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"George Shaw: A Day for a Small Poet" Exhibition Brochure

Item Type	Image
Authors	Shaw, George;Weeden, John
Publisher	Memphis, Tenn. : Art Department, Rhodes College
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Download date	2026-06-06 02:18:28
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/23762



George Shaw

A DAY FOR A SMALL POET

2007 january 19 through february 21
clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tn

Rhodes College is pleased to present the largest display in the United States to date of work by British artist George Shaw. In this exhibition of painted sketches engaging the mood and contextual framing of his hometown as it varies from day to day, Shaw says he's 'getting a sense of the soul of the thing.' Whereas a finished piece may take weeks of calculated reworking, these studies are more intimate notations of the feel of each scene, often completed within a day.



Shaw was born in Coventry, England, in 1966 and raised in the Tile Hill public housing estate, consistently deemed to be one of the roughest parts of the U.K. Newly built after German bombings destroyed much of that city in the Second World War, the landscape Shaw walked as a youth was a mixture prefabricated brick-clad homes, single storey strip mall shops along the main street, and a series of massive pubs constructed to represent a decidedly rosier picture of England as a green and pleasant land. Wandering through the town Shaw became fascinated with its overlooked nuances that increasingly textured his memory of the place and his presence within it.

Intermittently scattered throughout this manufactured village are corpses of the ancient Forest of Arden, the wood vaguely understood by locals to have been invoked by Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. For neighborhood teenagers, however, it served as the stage for infinite number of adolescent machinations and daydreaming just out of view of parents and teachers. A rubbish strewn clearing, a worn dirt path behind the shops, and a dilapidated row of derelict garages quickly became sites of private enquiry into the social character of the environs and the topography of Shaw's imagination.

It is these interstitial spaces, the transitional areas in between major points of pragmatic activity that are given primary focus in Shaw's work. In the blank, vacant openness, he found a certain freedom of non-definition where he could invent his own sense of self and contemplate the various and sundry kid-myths that played themselves out when no one else was watching. To this day Shaw still visits these overlooked and denigrated spots with camera in hand to document the terrain from which he derives his awareness of the world and draws meaning from life.

Having discovered a passionate talent for drawing at a young age, Shaw's was a solitary childhood devoted to poring over books on the Pre-Raphaelite painters, and memorizing passages from the poetry of Philip Larkin and writings of James Joyce. While the other boys were playing football (soccer), and practicing rolling cigarettes, Shaw was poking through the thickets and alleyways wondering what the world had in store for him, and why the pretty girls weren't impressed by his perfectly rendered drawings of post offices and flowering trees.

Due to his upbringing in the Catholic tradition, Shaw is intricately familiar with the symbolism of the Church and its myths of death and renewal. The works in this exhibition prominently feature gravestones and funerary architecture, reflect-



ing Shaw's fascination with cemeteries as places of repose and personal reflection. Produced in the last year, during which his father George Shaw, Sr., suffered a stroke and eventually passed, these works hold especial significance to the artist, as they effectually chart the last phase of his father's life, and their mutual attempt to reconcile this inevitability. As his father's health diminished they discussed such essential subjects at length, and Shaw was encouraged to develop several of the specific paintings in the series over the course of these conversations.

Of particular interest is that of the lychgate found at the entrance to the village churchyard, named after the Saxon word *lych*, or "corpse." In the middle ages the dead were carried to the lychgate and placed on a bier, where the priest conducted the first part of the funeral service under its temporary shelter. Shaw's father always maintained that, remarkably, this structure survived the desolation of the war, and is original to the church itself, both dating from the mid 15th century.

It is this landscape where the ancient rests alongside the contemporary and vestiges of the sacred stand silently amidst preponderances of the profane that drives Shaw's work. Meandering through these neighborhoods where his memory was first forged still compels his curiosity into what the world has in store for him. Accepting his inability to discern this and other ultimate answers, he continues to make paintings in an effort to light the path along the way.

John Weeden,
Assistant Director, CODA Scholars Program

This exhibition and George Shaw's week-long residency in November 2006 were made possible through the collaboration of the Art Department and the Center for Outreach in the Development of the Arts at Rhodes College (CODA).



All images are Enamel on card, 8.3" x 11.6" and courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

Cover: *Study for Poet's Day*, 2006

Inside Left: *Study for Afterwards*, 2005

Inside Right: *Untitled*, 2005

Back Top: *Study for St. Swithin's Day*, 2006

Back Bottom: *Untitled*, 2005



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