

Exhibition Guide

Boyd & Evans

Views

18 July – 2 September 2012

First and Second Floor Galleries

David Theobald

Deepest Sympathy

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Tower Room

IKON

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Artist-couple Fionnuala Boyd (b.1945) and Les Evans (b.1944) have been working together since 1968. Their paintings and photography explore the act of looking, points of view, dreamlike landscapes and strange moments where scenes are frozen in time. Relationships between figures and objects are ambiguous, a subtle surrealism pervades the scenes and imagery combines the epic with the banal.

The following text is taken from an interview with the artists, June 2012.

How did your collaboration start?

Boyd

In our final degree shows we both exhibited the same work ... Then after moving to London suddenly we were bereft of all the things that go with being a student; someone looking at your work, discussing it, making you answer for it, suddenly nobody's interested. We used to sit around doing drawings as a group. At that time it was in a climate of lots of 'happenings', artists working together doing performances. So we began by talking together about ideas and then trying them out, each providing the other with some sort of quality control.

Evans

We built in an idea that if we ever disagreed, then we would do both versions. We did this during a series of ten paintings – our first set of pictures – and one image we did twice. After that there was a sense of release. We realised we didn't have to contest it or fight for the 'right one' and eventually we found that we just agreed.

Boyd

The experiment is still going on. We still have the option to work separately, but we might have to have breakfast separately as well!

Why do you describe your work as 'narrative painting'?

Boyd

Labels are always hard but we stuck to 'narrative painting' rather than 'photo-realist painting', which was how people wanted to describe our work, because that's a very different thing actually ... we are interested in our paintings being about something, representing a moment, and what might happen next. It's not that it's an illustration and that we're telling you an idea ... we put elements in a picture and you have to find the story. Rather like film stills on a poster outside a cinema, they are part of a story, part of a narrative. We are giving you this one section, sometimes two. You will see in the exhibition there are several that belong to each other. That's the best analogy for what we are doing ...

What is the influence of Surrealism on your work?

Evans

As a student I was really interested in Dada and Marcel Duchamp. Surrealism has always been an interest from early on and that hasn't gone away; Magritte, de Chirico ...

Boyd

The wonderful thing about paintings is that you can have ambiguities, which you can't have so easily with words. You can with poetry but not with just words. We really like that effect. You can have two or three things that are perfectly plausible, until you put them together.

What is your relationship with different types of landscape?

Boyd

Our earlier landscapes were the ones we found going up and down the A1 and around the village where we lived, in Leicestershire.

In 1977 we had a wonderful Bicentennial scholarship that took us to America. We travelled and fell in love with the American landscape and the desert. For the last ten or twelve years we've been going back there whenever we can. In the American landscape we are particularly interested in where man meets the wilderness, and there is wilderness there in a way that there isn't in Britain. In America you get the feeling that there are still parts of the landscape that

have yet to be walked on, and you can easily get lost, or killed by the weather. But you think you are miles away from anywhere, or haven't seen anyone all day, and then there are a line of telegraph poles or tyre tracks ... The other thing that happens is that the wilderness takes back the man-made things very quickly. The images are a celebration, we love being there. The big skies allow you space to think.

How has the way you use photography changed over the years?

Boyd

We are exploring the act of looking but particularly with cameras. We've always used cameras for practical reasons. A lot has changed since we started. People believed photography was a true representation of 3D and we used it that way, as source material.

Evans

We were very aware of using that language. We wanted our pictures to 'convince' – for the story to be convincing – to help us represent something, for example, a man running. Very soon we found that we were constantly carrying cameras rather than sketchbooks.

Our attitude to painting is photographic and our attitude to photography is painterly ... there are means of expression open to you when you are playing with a digital photograph. What we like about photography is that it's a language that everybody recognises ...

Boyd

Cameras, as we all know, art historically, alter or change or dictate the way you look. A lot has changed, because now we can do anything we like with a photograph ... that belief that people had isn't there, but I think there is still that language of understanding space that people use. Some of our images are to do with photographic mistakes, classic things you shouldn't do ... a tree growing out of someone's head or people being cut off at the edge of the picture, but that's quite fun to explore too.

We never really left painting though despite the break; *High Time* (1980) marked a return to painting for us from the late 1970s after the trip to the States, when we had used photography for practical reasons. It literally was, 'high time' ...

What has been the impact of digital technology on your work?

Boyd

Initially we thought that computers would speed things up and sort out a lot of problems. We're talking quite a long time ago, when digital manipulation was first on the scene and it cost about £100 per hour to use a very clumsy machine, very basic, with about 256 colours. When it finally became something we could afford we thought we could design paintings on-screen because we always used scissors and paste before, cut things out, used projectors ... But then we discovered that they become something in their own right and they lead to different places.

The Colour in Black and White series is something we discovered. We take photography seriously and we take a lot of photographs ... but often looking at them, we were disappointed with what we'd got. We had been painting on black and white prints as part of an exhibition. So we tried draining the colour from everything in a colour print, except the lake, or the salt pool, or the sky, or the building, whatever it was that had attracted us in the first place. And suddenly we got back our magic.

Evans

Something that we hadn't planned is that there is an association with the American landscape of black and white photography, and so by making these pictures with the objects in them, we felt we were also bringing in this history of the American landscape – Ansel Adams, Edward Weston. There was a good marriage that was accidental. We didn't plan that.

Anecdotes (2004–2007) is another result of the fact that we continually take pictures, and we had lots of pictures of interesting things that weren't, in themselves, worthy of a complete work. Taken together, there is something of the character of travelling on the continuous horizons of the American landscape. There are a lot of anecdotes about people's attitude to extraterrestrials ... The Extraterrestrial Highway is 100 miles long and goes from *Ash Springs* (2007) to *Warm Springs* (2003) and there is this cafe that has no other reason to exist, the 'Little Aleinn', near Area 51 ...

There is also this phenomenon called a 'shoe tree' in quite a few places in the desert, where people for some reason decide they have finished with their shoes and they throw them on a tree and eventually the whole tree is covered ... one of them got cut down in an act of vandalism and the locals got very upset ...

All our work is collage in a way but a lot of our photography is found objects, which is a surrealist idea. So with *Salt Pool* (2004) that is the true colour, it hasn't been manipulated as many people think, we just found it and recorded it.

Boyd

We manipulate images but we don't manipulate the facts.

Evans

A lot of the images are 'stitched'; we don't get enough pixels from our camera so a lot of the images are taken in parts and put together in Photoshop. Interestingly, this is bringing up different attitudes to composition. If Photoshop had existed in the 1960s, we would probably never have taken up painting ...

What is your interest in film?

Boyd

If you were to ask us what our main influences are, it wouldn't be paintings, it would be cinema. We used to spend all our time at the cinema.

Evans

We are interested in surreal filmmakers, like Bunuel, and also the more existential work of people like Antonioni, Goddard, Fellini ... in fact film is surreal altogether.

Boyd

American films have had a huge influence, in terms of sets and locations ... I think it all looks like a film, our own film, when we're travelling. When we're driving it's like looking through a screen. We can't get over that idea of a European looking at how they think America is; it's still magical. As a child we used to get *Arizona Highways* magazine, so there's that and films as a background and we thought we knew what it was like, but it never is. It's still a wonderful surprise. So yes, films are the thing.

Catalogue

A full colour catalogue accompanies the exhibition priced £18, special exhibition price £15. Visit Ikon's online shop at www.ikon-gallery.co.uk/shop for the full range of Ikon's catalogues and limited editions.

Associated Events

In Conversation and Book Signing

Wednesday 8 August, 6.30–7.30pm – FREE

Join artists Fionnuala Boyd and Les Evans as they discuss the inspirations behind their career, paintings and photography with Ikon Director Jonathan Watkins. Boyd & Evans also sign copies of the new exhibition catalogue, produced exclusively by Ikon. Places are free but should be reserved by calling Ikon on 0121 248 0708.

Boyd & Evans' exhibition *Views* is supported by LewAllen Galleries and Flowers Galleries.

Views is presented as part of the London 2012 Festival.

David Theobald
Deepest Sympathy
18 July – 2 September 2012
Tower Room

David Theobald is a video artist born in Worthing in 1965. Although originally trained as a chemical engineer, he pursued a career in finance for fifteen years, living both in New York and London. Ten years ago he decided to change profession and dedicate himself to becoming a full-time artist. Most recently, Theobald's main works have been animations structured from photographs, scanned images or single frames extracted from video footage, blending these together to create a familiar yet alien environment. These may be structured as conventional films or as continuous loops with no discernible beginning or end.

Deepest Sympathy (2011) is a short digital animation depicting a biography conveyed through the medium of greetings cards. As a virtual camera tracks around the display rack in a shop, we move through an individual's loves, successes and tragedies: childhood birthdays, exam passes, career development, marriage, birth, divorce, retirement and death, each event accompanied by the bleep of a cash register. In so doing, one person's unique story is catered for by a set of pre-packaged events and standardised sentiments available for purchase.

For more information about these artists and our off-site programme please visit the Resource Room where you can find a selection of books, audio and film.

If you have any questions about the exhibition please ask the Visitor Assistants in the gallery.

Ikon Gallery, Brindleyplace, Birmingham B1 2HS
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