

## A nicely gutsy, tactile approach

Ed Lake

Last Updated: June 26, 2010 6:53PM UAE / June 26, 2010 2:53PM GMT

In his recent book *The Rational Optimist*, Matt Ridley presents a candidate for that ever-elusive quality, the essence of human nature. The thing that gave homo sapiens the edge over its rival hominids, Ridley claims, wasn't language or opposable thumbs: it was trade, and the scope it offered for industrial specialisation.

Once our ancestors stumbled on the idea of exchanging one good for another it became unnecessary for everyone to do everything. The fisherman could leave the goats to the goatherds yet still benefit from their labours simply by offering them his own excess catch. As each individual narrowed his sphere of activity, he refined his technique, becoming more inventive, more productive, more efficient. The larger goals broke down into sub-tasks. The fisherman no longer makes his own hooks; the hookmaker no longer digs his own ore, and so on. In this way, Ridley argues, prosperity can be said to evolve.

The world of art can be difficult to square away into this kind of adaptationist theory. After all, what's the point of it? A new photographic show at The Majlis Gallery brings us no closer to a solution to this riddle, but it does offer a good example of the lengths to which artists take specialisation. I remember once hearing the French sculptor Bernar Venet describe the horror of his dealers when he first departed from the geometrically regular metal curves of his early career to the wiggly metal curves of his maturity. In his own words, they told him: "Bernar, forget about it. People are not going to take you seriously if you get into something very free like this." Artists have to defend their niches.

In light of these thoughts, perhaps we can discern some grand truth about the sweep of human history in the apparently narrow preoccupations of Astrid Harrison. She's a photographer, or rather an equestrian photographer, or, to be exact, an equestrian photographer who specialises in parts of horses. Admittedly it tends to be a different part in each shot, but that has to be the next development: the fetlock photographer, the withers man. Still, until human ingenuity attains that zenith, Harrison's work offers a nicely gutsy, tactile approach to a field of fine art that is too often maudlin and twee. Her horse parts are sweating, tendinous slabs of muscle: vigorous, fleshly, alive. That, you must admit, is progress. (And don't miss Katy Donaldson's scenes of Arabian life, also at The Majlis Gallery.)

At TheJamJar this week, there's a show by the next generation of Dubai talent. Beyond the Surface collects work from 15 artists aged between 16 and 18, students at Repton School, Jumeirah College, Universal American School or Wellington International. As school exhibitions go, this one looks pretty accomplished. And nothing confers bragging rights on a collector quite like discovering a star while they're still young. If you think you have an eye for quality, shows like this are where to test it out.

Finally, next Sunday sees the opening of Fantasy on Ice at Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre. Bucking the evolutionary trend towards specialisation, Steve Wheeler's company trades on the eccentric combination of magic tricks and ice skating. Last year's Magic on Ice (a Ronseal name if ever there was one) drew favourable reports from those on the Arts desk who saw it. Don't miss the new one if you like magic, or ice, or both at the same time.

The next couple of months tend to be a slow time in the arts, so Cultural Calendar is taking a break. Until next time, then, and have an excellent summer.

### the details

#### Photography

July 3-22, The Majlis Gallery, Bastakiyah, Dubai

#### Beyond the Surface

July 1-August 31, TheJamJar, Al Quoz, Dubai

#### Fantasy on Ice

July 4-15, Adnec, Abu Dhabi

Have your say

Please [log in](#) to post a comment

---