

Dianne Owen frps, “*Creative Consciousness*”

Durham Photographic Society, 29th March 2012

An Appreciation by John Cogan

Joe’s eloquent and gentle vote of thanks at the end of an evening with Dianne Owen raised one of the fundamental issues of the time spent with this whirlwind of creativity. Joe had, like so many of us raised on darkroom chemicals and using pieces of cotton wool screwed into a loop of wire to dodge parts of an image, wondered if there this was all there was. The frustration of not being able to “push the envelope” must have struck a chord with many of Thursday’s audience. Here was a photographer who had seemingly torn up the “rule book” and showed us there was no rule book anymore. We were able to shape our work in whatever form and whatever genre we chose.

At the tea break, with the images displayed around the room, heads were scratched, beards tugged and the mental cogs whirled. We had time to let our initial reactions settle like specks of **sand** in a glass of water. Was this photography? Or was this something else? Was it art? How could anyone transform an image of two **Great Tits** into something that could easily pass for the work of the great Canadian wildlife artist Robert Bateman? For some of us each image could have been a painting without the paint; and there were plenty of references: the watercolours of Eric Ravillious; the subtle effects of Margaret MacDonald (wife of Charles Rennie MacKintosh); the wonderfully vibrant sensuality of Sir William Russell Flint’s watercolours; the explosive experimentation of the Glasgow Boys. To say Dianne’s work is painterly is an understatement and not one, **I suspect**, she would disagree with.

Adhering to a set of self-imposed restrictions, Dianne takes only what her camera offers. The serendipity of what appears on the screen of her Apple Mac is what she accepts and works with. There is no second chance: if the image isn’t “THERE” then it’s consigned to the recycle bin. With her music playing and a glass of red wine close at hand she imports her own brushes; arranges her elements adding and subtracting until the symphony becomes clear. Her work, when complete, is tight and subtle and her objectives well-defined... yet, how instinctive is her work? Is there a master-plan? Apparently not! It is what “happens” that counts.

The work of many artists who paint (like Sir Stanley Spencer) demand you step away from the canvas to appreciate the coming together of each brushstroke. Close-to the confusion of colours and shapes destroys your understanding. With many of Dianne's images it is the intimacy of standing close that is essential. The carousel with its mother and child can only be fully appreciated inches from the surface. It is then that the depth of the black, the impenetrable shadows and the steel-nib quality of the work overwhelms you. "Bible-Black" (as Dylan Thomas would say) and stark against the unforgiving white of the paper, fine lines etching the past, present and future consigning the child and her mother to be frozen in that moment.

The still-life pictures with random elements carefully arranged have a shock when seen from inches (sorry, centimetres) as the details coalesce. The fish knives and the accidentally disconnected bird's leg compete with a slate and pieces of chocolate for the prize of most detailed and watercolour-like element on the "canvas".

That quality of suddenly arrested motion is another thread that runs through much of Dianne's work. There has been no past, nor will there be a future, for her subjects. This is obvious when she works on images of the Gormley men but the past lives of her birds or the monk-like man have been shorn of their contexts. They spring fully formed and "in the moment" onto the canvas/gloss paper or whatever *Permajet* product she chooses as suitable for the image. And this choice of hardware is as crucial to the final result as any other element in her workflow. Of her subjects; we must accept them as they are. There is no compromise with Dianne's imagination. But we do not need to compromise nor do we seek to alter what we see. Each image is complete within its own context, happy and secure within its own "world".

This is where Dianne has taken her imagination; whether fuelled by Captain Kirk or not. This is her particular vision. And here is probably the most important lesson learned from the evening. If we forget the advice to make sure a mirror image is never identical on both sides; if we decide not to use the many overlays she uses; not to import *Liquefy* or wrap light bulbs in *Clingfilm*, we will realise that with the advent of digital imaging and photo-processing software, we are all involved in the creation of a NEW form of photography. The old boundaries are crumbling and though we may scratch our heads and pull our beards (those of us who have them and I'm not being deliberately sexist... honest Angy) this is a process that cannot be stopped. We are

witnessing a radical redefinition of the creative arts and just as music for the cinema has become the new, accessible classical music allowing contemporary composer to produce work that few can relate to, so we are filling the vacuum left by experimental artists. Damien Hurst and the like have vacated a position that we can now occupy and people like Dianne are shining a light into the darker corners. My only disappointment is that she doesn't use mist!

John Cogan