



George Shaw. *Ash Wednesday: 8am, 2004/5*: Humbrol enamel on board. 92x121cm
image courtesy of Anthony Wilkinson Gallery

George Shaw: A Corner of a Foreign Field The Holborne Museum, Bath

exhibition review by Adrian Coleman
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The painter George Shaw named his recent retrospective for a First World War poem. Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" begins:

*If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed...*

Although a larger version of Shaw's exhibition was recently mounted in the United States, the idea of Englishness cast in unfamiliar territory remains appropriate to the show's current venue. Unusually, the disjunction is between competing visions of the same country. The Holburne Museum, known for its Gainsborough collection, is a Georgian building in a city of honey-coloured crescents nestled in a green valley. George Shaw depicts Tile Hill, the Coventry estate on which he grew up. His paintings address its unremarkable architecture, the pubs and garages fallen into disrepair, the nearby woodlands littered with beer cans. In these charged times, it is tempting to view this disparity as a survey of the fractured Brexit landscape. Jonathan Jones, in *The Guardian*, describes Shaw as "the artist of the left behind" and the "ruinous pastoral."

And yet, to pigeonhole Shaw as a political commentator, as a highlighter of difference, is to neglect the deeply human nature of his project. Shaw deliberates upon his longing for and alienation from his childhood. The exhibition's first and earliest work, "No. 57," is a painting of the Shaw family house that Shaw completed at art school. His abilities were developing, and this is the most naive picture on display. In particular, the saturated colours - the green of the front lawns, the blue of the sky - seem straight out of the pot, unmixed and without nuance. Nevertheless, other observations are intimately specific: the shifting roof planes, the various window types, the spare vegetation. At some point, every young person has produced such an image of home. One day, every adult will feel this image recede, that the place they are from is no longer the same. Shaw portrays the road between the viewer and the front door as a gulf, almost half of the panel. This is a thesis statement for the subsequent body of work.

The exhibition follows Shaw's rapid trajectory from fairly graphic compositions, painted in blocks and silhouettes of colour, to environments of exquisite detail and atmosphere. Show-stoppers include "Ash Wednesday, 8:00 am," in which a figural tree casts a cruciform shadow upon a building, and "Landscape with Dog Shit Bin," a view of a road by woods punctuated by a red box. These descriptions underwhelm because Shaw makes magnificent paintings of plain and nondescript places. He is keenly aware of change and age, the weathering of materials, the shuttering of doors.

Critics often note how Shaw creates his paintings from photographic references. The not-so-subtle implication is this practice is somehow cheating or redundant. What is the purpose of making a realistic painting of something already photographed? Those of such limited imagination should consult the website "George Shaw's Tile Hill: An Unofficial Guide" (www.scenesfromthepassion.co.uk). A devoted fan tracked down the locations of Shaw's paintings using Google Earth's street-view function. The telling contrast between the robotic snapshots and Shaw's oeuvre emphasizes that his art is not a transcription of documentary footage. Each painting does not represent a space at an instant but compresses the memories of a long relationship into a single scene aching with absence and personal mythology.

Writers incessantly remark on Shaw's preference for Humbrol enamel paint, a medium generally reserved for model construction kits. The company should have sponsored the exhibition; Shaw can claim, with little hesitation, to be the greatest Humbrol enamel painter in all of history. The paint has an obvious proletarian and nostalgic connotation, and there is something pleasantly absurd about its reappropriation in "serious" art. Physically, the implications of the paint are less evident - it could be mistaken for oil or acrylic - but it leaves a shellac-like, reflective surface. This can be a distraction, as the lights are directed away from the paintings, to avoid glare, and the viewing experience can be somewhat dusky.

The one downside to the exhibition is that its size is limited. In the single gallery, the museum also installs a series of Shaw's drawings from 2005-6. Suggesting the bedroom of a teenage boy, the subjects include Joy Division's Ian Curtis, Frankenstein, and various pornographic nudes. The drawings are technically impressive and thematically relevant in their adolescent exploration, but they do not have the presence of the paintings. The curators should have saved the precious real estate for more of Shaw's recent work. In summation, they might have selected "The Painted Wall" from 2017, a meditation on an intricately-rendered brick wall that partially obscures a council block. The barrier is crudely streaked with white lines for goal posts. This instinctive act of painting transforms a divisive structure into an altar of common ceremony.