

PRESS RELEASE

THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY



GEORGE SHAW MY BACK TO NATURE

11 May – 30 October 2016
Sunley Room
Admission free

George Shaw, *The Living and the Dead*, 2015-16
© The Artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

George Shaw has been the National Gallery's Rootstein Hopkins Associate Artist for the past two-and-a-half years, but a fan of the Gallery all his life.

Armed with a sketchbook, the teenage Shaw made regular day trips from his home on a Coventry council estate to Trafalgar Square in order to draw from works by artists he found inspiring. In response to this enthusiasm for the Old Masters, his mother bought him an illustrated guide to the National Gallery as a birthday gift in the early 1980s. He still uses it today.

Since 2014, Shaw has been based in a studio located in the heart of the National Gallery. From here, he's had swift and unrestricted access to the Gallery to explore the collection out of hours at his leisure, draw from the pictures, observe the public, and find inspiration in great art for his own work... The result is *George Shaw: My Back to Nature*.

The world George found in the paintings of the National Gallery could hardly be in greater contrast to the estate where he grew up. Coventry's local hero, who you can barely escape in the town, is Lady Godiva, the noblewoman who rode naked through the streets to protest against unjust taxes, spied upon by the solitary man who gave us the name 'Peeping Tom'. Possibly connected to this is Shaw's teenage fascination with another legend of voyeurism: the story of Actaeon, who was savagely punished by the goddess Diana for watching her bathe. Titian's *Death of Actaeon* was one of Shaw's favourite pictures on those early visits to the Gallery. By the time George became Associate Artist, the Gallery had acquired two further mythological masterpieces by the great Venetian painter, *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto*.

During his teenage years, Shaw would often explore an area of neglected woodland around his home, strewn with abandoned rubbish. He remembers finding soggy, snail-nibbled pornographic magazines – the women in these pages providing a contemporary contrast to the nudes he was discovering populating the pictures of Titian and Poussin.

Walking through that woodland he remembers feeling “something out of the ordinary could happen at any time there, away from the supervision of adults.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given all his teenage experiences, the National Gallery paintings that have most interested Shaw during his residency feature trees as backdrops to mythical events involving incidents outside the accepted norms of behaviour, including violence, illicit sex, and drunkenness.

As a youth, he once described the National Gallery Collection as “naked women and pictures of Jesus” and as such, representations of the bloody body of Christ (as in Carlo Crivelli’s *The Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels*) also became an area of fascination, which we see explored in his exhibition.

More than 50 new paintings and drawings – predominantly woodland landscapes – are included in *George Shaw: My Back to Nature*, and feature his investigation of the clash of cultures; classical stories linked with the traces of similar, timeless behaviour in the modern world, also the portrayal of religion. Titian’s Actaeon with *Confessions of a Window Cleaner*, Poussin’s *Triumph of Pan* with Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* or Gordon Burn’s *Somebody’s Husband, Somebody’s Son*, Bellini’s *Assassination of Saint Peter Martyr* and John Constable’s *Cenotaph to the Memory of Sir Joshua Reynolds* with Hammer Horror films. The head of the Messiah as seen in *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

Some of the earliest works he made are a series of 14 self-portrait drawings in the various poses taken up by Christ in traditional *Stations of the Cross* compositions. Although Shaw is not an artist known for working from the human figure, these drawings were an important step on his way to making the work for this exhibition. By positioning them as the first thing the visitor encounters on entering the Sunley Room, Shaw encourages us to read his images of trees as carrying other, deeper ideas, rather than being just a ‘rehash’ of traditional landscape imagery.

Shaw is known for his highly detailed approach and his favoured medium is Humbrol enamel paints – more often used to paint model trains and aeroplanes – which give his work a unique, almost photographic, appearance. If pushed, he concedes that he likes the fact that they have no historical resonance. However, midway through his term of appointment, he very self-consciously ordered a set of canvases, three made up to exactly the same size as the trio of great Titian mythologies he loves so much (178 x 198cm). This triptych of paintings, his response to Titian, are individually titled *The Rude Screen*, *Möcht' ich zurücke wieder wanken* and *Every Brush Stroke is Torn Out of My Body*.

George says “*I think the best person for the job would have been me at 15 or 16. He would have been in the gallery 18 hours a day for two years. I accepted it on his behalf and did the best job I could. As it turns out the longer I spend here the earthier and more profane the collection gets. Even the religious paintings eventually get down from their high horse and meet you on your level. It’s all sex, death, bowls of fruit and flowers and the odd landscape. That may sound somewhat dismissive, but it’s kept artists busy for seven hundred years and continues to do so. As such I flip from feeling moderately confident to feeling utterly insignificant on a daily basis, every time I walk through the gallery. I have dragged these big themes through my own little history. In the woods I played in as a child I found Calvary, nymphs in the forest, the gods of drinking and naughtiness, rituals of transformation and transgression and the futile attempts to leave something behind that said I was here.*”

National Gallery Special Projects Curator Colin Wiggins says “*When the National Gallery invited Shaw to undertake this project, he was known for his representations of the crumbling urban landscape, with his subjects drawn from around the Midlands council estate that was his childhood home. After his time at the National Gallery however, this has all gone. Trees and forests replace tower blocks and lock-up garages but still showing those signs of human activity in the often rather nasty detritus we leave behind us.*”

National Gallery Director Dr Gabriele Finaldi says “*Best known for his landscapes of semi-urban dereliction, in this exhibition - the fruit of two-and-a-half years spent at the National Gallery as Associate Artist - George Shaw gives his take*

on the Gallery's mysterious wooded enclaves painted by Titian, Bellini, Poussin and Constable. By turns witty, irreverent, thoughtful, George Shaw's new works remind us that looking at pictures can be a very serious business."

NOTES TO EDITORS

ABOUT GEORGE SHAW

George Shaw was born in 1966 in Coventry. He studied Fine Art at Sheffield Polytechnic from 1986 – 89 and gained an MA in painting from the Royal College of Art in London in 1998. Solo exhibitions have included Looking for Baz. Shaz. Gaz and Daz, Void, Derry (2010); Woodsman, Wilkinson Gallery, London (2009); The End of the World, Galerie Hussenot, Paris (2008); A Day for a Small Poet, Clough Hanson Gallery, Rhodes College, Memphis, USA (2007) Poets Day, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva (2006); Ash Wednesday, Wilkinson Gallery, London (2005), What I did this Summer, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (2003). He has participated in group shows in London at White Cube, Tate Britain, Whitechapel Gallery, Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) and the Jerwood Gallery. Internationally he has exhibited at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, City Art Gallery, Prague, Ex-Teresa Arte Actual, Mexico and Fabian Walter Galerie, Basel. He was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2011.

ABOUT THE ROOTSTEIN HOPKINS FOUNDATION ASSOCIATE ARTIST SCHEME

The Rootstein Hopkins Foundation Associate Artist Scheme enables leading contemporary artists to work with a collection of paintings that were made before 1900. The appointment is by invitation and is for a period of two years. The artist is given a studio in which to make new work that in some way connects to the National Gallery Collection. It is designed to demonstrate the continuing inspiration of the Old Master tradition on today's artists. George Shaw is the ninth Rootstein Hopkins Associate Artist. For more information about the Foundation please visit www.rhfoundation.org.uk

The Sunley Room exhibition programme is supported by the Bernard Sunley Charitable Foundation.

For further information, please contact the National Gallery Press Office on 020 7747 2865 or email press@ng-london.org.uk

Publicity images can be obtained from <http://press.ng-london.org.uk>