



The Shape We're In –
Camden

By Helen Wilson
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Dan Attoe, You Have More Freedom Than You Are Using

Happy hours, massage parlours, bowling lanes, late night cafes and casinos – I blame Las Vegas, but these are the things that I think of when I see neon lights. Cheap, heady thrills: commercial outlets that are open for business and just waiting to take your money. So, installing neon lights in the windows of shops that have been vacant for months creates a strange sort of paradox: a conflict of extravagance and impecuniousness.

But, as part of their three-part survey of contemporary sculpture and installation, The Zabłudowicz Collection have done exactly this. They have installed three different neon light installations in two formerly unoccupied commercial properties in London, and despite or perhaps because of the illogicality of the idea, it works.

Take Tracey Emin's I Kiss You, which is located 46 Malden Road, just minutes from Zabłudowicz's London base in Chalk Farm. It is itself a paradox of form and content, combining a romantic Hallmark-esque slogan, with a sexy red blush, the result looking like some kind of dystopic sex shop sign.

Emin's is well-known for her light works that combine the seemingly tacky and seedy form of neon with deeply personal – sometimes explicit sometimes romantically heartfelt – messages. In a gallery setting these works can lose their punch, their guttural vigour. But, in this context – in the window of a former laundrette – I Kiss You, beyond anything else, appears like a warm glow of hope, a simple but tender message in an otherwise bleak and vacant window.

Dan Attoe's pieces, which sit side by side at number 56 Leather Lane twenty minutes down the road in Farringdon, carry a more antagonistic message than Emin's, assaulting the viewer with near-offensive assertions.

In We Have Simple Thoughts and Ideas the artist pairs this phrase with the neon silhouette of a long-haired man – a cross between Jesus and a stoner. This figure stares vacantly at the viewer, provoking them to defy the allegation.

In the same window, You Have More Freedom Than You Are Using, presents us with a much starker message. In it a woman, naked from the waist up, flails her arms in a sort of frenzied abandonment, her mouth agape. The outline of her body glows a vivid red and her hair a deep orange, making it look like she may be on fire. Although made two years ago, the piece seems painfully relevant now. It serves as a reminder – with the socio-political turmoil in the Middle East in mind – that we are very lucky to live in a democracy, and that we shouldn't take our freedom for granted, but should cherish it and take full advantage of it.

Both of these installations are located within the Borough of Camden and were enthusiastically supported by Camden Council who is actively encouraging the occupation of unused properties, in a bid to revitalize areas that have been worst hit by the economic depression. The artworks certainly do brighten up the formerly vacant windows, but they also do something much more than this. They act like motivational messages, calls to arms, rays of hope and a reminder of the tender feelings that keep us going, through the toughest of times.

They also suggest that the Zabłudowicz Collection's The Shape We're In (London), is going to be one hell of a show.