

Exhibition Events

George Shaw Film Series

Wednesday 11 February

6.15 pm, Cinema 2

£3.50 (£3)

All five films for £15 (£12)

George Shaw introduces a specially selected series of films to accompany his exhibition. The series tracks the process of growing up, from wide-eyed childhood innocence to disturbed, disillusioned adulthood. Shaw's introduction is followed by the first film in the series, **Whistle Down the Wind** (1961) and the series continues on Wednesdays throughout the exhibition:

Wednesday 25 February

6.30pm

Stand Up, Nigel Barton (1965)

Wednesday 3 March

6.15pm

Scum (1979)

Wednesday 10 March

6.15pm

The Likely Lads (1976)

Wednesday 17 March

6.00pm

The Offence (1973)

Gallery Talks

Thursday 12 February

7.00 pm, Gallery 1

Free

George Shaw and John Burnside in conversation.

Artist George Shaw and poet and author John Burnside have a striking affinity. They discuss their perspectives on life, art and literature in an informal conversation.

Thursday 26 February

7.00 pm, Gallery 1

Free

Graham Eatough, artistic director of acclaimed theatre company Suspect Culture offers his view on the work of George Shaw.

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What I did this Summer George Shaw

Exhibition Information

'Still I think out of the dreary sameness of existence, a measure of dramatic life may be drawn. Even the most commonplace, the deadest among the living, may play a part in a great drama.'

James Joyce

The title of this exhibition gives an instant insight into the preoccupation of the artist George Shaw: **'What I did this Summer'** is the typical essay school-children are asked to write after the holidays. While this would normally record the memory of a summer, Shaw's work encapsulates the memory of an entire childhood, seen as an adult. Shaw grew up in Tile Hill, a suburban housing estate outside Coventry. The paintings in this exhibition are, with a few exceptions, based on Shaw's recent photographs of the area and are, as one critic has written, *'rich in beauty and horror'*.

Shaw's landscapes are quiet, still places. He depicts sites that would normally pass unnoticed; the over-looked, in-between places that no-one really cares for or about. As part of his formative background, Shaw is compelled by these sites and renders them intriguing through the way he structures his images and the atmosphere with which he imbues them. He removes all the signs of life and information that might suggest *when* the images might have been taken – cars, shop signs, people – making them timeless. He directs our vision to particular objects or sites as the focal points of the images. He captures a very precise kind of light,

24 January to
21 March 2004

which tends to suggest the ends of the day: dawn or dusk. But the very fact of drawing our attention to them cannot help but suggest something may have happened here. They begin to look like crime-scenes, to be scrutinised for signs of what went on.

'His paintings articulate the tension between sunshine and rain, dusk and day, shadow and luminosity, in a way which brings to their foreground a primary role for landscape as a mute witness.'

Michael Bracewell

As a child, Shaw describes himself as 'a bit poetic or a bit staying in'. He says *'everybody else would be torturing dogs. Killing each other. So you would hide your aspirations/pretentious things under your snorkel parka, literally'*. He obviously felt isolated in his interests and this comes through in his work. The landscapes are deserted, devoid of any people at all. Part of the magic of Shaw's painting is his ability to capture that feeling of solitude. He describes the moment he depicts as *'that sort of time when, as a kid, all the other kids have run off and you're left on your own ... I want the paintings to be quite lonely, like those moments when you're off from school'*.

Trees feature a lot in Shaw's work. In **Ten Shilling Wood** a single tree forms the focal point of the painting but it is completely bare of any leaves and stands on its own, rather than in an entire wood. **The Hawthorne Tree** refers ironically to a pub. The only visible growth in this painting are hedges. If there ever was a hawthorn tree it was probably cut down to build the pub! In **The Swing** the trees take on a sinister quality. The twisting silhouette of the branches seems menacing

against the sky. But nature is always present, struggling to find its way through the harsh concrete and brick of the estate: in, for example **The Shortest Day of the Year** the tops of a few bare trees can be seen above the roof of the building and in **The Middle of the Week** weeds are encroaching on the gaping lock-up, gradually taking over.

Shaw says of Tile Hill that during the day *'the place was so quiet that all you could hear were wood pigeons and the occasional train in the distance'*. This encapsulates the experience of the suburbs in the daytime. Although these are built-up areas and you can hear trains and traffic rumbling by, they are nonetheless at a remove from the city and there is some connection with nature. It's not real countryside though, but a special kind of 'suburban nature' that consists of the odd tree and patches of overgrown, undeveloped land. Only in this environment would a tree stand out as **The Blossomiest Blossom**. This painting is testament to those moments of pure joy when you witness the beauty of nature bursting through in such a predominantly built-up landscape.

One of the remarkable things about Shaw's realist technique, involving a painstaking and lengthy procedure, is his use of Humbrol enamel, which he began to use in 1996. It is an achievement in itself to control these unwieldy paints, which are available in a very limited range of colours, to produce such clear, precise, meticulous work. Shaw confirms *'it's quite horrible stuff to use. There's no real logic to it. Sometimes it's too thick to use and sometimes it's like water'*.

He likes Humbrol though, he continues *'Humbrol is a nice word. It has a nice ring to it. It sounds a bit like humble'* and this is the key to why Shaw continues to use such an awkward medium. It is suited to his work because of its association with hobbies, activities taken up to pass the time, amateur rather than professional pursuits. It is an ordinary, widely-available material, not something associated with fine art. Like its subject matter, it is real, down-to-earth.

Of course a material that conjures up images of boys painting model aircraft is also an entirely suitable choice to render the landscape of one's childhood. Shaw's work is undoubtedly nostalgic but it is far removed from the romantic, rose-tinted nostalgia frequently associated with childhood. He knows the reality of the Tile Hill estate and doesn't try to hide it, but he does add just a little of his own magic.

'More than anything else, Shaw is a poet whose subject is time slowly passing in these semi-suburban estates.'

Richard Dorment
The Daily Telegraph

A new publication accompanies the exhibition with an essay on Shaw's work by Michael Bracewell and a specially commissioned text by poet and author John Burnside. The book is available from One Five Two, DCA's Shop, price £14.95.

Born in 1966, George Shaw grew up in Coventry but has recently lived and worked in Nottingham. Shaw studied in Sheffield and at the Royal College of Art in London. He has had solo shows at Wilkinson Gallery and the Nunnery Gallery, London and Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and was a prize-winner in the 1999 John Moores painting exhibition at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. He has participated in many important group exhibitions both in the UK and abroad. Most recently this included 'Days Like These: Tate Triennial Exhibition of Contemporary British Art', Tate Britain, 2003. Shaw's work is also represented in major public collections such as the Tate Collection and the British Council. This is the first time his work has been shown in Scotland.

For more information about the work of George Shaw please ask one of the Gallery Assistants. Alternatively visit the Information Room just outside the gallery entrance where you will find books, articles and reviews of his work.

Exhibition produced in collaboration with Ikon Gallery Birmingham.

Text compiled with thanks to Jill Iredale, Museum & Galleries Studies, University of St. Andrews.