Costume and Power

For this exhibition we have taken the unique opportunity to present this collection of historic paintings in a new way.

We have put aside the time periods in which they were made, and in some instances the reasons they were painted, and instead grouped them into four loose groupings. This allows us to see the works afresh, to create our own tales and connections between the historic works themselves and the works being produced today.

Why do we dress the way we do? What does what we choose to wear mean?

In historic painting, the colour blue (being the most expensive paint) was used to show wealth and importance. The Virgin Mary is often depicted in blue. Kings and queens or the most important person in the image is shrouded in blue cloth. So when did we change from blue to white to symbolise purity? Why do brides wear white, when only 150 years ago any colour was bridal? Does lace signify wealth, detail, craft, or class? Or does lace hint at something more sensual? More dirty?

Was Smith toying with the idea of the importance of the blue shroud when he painted the girl in blue? Or did he just need to paint her at that moment in that dress, struck by her beauty? In the same way does Schulz's drawing hint that he believes Anthony is less beautiful or more beautiful then the work of art he sits in front of? Does our dress have a code which tells other people something about us? Hattrick and Sangster utilise these elements of fashion to present us with objects related to style. Just as we have a fashionable style today, can this be captured in an object which is not a garment?

What does your favourite outfit say about you?

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Travel

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In this section all of the works that we present remind us of travel, either to beaches and parks as children or to day-dreams, wishes, the places we imagine going to. We are always interested in what the audience, you, and us, bring to the art. Where do these works take you?

What at first sight seems like a beautiful Venetian canal actually depicts a prison.

Venice seems so familiar, so instantly recognisable, even though I am yet to visit, but then again the Old Ouse Bridge in York looks so alien, so ancient. Paintings are the only record we have to help us visualise this bridge.

So just as Google Earth or holiday pictures today show us things that we have not experienced ourselves and render them recognisable and familiar, paintings present us with snapshots of the past. But these images can be tricky; a still life with exotic lemons appears to actually present us with oranges. A winter sea can be both beautiful and terrifying. The artists' experience always shapes the image they create, so we must question if our memory of travel as reliable as someone else's idea of a place? How reliable is any notion of a different location unless we are experiencing it ourselves?

Where does art take you?

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The Everyday

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The works in this section are a celebration, or investigation of the everyday, the events and objects that surround us and the beauty or the secrets that they contain.

Drinking in the tavern, an age old pastime; a tower; landmarks you walk past every day; a bouquet and a table setting. These all seem very normal but can be filled with meaning or memory. The husband and his mistress are caught after one too many at the ale house; the still life is in fact the aftermath of the banquet, the left-overs from the ruling classes, left to decay. The poolhall is infact completely made up from props in a small artist's studio in London. Roses or carnations can mean love or death. Birthdays and tables laid for breakfast. All tell us something about the society that they came from, the time they were made and relate to the time we are in now.

Objects have meanings and help us to work out who we are and what we stand for. What do the objects and scenes in these works say to us? What do you think the artist was trying to say? Is the abstraction of an everyday scene a destruction of the normal, or a personal way of experiencing?

What is your most precious everyday object?

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Narrative

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This section of the show really sparked our imaginations, each image hints at something going on elsewhere; they tell stories, some familiar and some we bring to the works ourselves. The works present us with cliff-hangers to ponder. What are the two young sitters looking at out of the side of the picture? Why would the man in the painting be hiding behind it? What, or whom, is he hiding from?

The same image can be interpreted in many ways according to your own unique memories and experiences. What clues do the images give to what is happening in the stories behind the images?

What tales do you see?

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