

## **The old school ties.**

In a paper for a series of conferences at the Tate Gallery in the early 1990s, the artist Susan Hiller related a comment that whereas Paris has artists' cafes and New York has artists' bars, in England we have art colleges. She then went on to elaborate that the function of these British art colleges was to validate a professional path but tied to this was its nature as a socialising body. The British art education, she says, "has been a rite of passage more than a form of training, a situation where older artists influence, criticise and sponsor younger ones and where younger ones keep their elders on their toes". This relationship between master and pupil, authority and the acolyte, was neatly visualised by another artist, Tom Phillips. As an introduction to a profile of Phillips' own work on Channel 4 television, he traced his lineage from his own tutor/ master Frank Auerbach through to Auerbach's tutor Bomberg, followed by Bomberg's tutor Sickett, and so on until he reached Raphael. Many of us who went to art college can trace a similar lineage. We were all taught by artists who were taught by artists. It is a 'vertical' chronology stretching through time.

Alongside this vertical heritage is a horizontal plateau. On this plateau are our contemporaries at art college, our fellow students. We look across to their example; we learn from the work that they have done; we acquire skills that they have forged; and we take sustenance from both their encouragement and their criticism. It is easy to label this as mere influence but in both cases, tutor to student and student to student, it is more a matter of dialogue. This dialogue does not end with art college, it can last many years as can be seen with this group and their current exhibition project.

Traditionally at the centre of the art academy was the life room. Drawing the figure from life was an essential skill that all were trained to master. It is the expectation of the man in the street that an artist can capture a likeness – make a drawing of them or their loved one. Life class drawing is much more than this. It demands honest looking, and the result might not be attractive. Frank Gambino continues to work from life with the basics of drawing, a stick of charcoal and a sheet of paper. As he states "My work is a record of the time I spend drawing the people who are in my pictures." It is not just a finished result that we consider, but the event of making a drawing. Gambino has labelled his drawings as 'big ugly heads' not very flattering to the sitters but this label gives heft to the drawings as worked events.

This emphasis upon the process of making is part of the work that Anna Bisset brings to her work. Using the subject as the starting point, she explores materials, techniques and production methods. Bisset has commented upon her time spent working in an industrial foundry saying that: "making the original piece (in wood, clay or resin) and mass-producing it in metal using the sand-casting method was something I could observe every day as being an influence in techniques and methods of production". While Gambino's drawings may point to a more traditional perspective of the art academy, Bisset's emphasis upon process may be the outcome of a necessity to consider design and the links to industry. Many art colleges in Britain trace their history to the Victorian period and the foundation of design education

that would strive to take account of the new manufacturing processes, an approach that would inform design education across Europe. Art academies became colleges of art and design. This relationship between functional design and the aesthetics of art have become an important factor of visual culture, many of the practitioners exhibiting in this exhibition are trained designers and part of a contemporary industry. Industry is the key aspect to Jon Woolfenden's work. He says: "I enjoy all things oily and industrial... I visited a turbine factory; man, machine, smell and sound akin to a scene from Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis'. Not for Woolfenden the refined approach of the academy, he applies paint with kitchen knives, rollers, stencils and even an icing sugar applicator. These worked surfaces reflect wrought products of the factory worker.

Guy Thomas uses the material of industry, steel, to fix the forces of nature. Thomas orchestrates the dynamic fluidity of landscape and seascape, but the organic force has become unyielding steel. Both Thomas's practice and that of his fellow sculptor Richard Crooks comes out of late modernist sculpture as advocated by Clement Greenberg. Following the discourse set out by the American critic, the British sculptor Anthony Caro established a truly British tradition of postwar sculpture in the British art colleges of the 1960s. The bedrock of this abstract sculpture was a concentration upon the formal aspects of the discipline. As inheritors of this legacy both Thomas and Crooks inject something extra, references to the world beyond the abstract sculpture have been inserted. The forces of nature crash into Thomas's work while for Crooks international connections are made. In Crooks' work imagery from a colonial and trading past, such as the humble teapot and Indian figurines, are dismembered and squashed into the language of international modernist forms. Whereas Thomas's elemental forces are monumental, Crooks' subjects are crushed into compliance by subtle moulding.

Parallel to the work of the British abstract sculptors was the work of British abstract painters, notably the St Ives group in Cornwall. Unlike their American counterparts, the Abstract Expressionists, the St Ives painters took inspiration from the landscape. As with the sculptors who followed Anthony Caro, these postwar abstract painters would have a significant impact upon British art education. The question has always been whether the British painters just copied their American peers or whether they offered something else. It is this strand of discourse that Mark Mainwood engages with. Starting off with small scale organic forms such as insects and microbiology Mainwood produces abstract compositions that although largely concerned with formal concerns have the ambition to contain references to day to day emotions and experiences.

By the 1970s the boundaries between practices had started to melt as the postmodern era dawned. Hybridity rather than purity would become the norm. As an illustrator by discipline Danny Coupe takes delight in a very wide range of sources for his work including Heath Robinson, Carry On films, and New Yorker cartoons. Using collage and what he terms 'unlaboured' drawing, a stark contrast to the work of Gambino, Coupe processes his findings to produce images that emphasise spindly lines that move across the picture plane. Likewise Paul Lindt, a graphic designer since leaving college, has also

started to use some of the abstract devices of fine art practice in his work. However, with Lindt's work we take a significant leap forward to art colleges of the present day as Lindt uses digital technology to create his pieces. He constructs what he terms an 'abstract architecture' with the layers of computer elements. Lindt exhibited in Hoxton with the photographer Paul Tucker in a two man show titled: 'Quiet City'.

The impact of technology in art colleges has always been present. Since its birth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century photography has been the upstart. Now it is perhaps a traditional media as all are consumed in the digital revolution. Paul Tucker's photographs follow a tradition of observed street photography that stretches as far back at the French photographer Atget. His seemingly ordinary scenes are the stuff made art by the American photographer William Eggleston. As with the painters and sculptors in this group Tucker is concerned with colour and form, using the pretext of place to pull the images together into a body of work. Until recently, photography was not shown in galleries alongside other art media. By the 1980s photographers in Britain developed the photobook as an alternative space to disseminate their work. Closely related to the artist's book (books produced by artists as art works in their own right), Tim Daly has developed this format to construct books that use photography to picture events that are associated with particular sites. Daly includes discarded material, such as paper ephemera or textiles, to give his pieces a sensory aspect, consequently looking at his photographs becomes haptic as well as visual.

British art colleges has changed. Most art colleges have been subsumed into Universities and become departments of the larger institution rather than an independent body. Alongside this change in organisational structure are the changes in curriculum and the changes in working methods. New media now dominate, notably studios are now equipped with computers. Iain Cotton's practice dates back to even before the art academies. As a stone carver Cotton's work is both ancient and permanent. His work is as much part of a craft tradition as it is a part of art and design. His word sculptures and his use of the written word have strong links to Conceptual art practice of the 1970s and in particular the work of Ian Hamilton-Finley. Both old and new, Cotton's work stands stubbornly in contradiction to the immateriality of digital breakdowns. As he states: "I design and carve my own letters by hand, because I want them to be human, full of life, and distinctive rather than mass produced". The British art college of the past may have had its summer. Like Simon Ward's watercolour images of pressed flies, all we have are the ephemeral marks on paper. Ward's work encapsulates the delicacy of the fleeting moment, something that was hardly there. Most of the artists in this exhibition went to the Bath Academy of Art in the mid 1980s. What is apparent from the work of these artists is the emphasis upon crafted skills honed in the studio rather than conceptual critique sharpened in the seminar room. Although art and design education in Britain still thrives it has become something different. The question raised is what should the art college of the twenty-first century be?

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