

Exhibition Guide

Steven Shearer
Second Floor Galleries
30 May – 15 July 2007

This is Canadian artist Steven Shearer's first major solo exhibition in the UK. Comprising new and recent painting, drawing, photo-collage, text and sculptural pieces, it reveals the conceptual rigour, technical accomplishment and eclectic nature of his practice.

Since graduating from Vancouver's Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design fifteen years ago, Shearer has developed discrete bodies of work exploring issues surrounding teenage identity and social class inherent in Heavy Metal culture. At their core lies a vast accumulation of images predominantly drawn from the internet but also including magazine clippings and found photographs. Meticulously, idiosyncratically catalogued according to subject matter, (files include 'First Band/ Groups' – amateur bands performing or offstage from 1950 onwards and 'Bags and Rings' – under the eyes; so far unused), this archive provides Shearer with the raw material from which to generate his work. Democratically posted on the web or published in fanzines, Shearer likens the imagery he is dealing with to 'folk art', offering glimpses of a predominantly male, working class culture resonant with his own background and upbringing. Born in Port Coquitlam, a suburb of Vancouver, Shearer identifies with the teenagers, often overlooked, who express their feelings of alienation, isolation and cultural impoverishment in the language and posturing of rock and metal music. By occasionally including pictures of himself within the work, he tends to resist ironic interpretation, and, as he explains,

"Making art about only myself would be boring to you; making art about only somebody else would be boring to me."

Shearer's 'archive' works, at once, illustrate their titles and suggest multiple readings. *Puffs*, for example, is a somewhat surreal selection of snapshots including a man smoking a pipe, a child blowing bubbles, a puff of smoke, pursed lips and

an inflated parachute. Figures are seen to be both sexual and sinister, comical and naïve. In *Owls Butterflies Corpsepaint*, the visual variations on a theme suggest previously unconsidered, graphical associations and in *Slumber*, hundreds of sleeping people appear to be on the threshold of another world, undergoing some kind of ecstatic transformation or evoking a death-like stillness.

Some images included in the 'archive' works are also reworked as exquisite, figurative drawings, obviously alluding to art history. In *Longhairs*, individuals from various bands are rendered in red crayon in a style reminiscent of old masters such as Brueghel or Dürer. *Moonlight* depicts the 1970s teen star Leif Garret beautifully drawn in blue ball-point pen, not only referencing the style of Degas but also the absent-minded, inky doodles of bored teenagers. Vivid colours in paintings such as *Boy with Orange and Green Face* echo the style of Symbolist painters such as Munch transforming an innocuous image into a picture of sickly decadence and teenage angst. Shearer thus ties together motifs from popular culture with high art, providing a critique of social privilege whilst celebrating universal, everyday creative expression.

Poems XIII comprises seven drawings of phrases compiled from Black and Death Metal song titles and lyrics, carefully selected from a series of websites cataloguing the various sub-divisions of metal music from around the world. The more over-the-top or intense the language of these poems becomes, the more absurd and comical too. The words often recall notions of the sublime, albeit in an unconventional way, resulting in the kind of exaggeration that instils hilarity in teenagers. The intention is not to gratuitously shock or be sensationalist but instead to use humour to animate aspects of contemporary life. At first glance the work seems to be printed but on closer inspection the hand-drawn nature of each poem is betrayed by an occasional smudge.

In addition to the work presented here, Shearer presents *Poems*, a new work as part of Ikon's Eastside programme. The upper-case text has been scaled up and adorns the outside wall of Ikon's new Eastside space at 68–70 Heath Mill Lane, B9 4AR. Also there are two limited edition multiples available for purchase from Ikon Shop.