhibition has. Starting as a small but busy show at PEER in London at the end of last year, an expanded 'Act II' was at Blackpool's Grundy Art Gallery over the summer, and the final leg finds them on the UK's South East coast. The locations are significant: 'Love Life' takes its cue from the puppet show, Punch and Judy, which can trace its roots in the UK to 17th-century London. In the 20th century, the show's red-and-white-striped booths became a seaside holiday staple, Punch's frequently violent relationship with Judy becoming a benchmark of summertime family entertainment. But while 'Love Life' references the tropes of the show – De La Warr Pavilion's back wall is painted in vertical red and white stripes, the artists wear Punch-style large noses in a short film – it is contemporary domestic tensions that are being explored here rather than the puppet show itself.



Jonathan Baldock and Emma Hart, 'LOVE LIFE ACT III', installation view, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2017. Courtesy: De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea; photograph: Rob Harris

The scene is set with a decorative hessian hanging depicting a twee-looking house with crosshatched windows (Baldock, *Wait Until I Get You Home*, all works 2016 unless otherwise stated). At PEER, this faced the gallery's floor-to-ceiling front window; in Bexhill-on-Sea, where the first-floor exhibition space is open on one side, it faces onto the interior landing of this seafront pavilion. Peeking out from under the hanging is a garish pink carpet; to the left there's one of four booth-like interiors that resemble sparsely furnished stage sets. Dyed-red clothes tumble out of a washing machine made from pink metal tubing (Baldock, *Out Damn'd Spot!*) and works in ceramic and fabric are positioned on the floor, the walls, a dining table. A giant figure in a baby walker – Baldock's *A Guiding Hand* – acts as a slightly sinister overseer, its large pink fabric head featuring a film of a single blinking eye. Behind it on the wall, Hart's ceramic *Boohoo Boob Tube* features two squeezed paint tubes morphing into red-raw breasts. Spelt out in alphabet spaghetti in a ceramic saucepan are the words: 'I feel like I'm drowning' (Baldock, *It's Not Burnt It's Caramelised*). This is no 'Home Sweet Home', then; cartoonish and tense, it's a place to escape from, rather than to.



Jonathan Baldock and Emma Hart, 'LOVE LIFE ACT III', installation view, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2017. Courtesy: De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea; photograph: Rob Harris

The tension is ramped up further in the film, *Love Life* (2017), one of two pieces in the exhibition produced collaboratively, the other being *Jon and Emma*, a sound installation based on a 1951 Stan Freberg comedy skit. Viewed from a red velvet sofa and presented on a large wall-mounted television, *Love Life*'s portrayal of domestic drudgery and disquiet provides a narrative that links the exhibition's disparate elements. In a series of simmering conflicts that border on the slapstick, the domestic life of a couple with a young baby plays out, at turns funny, farcical, and displaying a pettiness that anyone who has ever had an argument with their partner will surely recognize. Feet are intentionally trodden on as they pass on the stairs; doors rhythmically slam; a crammed washing machine whirrs naggingly. The pair don't talk and barely look at each other, their only communication being via occasional messages written on cardboard: 'You ****ing loser' says one; 'A*?*hole' another.

'Love Life' offers an uncompromising portrayal of a couple living together, exploring both the internal pressures exerted on a relationship and the external expectations that come with family life. Yet while it captures the monotony and frustration of the everyday, it is sustained by both its humour and an almost self-deprecating shrugging of the shoulders. As it examines the stresses and problems of the domestic sphere, it also acts as a reminder that, despite all it can throw at us, equipped with an 'if you don't laugh you'll cry' stoicism, it is still possible to – yes – 'love life'.

*Main image: Jonathan Baldock and Emma Hart, 'LOVE LIFE ACT III', installation view, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2017.
Courtesy: De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea; photograph: Rob Harris*

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