

# REALITY:

## MODERN & CONTEMPORARY BRITISH PAINTING

**Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, Norwich**  
**27 September 2014 – 1 March 2015**

The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, in collaboration with artist and guest curator Chris Stevens, is curating **Reality**, an exhibition which brings together some of the best and most influential British figurative painters from the last sixty years.

**Reality** presents a survey of the strength of painting practice in the UK and comprises a selection of mainly large-scale works from the 1950s (except Walter Sickert's *Ennui* from 1917-18) to the present day, featuring major artists such as Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud, alongside contemporary painters including David Hepher, Chantal Joffe, George Shaw and Caroline Walker.

The work of each artist represented retains a strong reference to the real world, 'the stuff of life'. Uncompromising and direct, the works reference the body, relationships, history, politics, war, the urban environment and social issues. The selected paintings are diverse in their subject matter, but united by two things; the base, guttural reality – the harshness – that has concerned key British artists over the decades; and the simple act of painting.

Each artist included has seen painting not as a medium but as a necessity. Painting here is a discourse, a way of making art that simultaneously engages with the brutal clarity of real life, and the on-going role and language of painting as a genre. Painting is direct evidence of the artist's hand and gestures, an intimate means of self-expression, and provides an immediate way into a narrative; a sensation; an experience. While, to an extent, painting has been eclipsed as a means of dealing with reality by the Minimal and Conceptual movements, and installation, photography and film, what is clear is that some painters have continued to resolutely pursue painting as a singular activity, deliberately choosing their medium to be the means by which they represent themselves.



WALTER SICKERT  
*Ennui*, c. 1914, 174.1 x 134 cm, Tate

**Walter Sickert's** *Ennui* signifies the starting point of **The Harsh Reality**; a painting, which as its title suggests, captures the listlessness and dissatisfaction with life at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The dark, earthy tones of the interior compound the claustrophobic nature of the composition; the couple are positioned close to one another yet are looking in completely different directions, each absorbed in their own thoughts. The man wiles away the time by smoking and drinking; the woman leans thoughtfully on the chest of drawers, staring into the corner of the room imagining a more exciting and better life elsewhere. The subject of *Ennui*, the reality and banality of everyday life, has continued to manifest itself in the work of British modern and contemporary artists and is therefore a key and vital component of **The Harsh Reality**.



**STANLEY SPENCER**

*Self-portrait with Patricia Preece, 1937, 61 x 91.2 cm, The Fitzwilliam Museum*

**Stanley Spencer** is British painter of great importance and this extraordinary painting will form part of a small but significant group of works from the first half of the twentieth century which introduce the subject of 'the harsh reality' to our audience. This select introductory group will include paintings by Walter Sickert, John Bratby, Carel Weight, Francis Bacon and L.S Lowry.

*Self-Portrait with Patricia Preece* captures the agonising relationship between the artist and sitter who were lovers; a couple for whom both marriage and separation were imminent. In the background of the painting Preece is laying down while Spencer stands in front, apparently naked. His model/lover had entranced and enticed him away from his first wife, Hilda Carline, before carrying out the ultimate rejection by returning to her long-standing partner, the artist Dorothy Hepworth, shortly after her marriage to Spencer.



JOHN BRATBY

*Dustbins in the Studio*, 1954, 112 x 101 cm, Royal College of Art Collection

**John Bratby's** *Dustbins in the Studio* will form part of a small but significant group of works from the 1950s and 60s which introduce the subject of 'the harsh reality' to our audience (the group will also include works by Francis Bacon, L.S. Lowry and Carel Weight). John Bratby was a key member of the 'kitchen sink' group of artists, all of whom were interested in the 'life' that surrounded them. Bratby painted in a harsh realist style, applying paint thickly in vibrant colours, revealing the banality of everyday life in the subjects he chose to depict, whether in a cluttered urban domestic setting or the chaos in his studio.



CAREL WEIGHT  
*Fury*, 1956, 92 x 122 cm, Herbert Art Gallery

**Carel Weight's** *Fury* will form part of a small but important group of works from the 1950s and 60s which introduce the subject of 'the harsh reality' to our audience (the group will also include works by John Bratby, Francis Bacon and L.S. Lowry). The work of this prolific artist has often been overshadowed but Weight is a key component of this group and of the exhibition as a whole; his paintings are consistently melancholic, capturing the unexpected in suburbia, often referencing his own experiences of rejection, isolation and apprehension. In this fine example, the park keeper is violently reprimanding a young boy while his friend desperately tries to run from the fast approaching policeman. The 'fury' of the man wielding the large stick is accentuated by the flowing contours of the wall and path. The aggression and anxiety that Weight has imbued in the painting perhaps relates to his own experience of being hit by a terrifying school master and the consequential fear of different people that developed throughout his life.



FRANCIS BACON

*Portrait of P.L.*, 1957, 159.6 x 126.7 cm, SCVA

Francis Bacon, along with Lucian Freud and David Hockney, played a pioneering role in the reinvention of figurative art in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bacon's masterful work, *Portrait of P.L.*, reveals 'the harsh reality' of human relationships in the most confrontational way; Bacon's violent lover, naked, is constrained by a 'cage' within a room, looming over us and confronting us with his piercing stare.



L.S. LOWRY

*Bargoed*, 1965, 122.2 x 151.7 cm, The L.S. Lowry Collection

**L.S. Lowry's** *Bargoed* will form part of a small but significant group of works from the 1950s and 60s which introduce the subject of 'the harsh reality' to our audience. This select introductory group will also include works by John Bratby, Francis Bacon and Carel Weight. Lowry's bleak portrait of the almost apocalyptic Welsh colliery town, Bargoed, reveals the land immersed in a veil of white coal smoke, creeping its way through the valley and entwining itself around the chimneys and buildings. There are no people in this painting, perhaps reflecting the artist's own experience of being alone in the latter part of his life. Lowry's dedication to the industrial landscape and his relentless portrayal of the harshness of everyday life make him an absolutely vital component of **The Harsh Reality**.



DAVID HOCKNEY

*My Parents*, 1977, 194 x 194.1 cm, Tate

**David Hockney** has played a pioneering role in the reinvention of figurative art in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and this poignant work by one of Britain's most significant painters complements beautifully the work by Sickert painted over 60 years previously. *My Parents* deals with the fundamental nature of figurative painting; Hockney has painted exactly what he sees while conveying not only the emotional relationship between his mother and father, but of that between his parents, himself and the viewer. The artist has imbued the painting with symbolic references to create a narrative and is a dedication to love and commitment; to the 'harsh reality' of relationships and growing old; to the differences and similarities that unite and separate us.





JOCK MCFADYEN

*The Street*, 1980, 173 x 173 cm, Courtesy of the artist

In 1981, **Jock MacFadyen** was appointed Artist in Residence at the National Gallery, London. During this period the painter resolved to make the observed world his subject rather than the witty conjectures with which he had graduated from Chelsea School of Art in 1977. The first pictures to emerge in the early eighties were populated by the waifs and strays of pre Canary Wharf London. MacFadyen, like many others, was part of that diaspora of artists which had taken to the East End since the late sixties and he has always claimed that the figures in his work of that period were not inventions but sightings of individuals and events of the time.

(Text taken from <http://www.bournefineart.com/Artist/p/artist/960#biography>)



TERRY SETCH

*Once Upon a Time there was Oil III, Panel I, 1981-2, Tate*

**Terry Setch's** forty year engagement with the conflict between man and nature, prompted by the Torrey Canyon oil tanker disaster of 1968 has resulted in a series of works which capture situations of chaos and hopelessness. Pushing the boundaries of figurative painting, Setch's emotions run through the canvas of *Once Upon a Time there was Oil III* as the simplified form of the central figure, head bowed, carries a carcass from the fire and surrounding debris. It is this ability to evoke feeling and passion through the medium of paint which makes Setch an important component of **The Harsh Reality**.



TONY BEVAN

*Tender Possessions*, 1986, 210.5 x 119.5 cm, British Council

**Tony Bevan's** psychologically charged portrait of an ageing tattooed punk, fingers adorned with rings and cigarettes, is at first appearances confrontational and aggressive; the thick dark lines and red and orange tones are harsh. What is slowly revealed, however, is a vulnerability and anxiety in the subject; his eyes stare out, desperately trying to hold onto the identity of his youth while dealing with the fear of mortality as his glasses suspend from a cord that hangs around his neck. This tender portrayal of a person clinging to the edges of society makes *Tender Possessions* a valuable and vital component of **The Harsh Reality**.



**GRAHAM CROWLEY**

*The Chain Store*, 1987, 203 x 254 cm, Middlesbrough Council/MIMA

**Graham Crowley** is a painter of great importance, whose conviction of the validity of paint has led him to produce works of varying style while maintaining a narrative of political, cultural and personal concerns. He is a commentator for injustice: of social upheaval and trauma and political wrong-doing. *The Chain Store* is a fine example of Crowley's work; the luminous layers of paint conceal dissent, subtly highlighting the significant and harsh social transformation whereby an economy of production was becoming an economy of consumption.



GRAHAM CROWLEY

*No Such Thing*, 1993, 168 x 240 cm, Courtesy of the artist

*No Such Thing* depicts Dormanstown, a massive run-down housing estate built by the Dorman Long steel company in 1946. In the early 1990s, **Graham Crowley** was an artist-in-residence as part of the Riverscape Drawing Project based on and around the River Tees. Most days he would drive past Dormanstown on the elevated and aptly named Trunk Road, where he observed the North Sea appearing 'above' the estate and fusing with the sky. Crowley was unaware at the time that this was one of the estates involved in the Cleveland child abuse scandal in 1987. *No Such Thing* is an attempt to reflect the sense of alienation and abandonment that working class people were experiencing under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. In 1987, during an interview with the weekly magazine 'Woman's Own', the prime minister went on record as saying, "There's no such thing as society".



PAULA REGO  
*Snare*, 1987, 150 x 150 cm, British Council

**Paula Rego** was born in Portugal but is a British citizen. She is a prolific painter who in essence, captures the experience of being female, in all its harsh reality. She creates disturbing scenarios in which the narrative is ambiguous. Rego's paintings tell stories, containing human drama based in part on childhood memories.



LUCIAN FREUD

*Standing by the Rags*, 1988-89, 181 x 150.5 cm, Tate

*Standing by the Rags* embodies the character of the exhibition in the most masterful way. **Lucian Freud's** intense scrutiny of his subject and his use of thick textured paint has produced a painting of great physical presence, revealing the body with all its blemishes, contours and crevices.



CHANTAL JOFFE

*Untitled (Face)*, 1994, 133 x 109 cm, Royal College of Art Collection

**Chantal Joffe** is an artist whose work refers directly to photography and the moving image. She is interested in women and their bodies, how they are portrayed in the media, in fashion and in pornography. Her paintings appear effortless, painted with huge brushstrokes, but through these layers she reveals a reality. On the surface her subjects appear in control, in charge of their destiny but there is vulnerability, a feeling of unease that confronts the viewer. The 'face' in *Untitled (Face)* is that of a woman, whose ear is being tongued by a person appearing on the left-hand side of the canvas with a kiss from another coming in from the right. These 'extras' challenge the notion that this is just a portrait of a face. Is it a still from a pornographic film? Is the woman participating in this act or is she attempting to escape the unwanted affections/intrusion of the people next to her? Her eyes look like they are pleading, her smile fake, so who exactly is in charge here? Joffe's work confronts the harsh reality of how women are portrayed, used and manipulated in contemporary society and is a vital component of **The Harsh Reality**.





GEORGE SHAW

*Scenes from the Passion (The Path on the Edge)*, 1997-8, 43 x 53 cm, Royal College of Art Collection



GEORGE SHAW

*Scenes from the Passion: Late*, 2002, 91.7 x 121.5 cm, Tate

**George Shaw's** work epitomises the concept of **The Harsh Reality**. His dedication to the depiction of his home town, Coventry, reveals the mystery of the mundane, the absence of human life and the unfamiliarity of the familiar. Shaw portrays the narrative in his paintings with great subtlety, almost tenderness; his streets and buildings are deserted, allowing his own emotional response to the ties of suburbia to creep in and take hold. *Scenes from the Passion (The Path on the Edge)* portrays an overgrown path that runs alongside a non-descript housing estate; the path holds secrets of misadventure and menace while *Scenes from the Passion: Late* depicts a disused row of garages, condemned to vandalism and decay.



PHILIP HARRIS  
*S.P. Behind a Glass Door*, 2001, 132 x 305 cm, Private Collection



PHILIP HARRIS  
*Arizona (work in progress)*, 2014, 152.4 x 305 cm, Courtesy of the artist

**Philip Harris'** work is confrontational both in subject matter and in the size of canvas on which he chooses to paint. His dream-like figures are suspended within an ultra-real world; there is an ambience of discomfort as we question the events that may precede or follow what is being presented to us. Harris also questions the judgements we may or may not make when faced with ambiguity.



DEXTER DALWOOD

*Grosvenor Square*, 2002, 268 x 347 cm, Saatchi Collection

**Dexter Dalwood** is a British painter of both national and international importance and it is imperative that he is represented in **The Harsh Reality**. *Grosvenor Square* is a fine example of Dalwood's preoccupation with the memorial and description of historic people, places and moments, both real and imagined. Grosvenor Square is home to the American Embassy and has been a place of protest, most famously for the anti-Vietnam demonstrations that took place there in the late-1960s. Dalwood has depicted the statue of President Roosevelt, a power figure, surrounded by upside-down trees. These are a direct reference to Georg Baselitz' inverted trees which he saw as symbols of human cruelty. *Grosvenor Square* was painted as events leading up to the Iraq War began to escalate, and captures an eerie calmness before the 'harsh reality' of war unfolded.



JOHN KEANE

*Hopeless in Gaza (Road to a Settlement)*, 2002, 137 x 183 cm, Flowers Gallery

**John Keane** has two interests – ‘the process of painting, and...why human beings want to kill one another for political ends’. His work focusses on many of the most pressing political questions of our age; he has always been deeply concerned with conflict - military, political and social - in Britain and around the world and his subjects have included Northern Ireland, Central America, and the Middle East, sometimes working with organisations such as Greenpeace and Christian Aid. *Hopeless in Gaza (Road to a Settlement)* and *Inconvenience of History II* (below) were the result of photographs and films of the people and places he encountered in the Middle East as part of a project facilitated by Christian Aid. Keane’s *Hopeless in Gaza* is perhaps one of the most shocking and moving paintings in the exhibition. 12 year old Mohammed al-Durrah was killed after being caught in the crossfire between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian security forces in the Gaza Strip in 2000; the incident was broadcast worldwide and Muhammed was hailed a martyr. Instead of the wall against which Muhammed and his father had actually been crouching, Keane has painted them in the middle of an open road, an expanse of land around them. This positioning emphasises the fact that they had nowhere to hide, that they were visible and had been attacked without any way of defending themselves. Keane’s sensitive yet unabashed narrative of political injustice and murder of an innocent young boy provides a way of understanding the horrors of modern warfare.



JOHN KEANE

*Inconvenience of History II*, 2003, 86 x 122 cm, Flowers Gallery

The *Inconvenience of History II* represents a personal account of what **John Keane** saw on his two trips to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories with Christian Aid. The scene in this painting depicts Saffuriyya, an old Palestinian town whose population was evacuated in 1948, some to nearby Nazareth, and many to the West Bank. The background is an area of the town now completely obliterated by forestation, the couple in the foreground now homeless. The Israeli authorities have failed to recognise the land rights of the indigenous Arab population, deeming them to be 'absent', but when it comes to taxation, they are 'present'.



RAY RICHARDSON  
*Everything is Everything*, 2005, 106 x 97 cm, Courtesy of the artist



RAY RICHARDSON  
*Our Side of the Water*, 2012, 137 x 127 cm, Courtesy of the artist

Ray Richardson paints from life – the people he sees, that either live on his estate or down his street. There is both affection and attitude in his work; they are atmospheric, moody and sometimes humorous.



CECILY BROWN

*Maid's Day Off*, 2005, 200.7 x 198.1 cm, Hiscox Collection

**Cecily Brown's** paintings contain an element of narrative and hints of 'the real' but are distorted, playful, tactile, challenging our perception of figurative art. Her subjects, often pornographic in nature, are hidden behind a veil of seemingly chaotic brushstrokes; the harsh reality of what is there only slowly revealing itself after the viewer has invested time in looking and experiencing the work. Brown is a key figure in contemporary painting practice, making *Maid's Day Off* a valuable and vital component of **The Harsh Reality**.



ALISON WATT  
*Hollow*, 2009, 183 x 183 cm, Ingleby Gallery



ALISON WATT  
*Black Star*, 2012, 183 x 183 cm, Ingleby Gallery

**Alison Watt** demonstrates a deep fascination with the possibilities of the suggestive power of fabric. She creates monumental paintings depicting richly draped cloth, showing closely cropped folds, gathers, tucks, and creases—all sensuously developed from a selective palette of white, grey, burnt sienna, cadmium red, and yellow. Her works represent a more subtle and contemplative element of the exhibition; they have a strange, sensual quality suggestive of human presence, or absence, conveying a sense of the traces left by the body on the surrounding fabric.





SAM JACKSON *Querelle*, 2009, 60 x 60 cm, Private Collection

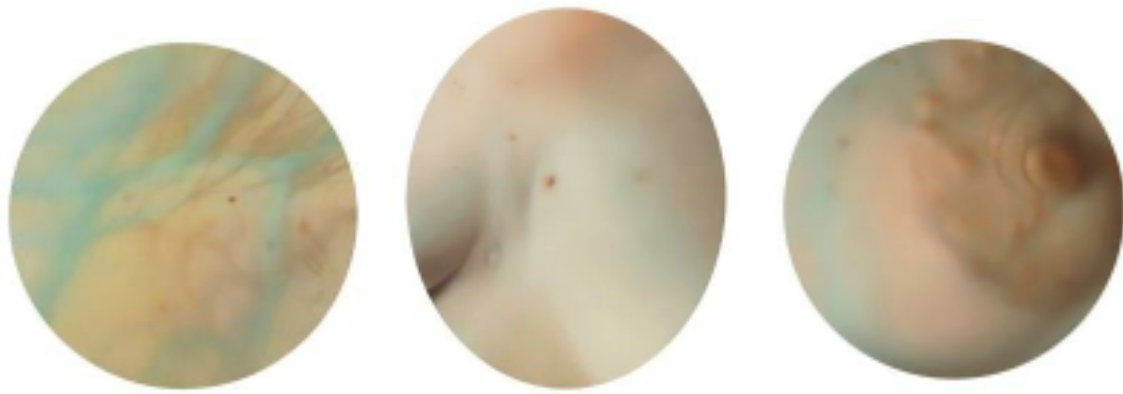


SAM JACKSON *Vas Defrens*, 2009, 60 x 60 cm, Private Collection



SAM JACKSON *Young Gorbachev*, 2009, 60 x 60 cm, Private Collection

**Sam Jackson** works small-scale and recalls in tone and atmosphere the work of Old Masters'. He is an artist who's dark and intimate portraits are imbued with a stark psychological intensity; the subjects emerge from the shadows, confrontational yet often with vulnerability. There is violence and sexuality in his work as the artist manipulates and contorts the paint around the canvas. It is Jackson's dedication to paint and to his dark subjects that make him an exciting and vital component of **The Harsh Reality**.



GWEN HARDIE

(l-r)

*Body 06.29.11*, 2011, 76.2 cm diam., Courtesy of the artist

*Body 03.30.09*, 2009, 91.4 x 76.2 cm, Courtesy of the artist

*Body 03.20.12*, 2012, 76.2 cm diam., Courtesy of the artist

**Gwen Hardie** paints small portions of her skin which is magnified to reveal all its perfections and imperfections, beauty, textures and flaws. She is interested in how the human eye records and perceives information and how the eye is different to the camera lens as a tool for observation.

Hardie chooses to depict her own body and skin as it is so familiar and real, and she is fascinated by how it serves and defines us. Both intimate and monumental, her work challenges our perceptions of the body, ourselves and others.



JOCK MCFADYEN

*Tate Moss*, 2010, 200 x 300 cm, Courtesy of the artist

**Jock McFadyen** is a dedicated painter whose subject is the observed world. From his studio in the East End of London, he creates epic landscapes of urban wastelands; a subject that has preoccupied him for over 25 years.



DAVID HEPHER

*Tree*, 2010-11, 208 x 810 cm, Flowers Gallery

For most of his career, **David Hephher** has painted tower blocks and towers. He sees himself as a landscape painter, rather than architectural. He is capturing the lives of inhabitants who he has chosen to omit from the canvas. Despite his use of concrete and other materials there is a sensitivity to the hopelessness and decay that emanates from these buildings.



KEN CURRIE  
*Dirty King*, 2011, 275 x 198.5 cm, Flowers Gallery



KEN CURRIE  
*Hunting Lodge*, 2011, 244 x 366 cm, Flowers Gallery

**Ken Currie's** works are from a recent series of claustrophobic and imposing paintings of fictitious power figures. The men and women cling to power, wealth, fame or class, believing they are immortal. But his portraits stare mortality in the face. The powerful think they can cheat death but they can't. Several of his works feature mirrors, doubles, and doppelgangers; they are mediation on the nature of what portraits are, and the nature of the self. What are we exactly? When you look in a mirror, is that you? Who are you?



CHRIS STEVENS

*The Age of Reason or Salem's Lot*, 2011,  
170 x 180 cm, Courtesy of the artist



*Anthem to an Embittered Youth*, 2011,  
170 x 180 cm, Courtesy of the artist

The figures in **Chris Steven's** work challenge the preconceptions we have about people. The works are concerned with identity, class, race, gender and the environment.



KATARZYNA COLEMAN  
*Admiralty Road 1*, 2012, 70 x 90 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



KATARZYNA COLEMAN  
*Admiralty Road 2*, 2012, 70 x 90 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

**Katarzyna Coleman** takes a softer and subtle, slightly melancholic approach to the depiction of the harsh buildings and roads of Great Yarmouth, stripped bare of decoration and inhabitants, and perhaps provides a more contemplative element to **The Harsh Reality**. The rhythmic composition of the industrial and urban landscape, bathed in sunlight and obscured by shadows, will provide the viewer an opportunity to reflect on their own surroundings and the very real emotional attachments that bond us to the places we encounter.



CAROLINE WALKER  
*Illuminations*, 2012, 240 x 305 cm, Franks-Suss Collection



CAROLINE WALKER  
*Consulting the Oracle*, 2013, 193 x 175 cm, Private Collection

**Caroline Walker's** paintings are voyeuristic; her women seem unaware that they are being observed, either half-clothed or naked. They appear to be in limbo, waiting for something to come along to alleviate their mundane existence but is something sinister about to happen? Walker's interest is certainly in creating a feeling where something might be amiss. But she is also interested in how people relate to architecture; about the psychological possibilities of architectural space and how it relates to gender.





ALAN MACDONALD  
*Spam Dragon*, 2013, 190.5 x 215.9 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



ALAN MACDONALD  
*The Candy Man*, 2013, 190.5 x 215.9 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

**Alan Macdonald** paints the harsh reality of our subconscious, our hopes and dreams, and the way all of these things are moulded together to form who we are. He confronts the difficulties of being an individual, of being ourselves without being self-conscious. He draws to attention the feeling of not understanding what we are about or who we are. Macdonald's historical references relate to figures who are out of time, lost, trying to work out the universal question 'What the hell am I doing here?' His masterpieces are theatres for dreaming – he wants us to just look and absorb his work without any inhibitions or restraints.



CLIVE HEAD

*Looking Glass*, 2014, 198 x tbc cm, Clive Head/Marlborough Fine Art



CLIVE HEAD

*Les Souvenirs du Cafe Anglais* (work in progress), 2014, 198 x tbc cm, Clive Head/Marlborough Fine Art

**Clive Head's** work has always been concerned with looking around a space. In these two new works he has extended this much further by looking through objects, bending space and developing layered and multiple images whilst still being about the here and now of the urban landscape. In these meticulous and glorious paintings he has created his own distorted reality.