



George Shaw, 'The End of Time', 2008-9, Humbrol enamel on board, 148x198cm. Courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery, London

whowhatwhere

IN SEARCH OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN

George Shaw is known for his meticulous paintings of scenes from the Tile Hill estate in Coventry where he grew up in the 1960s and 70s. His recent show, 'Woodman' at Wilkinson gallery in east London, saw him looking again at those familiar places of his childhood and adolescence. Alli Sharma met him in Coventry where they took the bus to Tile Hill and talked about his work.

You keep returning to Tile Hill. Did that start during your time as a student?

Yeah. I don't know how I got into the Royal College at all, because my work was quite fake in some ways.

What do you mean by that?

The whole intention was quite fraudulent, as a lot of youthful work is. It was derivative and self-conscious. I was copying a lot of techniques and stylistic conceits from outsider art and the crude daubing you find on the back of toilet doors, though I could actually draw really well.

Like you were denying something?

It was replacing what was real with a style. When I went to college I realised I couldn't carry on with that, once you strip that style veneer off you run the risk of finding nothing underneath. I think I did that, and found it to be hollow. I went back to a time that I felt wasn't hollow, when I was about 15, and that



at other people having a good time.

It isn't about an angry young man escaping from the confines of his poverty-stricken background. It was more a question of me looking out the window and seeing it all but not having the tools to actually get in, and becoming totally obsessed with it. I wouldn't want to be seen looking, so I'd be peeping through the net curtain at a bloke revving his motor bike trying to impress a girl.

It's Easter Saturday today and you've made a series of paintings called 'The Passions', a series called 'Ash Wednesday' and you linked 'Woodsmen' to the period of Lent. You describe religious events as punctuating the calendar.

Yeah, stopping you sliding out of the bottom of infinity. It's just like a clock. I'm always watching the clock. I was quite obsessed with Joyce and his way of using big myth and folklore to give everyday experience the weight of mythology. The only myth I had was Christianity and I have as much belief in the Catholic God as I do in the Minotaur. And they have the same function.

Did you believe in God when you were young?

I can remember as a kid, it must have been the way it was taught, feeling like somebody was watching you all the time - along with everyone who'd died.

Even when you were out in the woods looking for porn?

Yeah, that's where I could hide.

They couldn't see you through the trees?

It sounds quite absurd but I probably still feel that now - that idea that you are being watched.

Well, you probably are - on surveillance cameras.

Probably. Like religion, surveillance cameras have no real function. They don't stop anyone getting murdered. Somebody watches someone getting murdered, then later they go and catch the murderer. That's basically religion isn't it? You can do what you want because you've got free will but at some point you will be called to account. I was less interested in the notion of God than I was in Jesus, who was much more interesting because he was a person and did ordinary things.

The son of a carpenter.

I liked that. Years ago, I was going to make some paintings based on the Stations of the Cross. I wanted to make figurative paintings centring on the body as an idea,

like nudes. I thought the best way of doing it was to make a landscape and take the bodies out and put them in the title or text.

You've emptied your paintings of people but there is always the person looking in at the scene.

Yeah and that's helped by the glossy surface where you can see the reflection of the viewer.

Because the paintings are empty I find them lonely and reminiscent of the overwhelming boredom in childhood.

Boredom is totally underrated. I think it's essential as an adult and as an artist - to be bored. Boredom produces genuine thinking, it's disturbing because it encourages free thought.

That's what I wanted to get at, being bored to tears and having to invent and be creative.

That's how I think about art. If I didn't do it I'd be bored. I've invented it as a way of doing something between now and when I die. It's that basic and fundamental but also that important. There's a fear about childhood because kids with nothing to do will generally do something destructive rather than creative. So boredom is very powerful. You have to be in touch with what's really important about the things you fill your life up with.

I get the feeling that anyone who's ever lived on a Council estate in the UK could identify with your paintings. Do you feel any sense of responsibility with that?

On the whole, I think the majority of people who've had the experience I've had growing up don't see the paintings.

But perhaps those who have and do might stop in their tracks - you don't generally see that life in galleries.

It is like that. A bit like being thumped. And I do get emails and letters. It's quite odd. But I'm not doing my work because I want the unheard voice of the common person to come through.

Well, you can't not be political, making the work you do.

No, it is there, I really don't see any sense in completing a little circuit in a very small part of human life - the art collector and the art viewer. You have to engage with the crap of everyday life. There's something great about genuine folk art and pop art, not made by artists - record covers etc. They're the real stuff that touches people's lives.

took me back home to Tile Hill. I talked to my parents, looked through my old portfolios, and started painting the place.

Do you see it as you looking for yourself or mourning a person that you once were?

When I started making the work I didn't, but now I do. I was overambitious as a kid. I was quite tall and I dressed like an art student, so at the age of 15 I walked straight into the art college and went and sat in the library. I wasn't studying books; I was studying the art students, seeing what they wore and how they talked. And so it was doomed right from the start - because you leave what you're doing and start to hollow it out right from the word go.

You don't appear to be looking back at an idealized past.

No, absolutely not. It is a warm vision though.

It comes from a love of the place?

Not of the place but of the time. Love is probably a bit useless. Respect is more useful because it gives you a

healthy regard for something and allows you to see its true worth. Love can be unbalanced.

You made a lot of work for your recent show, 'Woodsmen'.

Six months work - 14 hours a day, seven days a week. There's something about the subject of the work that's reflected in the concentrated way it's made. Work is interesting when there's no division between the materials, the thinking and the subject. They're produced out of anxiety and if they're about something it would be anxious things themselves. About running out of time. For a long time I used to think it was about time that I'd spent. Now it seems to be about the lack of time I've got left. I suppose that's because my dad died recently.

Do you see painting as a way of slowing things down?

Absolutely.

You also used that Smiths lyric 'Stop Me if You Think That You've Heard This One Before' in your press release for 'Woodsmen', and I've got this image of you now in your bedroom, drawing, with The Smiths playing, looking out

George Shaw
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Alli Sharma