

Francis Davison and Jack Shanahan – Support Notes

24 November 2007 – 20 January 2008

About the artists

Francis Davison (1919 - 1984)

- Davison studied at Cambridge and had begun as a poet. He moved to St Ives in 1946 at the behest of his friend Patrick Heron. There he met artist Margaret Mellis (who was recently separated from fellow artist Adrian Stokes). Davison and Mellis moved to the south of France before settling in Suffolk in 1950. The landscape paintings of this time betray the impact of Cornwall in their economy of colour and descriptive elements and are close to the work of William Scott and Roger Hilton. By 1952 Davison had begun to work in collage. They supported themselves as chicken farmers.
- Davison asked that no biographic information be included in the catalogue of his Hayward Gallery exhibition in 1983. He also excluded dates and titles from all of the collages on show. Consequently, the focus remains fixed on the works themselves with few external clues to the artist's intentions. This deliberate act by Davison insists that the viewer brings their own interpretations to the compositions.
- The paper is more often torn, than cut, which creates movement and a feeling of freedom in the compositions (visualise any of the collages with perfectly smooth, regular edges around each of the shapes and all the life seems sucked out of them).
- Davison was happy to limit himself to the available paper colours and worked within that palette. In comparison, painters have infinite choices for colour variations and combinations.
- It is difficult to place Davison's work in chronological order as he often reworked older collages many years later, transforming them and thereby creating new compositions.

Jack Shanahan (1983 -)

- Jack Shanahan lives in Dublin where he has been supported by Stewarts, a foundation dedicated to the provision of lifelong care, regardless of the degree of intellectual and other disability experienced by its service users. He is about to take up a place on the Certificate in Contemporary Living course at Trinity College, Dublin and has represented the interests of people with learning difficulties at conferences. This is his first exhibition and the work exhibited has been selected from his many sketchbooks.
- Shanahan works almost exclusively in felt pens, drawing strong black outlines and then filling the spaces with fields of colour. The effect is reminiscent of stained glass and is equally effective in both his abstract and figurative compositions.
- Shanahan takes inspiration from the world around him and his personal interests. This can range from something as everyday as a garden shed or traffic lights through to something as personal as his favourite football club (Manchester

United). While apparently simple, they can often display acute observation and wit.

- Some of his works are grids or snakes of colour, divided into squares or bands; some derive from letter forms. In these works, the relationships between colours dominate, creating a visual rhythm and spatial sense that are not dissimilar to Davison's collages. Sometimes the black outlines bleed into the colours, creating a smudgy effect that reveals the hand of the artist and his technique.

Points for discussion in the gallery

These questions are predominantly about opening up discussion, sharing ideas – both listening to others and speaking - and developing skills for describing what one sees.

Davison

- Why do artworks have to be contained within a rectangle? What is the effect of an irregular outline? How does the artist know when to stop?
- What does the image remind you of? Does it matter if this was not the artist's intention?
- Without any information outside the image itself – what can we focus on and talk about instead? (colour, line, shape, texture, pattern, rhythm, composition, scale, how it makes us feel, what it makes us think about, how the artist made it, the space that it is exhibited in, etc)
- What kinds of words do we find ourselves using?
- Without the use of shading, how has the artist created depth in his composition? (layering, dark colours recede)
- What shapes and textures are repeated in many of the compositions?

Shanahan

- What are the differences between his figurative and abstract images? Do you prefer one or the other – why?
- Shanahan images are a combination of strong lines and bright colours – which aspect do you think is more important to his work and why?
- How do these images make you feel? How has the artist elicited this response?
- How would it be different to experience these images in a sketchbook, rather than in a gallery space?

Both artists

- What is the effect of having no titles and no reference to the external world? How does that make you feel about the artists' work?
- How much do we need to know about an artist to enjoy their work?
- Select one work from each of the two artists that you feel are linked in some way. Discuss your reasons with a partner/group.

Links with the Kettle's Yard house

There are many associations that can be made between the artwork in the gallery and the artwork in the house. When you book a visit, please tell the Education Officer if you intend to use both spaces. There is more information about the Kettle's Yard artists on our website: www.kettlesyard.co.uk.

Titles

- Francis Davison asked that his collages not be titled or dated when they were displayed at the Hayward Gallery in 1983. Jim Ede did not include labels next to any of the artworks in the Kettle's Yard house (although there is a guide book available). How do we look at artworks differently when we don't have this information available?

Cornwall

- Davison's early career was in St Ives, a town famous for the artists who have taken inspiration there, including many in the Kettle's Yard collection.
- Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo and Christopher Wood were among the first modern wave of artists to respond to St Ives. The fisherman Alfred Wallis, labelled a 'naïve' painter, was a huge influence on the development of Christopher Wood's practice and was greatly admired by Nicholson. Nicholson and his second wife, Barbara Hepworth, moved to Cornwall in 1939 and she remained there until her death in 1975. All of these artists are in the collection.
- Patrick Heron, who encouraged Davison to move to Cornwall, was one of the next generation of St Ives artists, including Roger Hilton and William Scott, both represented in the Kettle's Yard collection.
- What are the links between the collages of Davison and the abstract compositions of Hilton (or the use of colour by Scott)?

Naïve Art

- Shanahan's pen drawings may be reminiscent of Bryan Pearce's paintings in the house. Both artists work with strong, repetitive outlines and flat blocks of colour. They have sympathy for colour harmonies/combinations and their work has simplicity and directness in its execution.

Collage

- Jim Ede collected many collages by the Italian artist Italo Valenti. Many are in black and white, in stark contrast to the bright and varied colours of Davison's work. However, both worked on a large scale, experimented with the texture of torn paper, and played with the idea of the picture plane and advancing/receding forms.

Poetry

- Davison's early interest in poetry recalls David Jones, a Welsh artist who was also a poet. Jones was a good friend of Jim Ede's and we have examples of his delicate paintings and lettering in the collection. Could you write a poem in response to one of Davison's or Shanahan's compositions?

Further reading and extension

Davison's work taps into many ideas and art movements.

- Look at the affinities with the St Ives art scene, particularly Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo, and the next generation, particularly Patrick Heron, Terry Frost, William Scott, Roger Hilton.
- Collage was first exploited in Cubism and then used in Dada and Surrealism and later on, by Pop artists. For examples, look at Pablo Picasso, Hans Arp, Max Ernst, Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton. Also look at late career collages of Henri Matisse and the recent exhibition at Kettle's Yard by Arturo Herrera.

Other Davison literature

Julian Spalding, Hayward Gallery catalogue, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1983

Patrick Heron and Julian Spalding, Redfern Gallery catalogue, 1986

Margaret Mellis, National Life Story, Archival Sound Recordings, Collection: Artists' Lives, British Library

Alan Powers, Austin Desmond Gallery catalogue: Paintings and Collages 1948-83, 2006

Biography of Margaret Mellis - b.1914 (wife of Davison)

Painter, maker of reliefs and collages and sculptor, born in Wu-Kung-Fu, China, of Scottish parents. Moved to Britain as a baby, was educated in Edinburgh and attended the college of Art there, 1929-33, her teachers including Hubert Wellington and S J Peplow. A postgraduate award and scholarship enabled her to study and travel on the continent, where she was taught in Paris by Andre Lhote.

From 1935-7 she held a fellowship at Edinburgh College of Art. Then studied at Euston Road School and in 1939 with her first husband, Adrian Stokes (she later married Francis Davison), moved to St.Ives where they became key figures in the artist's colony. There she was influenced by Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo and adopted a Constructivist style, making reliefs, returning to painting after the war, when she lived for two years from 1948 in the south of France. Returning to England in 1950 she went to live in Suffolk, settling in Southwold, where found objects and driftwood were employed in her work.

Exhibited widely in group shows and had many solo exhibitions, including AIA Gallery, Bear Gallery in Oxford, Redfern gallery and a retrospective at City Art Centre, Edinburgh, 1997, Victoria & Albert Museum, Ferens Art Gallery in Hull and other public galleries hold examples. (source: www.waterman.co.uk/pages/biography/37.html)