

School assembly by Mr Downey – Wednesday 3rd February 2010

I was interested to hear what David Whitely said in his assembly last week about the origins of story telling and it should come as no surprise to you that I quite like the idea of man developing his story telling through drawing. Making pictures is more basic and fundamental to our communication than we perhaps fully realise. David Dimbleby started an interesting series of programmes last Sunday about the seven ages of Britian. In it he shows his audience the vast array of artwork, sculpture, architecture, illustrations and other artefacts that have shaped our culture and heritage. It is an interesting collection and it is amazing to see the care and skill those artists and craftsmen displayed when making their work. Art seemed to take a bigger role in our culture in those distant times but our view of art today is skewed by our poor understanding of what art is for. Leading members of the arts community probably know more about current trends of thought in contemporary science than those in contemporary art. Why has science brought forth great explainers while the arts produces some of the loosest thinking and worst writing known in modern history ?

Art shouldn't always have to explain itself, nor should writers have to explain it but there should be a discussion about what art does for us, what is being learnt from it, what it might enable us to do, or think, or feel that we couldn't before.

Most of the public criticism of art is really an attempt to ask questions and art might be better served if it were not just content to create controversy but instead admitting that answering a few questions might not be such a bad idea after all.

As an artist I hate to say this but science is way ahead of the game. Science rose to the challenge and the book sales of those great explainers indicate a surprising public appetite for complex issues. The result of that debate is a fascinating dialogue about the power, the beauty and limits of science. There has been no equivalent dialogue in art. The lack of a clear connection between all the amazing creative activity and the intellectual life of society leaves the whole project poorly understood, poorly supported and poorly exploited.

There are no easy answers and I can't tell you what to like or dislike. But you should look at art more so you can begin to make some decisions for yourself. Damien Hirst

said recently that “art is what you put on the wall above your sofa”. It’s an interesting point of view but I don’t agree with it entirely.

I am often asked who my favourite artist is. It’s not an easy question to answer so I usually respond quickly without thinking too much about it. My usual response is Alberto Giacometti because I’ve loved his paintings since I was at school but if I say him then I’ll be ignoring John Singer Sargent. He was almost too talented and could he could paint anything with just a quick flick of his paintbrush. If pick John Singer Sargent then what about Gianlorenzo Bernini whose sculptures are so incredible ? He carved this big lump of marble with such skill that it is hard to believe that this small detail really is stone.

There’s more and it is hard to ignore the works of Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Cornelia Parker, Jenny Saville, Lucien Freud, Chuck Close, Edward Burne-Jones or Patrick Heron. It’s difficult to pick one there’s too much choice but this morning I am going a little self indulgent and show you 5 pieces of work that I like that do something more than simply decorate a space.

English landscape painting was at its peak in the 19th century. There was Constable of course but the ultimate artist in that field must have been Joseph Mallord William Turner. Turner was well ahead of his time and few people understood his work during his life but today he is regarded as possibly Britain’s greatest artist. Here, a small ship is caught in the heart of a storm and struggles to stay afloat. The Sea, snow and smoke from the ship’s engine have been sucked together in a swirling mass of lashing wind and spray. Turner has captured it all with the unhesitating spontaneity of a modern abstract artist. It is said that in order to capture the true atmospheric effects of a storm he had himself tied to the bridge of a steam boat as it sailed from Harwich in very bad weather.

Landscape painting is about colour, light and shade, texture and composition. It was a method of recording the changing seasons, the effects of light or simply just remembering a beautiful view. Turner does something different than simply record the scene. Here he allows us to feel the weather, to experience the sea swaying violently as the sleet, rain and sea spray pelts your face as you hope and pray that

the boat you're in doesn't capsize. Turner's skill, and his genius, was in allowing us to feel exactly the same sensations he experienced.

Some of you will recognise this as Picasso's work immediately. This painting shows suffering people, animals and buildings wrecked by violence and chaos.

Guernica is a town in Spain's Basque country. During the Spanish Civil war it was regarded as the centre of Basque culture and a stronghold of the Republican resistance movement. On 26 April 1937, the Germans, who were fighting alongside the Nationalists and using the Civil war as an opportunity for their airforce to test out new weapons, bombed Guernica.

The scene is revealed within a room where a wide eyed bull stands over a woman grieving over the dead child in her arms. The centre is occupied by a horse falling in agony as it had been speared. Above a lightbulb forms the image an evil eye. The symbolism here is not accidental and relates directly to the Spanish word for lightbulb ; "bombilla" clearly making an allusion to the word bomb.

The shape and posture of the bodies express protest while the sombre colour and restricted palette reinforces chaos and pain. The broken sword at the bottom of the painting symbolises the defeat of the people at the hands of their tormentors.

It is a painting that yells out at the outrage of the atrocity. You can see the suffering of people as they flee falling masonry, you can hear their cries of pain and feel their anguish, their confusion and loss. This is Picasso's memorial to those people who died and his demonstration against war. Some regard this as his greatest work and I can understand their point of view.

In contrast Mark Rothko's work was always something I could quite easily pass by. The Rothko's in this country are mostly dark and dreary paintings but this one in Museum of Modern Art in New York caught my eye and I was captivated by it. The rectangular expanses of colour float on the canvas. Their blurred edges make the colour vibrate with a magical quality. The colour is rich and a luminosity suffuses the painting, dissolving the contrasts of light and shade into an inner glow. Rothko's works are the embodiment of long and arduous meditation. He wanted to immerse

the viewer in a total colour experience. He said “ I paint large pictures because I want to create a state of intimacy. A large picture is an immediate transaction; it takes you into it”. Rothko didn't want his pictures to be displayed in galleries alongside other artists in a conventional manner, instead, he wanted them to be in smaller rooms or corridors on their own so you would not be distracted from the sensations he was hoping to evoke. I sat on the bench in front of it for some time and stared at it while the other visitors in the gallery passed by unnoticed. The scale and the intensity of the colour was overwhelming. For a while I lost track of time and I was lost in that painting.

This painting by Marcus Harvey first came to the attention of the public when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1997. It was not a popular painting, it was attacked in the press and was attacked by one member of the public who felt so strongly that he poured orange paint all over it. The painting is a portrait of Myra Hindley, she was regarded as the personification of evil and Marcus Harvey was criticised for glorifying her name and the Royal Academy were criticised too for displaying it. Hindley and her accomplice Ian Brady, were arrested and found guilty of abducting and killing five young children between 1963 and 1965. The bodies were buried on Saddleworth Moor near Manchester and to this day, two of the victims have never been found. The case made worldwide news and it was no surprise when the press dubbed her as "the most evil woman in Britain".

The criticism and the abuse Marcus Harvey suffered was undeserved for this is a quite brilliant painting. Look more closely and you will see that the various shades and tones are made of small hand prints, the hand prints of children in fact. Hindley's stare is menacing, it's haunting, disturbing but a closer inspection reveals the true story. It is a powerful image made even more so by way it was made.

As well as admiring the technical skill used to make these paintings, each piece has moved me to think about the story, to empathise with the victim, to feel some emotion or to experience a sensation. They are images that do more than look good - they communicate something as though they are speaking in a more fundamental language. Art has that power. It can make you think, it can lift your spirit and it can touch your soul.

My final and best piece is by the renaissance sculptor Donatello. It might not look like much but it really is an amazing piece of work. It is Mary Magdelene. She was known to be a sinner but she became one of the most devoted followers of Jesus and this portrayal of her illustrates part of her life story that is the Golden Legend. After Christ's crucifixion, she retired to live in solitude on a mountain. For 30 years she was without food but was taken to heaven by angels seven times each day. Whilst living in solitude her clothes fell to pieces but her hair grew so thickly that she was covered by it. This sculpture, carved from wood, then covered with clay is extremely moving. The first time I stood in front of this sculpture I was shocked by it. I had seen it in books and, as you do now, in a slide show but I was not ready for the assault on my senses. Her weathered features, sunken eyes, skin like leather from the desert sun and broken teeth are almost hypnotic and her skull, visible beneath the skin, reminds us of the transitory nature of all flesh. Her profuse hair alludes to both her former beauty and the humble act of washing Christ's feet. No longer a sinner, she has been purified of her sins by God's fire to become a spiritual beauty joining her hands in prayer. She is like a flickering flame pointing to heaven, enlivened by the flecks of gold in her hair.

I forgot all about that though, I forgot about the bible legend and the story of her life and instead, I saw a woman who struggled for life, who was tired, hungry and who was sorry for her mistakes. She had made sacrifices in order that she may find peace and Donatello worked to show her suffering so we may feel it too. I was moved by this sculpture in a way that I had never experienced with a piece of art before.

Donatello excelled in making sculptures that looked as though they could easily step off their plinth and join us as we go about our daily business. They had a life within them, they had a soul and that made his Magdelene fascinating, moving and remarkable. As far as I'm concerned there isn't another piece of art that quite matches it – it is my favourite, unless of course, you ask me who my favourite artist next week when, most likely, I will have changed my mind.