

# FLYING WITH THE CROWS

ONE HECTIC WEEK OF ART, IRRITATION AND DELIGHT

Jim Crace

I have not meant to create a work of art, something warranting display, though my travels over the coming week might make me wonder if that is what I've done, unwittingly; then its imagined gallery caption would have to read, "*Crow Flies*" (or "*My Greater Neighbourhood*"), 2014, **Mixed media – graphite, marker pens, emulsions, found map, collage** and "Here the artist utilizes an established if outdated mode of orientation -Sheet Seven of the *Ordnance Survey Routemaster Series (Wales and West Midlands)*, 1 inch to 4 miles, 1986- to investigate and play with notions of dislocation and upheaval and to explore issues around dimensionality."

Yes, it is an uncomfortable admission for a man of my age who nevertheless imagines himself progressive and enlightened, but a lifetime of visiting exhibitions and reading bloated descriptions of *the work* has left me cynical and impatient; impatient with myself, as well, for seeming staid and blinkered. I and -truth be told- almost everybody else who frequents galleries have tussled over recent years with what a younger generation of *producers* and *makers* wants to pass as Art and what they have to say about it. We -the oil and water generations, the ones brought up on canvasses and paper rather than on formaldehyde and shark and whose only installations have been the picture frame and pedestal - expect to gurn at contemporary art with our eyes narrowed and our eyebrows raised. At least we're not expecting to be bored.

This is spring, the season of the Turner Prize. The judges are already in deliberation, so I cannot help but wonder, with more than an edge of mischief, what they'd make of my *Crow Flies* if I submitted it. I suspect they would value the caption more than the work for, as the Guardian's arts correspondent, Mark Brown, writes, this year's four finalists -including a You Tube artist, a video maker and a photo/audio story-teller but not a single painter or sculptor- will be considered "a bit dour" and baffling. It is as if the judges "want us to

struggle with meaning as much as the artists seem to do,” he says. I’m baffled, certainly. And struggling, too. It’s *kunst* and *kampf* for me.

My conjecture about the prize-winning prospects of *Crow Flies* is not entirely mischievous, however, for already hanging on the walls of deservedly well-regarded Midland galleries are at least three contemporary works which are unnervingly close in appearance to my own unwitting piece. They are Rita Donagh’s *Ordnance Survey Birmingham 2004* (“**Pencil, gouache and tracing paper on ordnance map**”)<sup>1</sup> and Gregory Dunn’s pair of matching printed maps of Anglesey and Snowdonia (“**Ordnance Survey, vinyl lettering**”)<sup>2</sup> which he has overlaid in black text with the titles “Better than Sex” and, in Welsh, the slightly racier “Yn well na ffycin.” Also there are Richard Long’s prints, of course; his map-based tracery of Irish rivers, his *Amazonia as a Tree*.<sup>3</sup>

I find these art works / map works oddly moving in ways that surely can’t apply in any equal force to *Crow Flies*. Can that only be because they are mounted on the walls of galleries and have, therefore, already been assessed as worthy of attention by judicious and experienced curators? They are, in other words, validated by professionals and that allows us, the wary and untutored spectators, a reason to be trusting, or credulous. Or can it be that maps are lovely anyway, and that the attraction of them in these galleries is no greater than if they’d been sat-naved on a smart phone or flipped open in a gazetteer. If it’s the second of those two, then how can I be sure who I’m admiring here? Is it Donagh and Dunn? Or is it the Landranger and Routemaster team in the OS offices? Is it the thieving magpies or the stolen jewels? These gallery artists or curators must explain themselves, we feel, or at least defend their appropriations. And so they often -far too often- do. Dunn, for example, says that his work is an exploration of “geo-emotional encounters” rather than those of “psycho-geography”. And the exhibition catalogue adds that the artist’s concern is “with the inter-relationship between the corporeal body and the physical natural world; how material affects and how material is affected.” I am none the wiser. But, despite the bafflegab, these are undoubtedly objects of power and of beauty and I am drawn to them.

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<sup>1</sup> *40 Years of Women Artists* from the Permanent Collection at the New Art Gallery, Walsall.

<sup>2</sup> From *New Art West Midlands 2014* at Birmingham Museum & Art gallery

<sup>3</sup> *Richard Long Prints 1970-2013* at the New Art Gallery, Walsall

I would prefer, of course, to explain the unwitting decoration of *Crow Flies* more plainly and in the style in which I wish all artists and their curators would address the world in captions or in catalogues. My map is personal: after forty years of living within comfortable walking distance of Birmingham city centre, we have moved out into the Worcestershire countryside south of Redditch, the world capital of roundabouts. I am feeling as giddy, out-of-place and gone-astray as anybody would after so long in one house and in one district; so, to help me get to grips with our new patch, I have decorated this local map and blue-tacked it to the wall above my computer screen.

The map predates the M40 motorway and much of the orbital M42 is marked with broken lines to show that it is still under construction. This is no longer a serviceable road map, in other words. So it has not been an act of vandalism to tear along its weathered creases and remove an oblong centred on Hive Cottage where we now live and which I have stickered with a small star. I have also, using an old school compass and a thick red pen, marked on the map a circle pivoting at the cottage; it has a six-and-a-quarter inch radius and so encloses everywhere within twenty-five miles of us, *as the crow flies*. Indeed, I have attached some paper crows in silhouette, flying off the top. They are fitting totems of our new life. The city garden where we used to live could only boast some roguish magpies and the occasional jay, and then only if there were autumn apples going spare. But here the sky is hectic with corvids all year round. The jackdaws and the rooks are most numerous but it is the ponderous and solitary crows sculling through the weather on their determined routes that satisfy me most, their sense of purpose and their calmness, and their innate understanding that -to use the recent and annoying business axiom- If you fly with the crows, You get shot with the crows, or Mind the Company You Keep. They have plainly never gone astray. From that height, every where's a map for crows; our three dimensions (our "issues around dimensionality", I ought to say) are their two.

Outside the circle, using first some pale -or more exactly, Indian Cotton- emulsion paint left over from decorating and then a swipe of timbercare in forest green, I have smudged out, as being beyond the borders of our new locality, as being almost out of range, all the other towns and countryside of OS Sheet Seven. Finally, in what I imagine to be bird-like lettering

-it's black and feathery- I have added the title CROW FLIES. This is now my Greater Neighbourhood.

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My Greater Neighbourhood in Birmingham for four decades was the flush and liberal one common to most British cities. I was complacent about the variety and abundance on my doorstep, of course, and (at least until the cut-backs) took it all for granted. I had a buzzing network near at hand; a choice of parks I could walk to, say - or supermarkets within easy reach - or libraries and swimming pools - or restaurants. We were always *popping out* or *nipping over* because everything we wanted seemed so close and effortless. We hardly needed to use the car.

So it was with art. I was living at the centre of a web. I was spoiled for choice. The Midland Art Centre's many display spaces, for example, were in short walking distance. And whenever I had an hour or so free it was a simple and speedy matter to jump on a bus and revisit the three local galleries with which I have become devotedly familiar: BMAG, pronounced Bee Mag (the solid but not in the least stolid municipal Birmingham museum and gallery); the Ikon (an adventurous advocate of contemporary art over the past fifty years, and now fruitfully if a little incongruously rehoused in one of the city's loveliest surviving Victorian redbrick buildings); and, a couple of miles down the towpath of the Birmingham & Worcester Canal, the delightful, idiosyncratic Barber Institute on the old university campus. It's the first purpose-built centre for the study of art history in Britain. Despite a snooty acquisitions policy imposed by its benefactor in 1932 (Nothing produced after 1899, thank you kindly) the Barber's art deco galleries house a world class collection. It now includes, praise be, more recent works which brazenly break the Barber rules, including a Leger, a Magritte and -my favourite; the one I want to slip into my bag- Howard Hodgkin's *Artificial Flowers* (1975); its joyful, heartfelt oranges and greens are the final colours at the final door and placed there, I suspect, to divide opinions as visitors depart, to send them home elated or dismayed.

After forty years of visiting these three buildings, much of what I encountered became entirely and sometimes boringly familiar, of course. But I have not been troubled by such repetitions. We demand surprises from our galleries, and periodic challenges, but yet one more humdrum rendezvous with something we already know a bit too well can be rewarding too. Familiarity is just as likely to nourish and deepen intimacy as it is to induce yawns or breed contempt. (Think music here. Think marriage, too.) I have therefore never tired of the Cornish and St Ives tendency in BMAG's modern rooms, for example, its Ben Nicholson, its Barbara Hepworth, its Terry Frost and its Patrick Heron; and there are fine *en plein air* works too from Birmingham-born, Walter Langley, the founding father of Cornwall's Newlyn School of romantic realists who died nearly a century ago but recently has found a new audience in supermarkets: his portraits of West Country fishermen, their fleets and their grieving wives have been appropriated and printed now on pilchard tins.

I have also grown to love -against my instincts- the BMAG pre-Raphaelite collection, though that is partly because of a faint family association with the group. My Victorian predecessor, John Gregory Crace, whose firm designed and decorated the interiors of the Brighton Pavilion, Chatsworth House and the Houses of Parliament, along with many other buildings, has a drawing-room chair on display amongst Birmingham's Morrises, Burne-Jones and Rossettis. It was made to William Holman Hunt's designs in 1859 and its delicate Egyptian-style structure of mahogany and sycamore wood, inlaid with ivory, can only have survived more than a hundred and fifty years of wear and tear because decades of museum attendants have stopped me sitting on it, despite my assertion of family rights.

I have my habits at the Barber, too, an unadventurous, repeated pattern of paces and pauses that never fails to leave me spending non-believer's time with crucifixions by Hans Memling (school of), van der Weyden (circle of) and Odilon Redon (himself) but wasting none on the comparable but less affecting *Christ of the Cross* by Cima da Conegliano. So, too many times to count, I have proceeded, chronologically and counter-clockwise, as if on autopilot, hardly varying the route from the medieval to the modern, through the Barber's four main rooms, named liked characters in a Quentin Tarantino movie -the Green, the Red, the Beige, the Blue- until that final Hodgkin, the only exhibit in the collection not yet entirely endorsed by time, taste and fashion, kicks me back out into the open air.

Still, I cannot be the only Brummie whose life has been so agreeably patterned with such well-worn and well-oiled grooves, whether they have led from gallery to gallery, or store to store, or pizza parlour to balti house. Routines are not always deadening. But they are not testing either. Or refreshing. So I began to wonder a couple of years ago if these urban grooves had deepened into ruts. Without a doubt, one of the impulses to move away from Birmingham after forty happy years in a city that I love, has been to haul myself out of the old furrows and start etching in some new ones. But change is risky. There must be losses. Now that we have finally moved into the Worcestershire countryside, I fear I'll no longer be spoiled for choice. Certainly, there'll not be handy galleries. I'll have more fields but fewer canvases.

In fact, it soon becomes evident that my local art world has blossomed rather than faded. Our little agricultural cottage tucked away in the cleft of hills and fields with what must be England's feeblest radio, television and telephone signal, is however well connected to the exhibition scene. We are at the epicenter of a gallery glut – but only if we are prepared to drive a short distance, up to twenty-five miles. Nothing, really. The circle on *Crow Flies*, my augmented Routemaster map, encloses at least nine good galleries. The three Birmingham favourites are still no more than four Ordnance Survey inches and sixteen crow miles away from home. What used to be a half-day trip, a visit to the Compton Verney galleries in rural Warwickshire, is now a short drive to the east, across our county border; set up by the Littlewoods millionaire, Sir Peter Moores, in an Adam-designed mansion at the centre of Capability Brown parkland and draped with his collections of British folk art, northern Renaissance works and Neapolitan paintings, the gallery also stages some of the best-curated temporary exhibitions in the country. And what I cannot help but think of as *the 4 Ws* (that's galleries in **W**alsall, **W**olverhampton, **W**orcester and **W**arwick University), plus the outstanding Herbert in Coventry, with its striking coxcomb roof, are alluringly close. Half an hour, with a backing wind. All within my new Greater Neighbourhood.

Three more galleries -one at Nuneaton and two others in National Trust properties at Dudmaston Hall in Shropshire with, most notably, its Hepworth and its Ernst, and Upton House in Warwickshire (Canaletto, Stubbs and Hogarth) lie teasingly beyond reach in the

Indian Cotton regions of my OS map and -according to the campaign of visits now forming in my imagination- are just a wing beat too far for me to *nip across* to.

However, as I discover trawling the web and fishing through my What's On guides, I am still ruined for choice. Not only can I encounter several important permanent collections (Is there anything more satisfying and various than the Garman Ryan collection in Walsall? Is there a more adventurous gallery in the whole country), I can also -on that very day- choose between transitory exhibitions by George Grosz (*The Big No*)<sup>4</sup>, Grayson Perry (*The Vanity of Small Differences*, six tapestries on the subject of taste and class)<sup>5</sup>, Henry Moore and Rodin<sup>6</sup>, and Richard Long. Also there are world class shows of pop art, photorealism (*50 Years of Hyperrealistic Painting*)<sup>7</sup>, two retrospectives of twentieth century women artists<sup>8</sup>, the annual BP portraiture show<sup>9</sup>, St Ives seascapes (*Song of the Sea*)<sup>10</sup> and a themed, portmanteau collection called *Exposed; The Body in Art*<sup>11</sup> which finds convincing cause for a Rembrandt and a Durer to share wall space with Bacon and Picasso. So it provides, work by work, a thorough sweep across the centuries, testing and ageing our responses on the way, asking us to realign our moods across gaping historic and emotional spaces but with just a step or two between exhibits, until it reaches *now* – or the closest to now that a retrospective can get, in this case a 2009 C-type print by Gillian Wearing of an eerie, doll-like and tightly buttoned portrait of Lily Cole, the model.

What most attracts me and excites me, though, is a multi-sited show called *New Art, West Midlands*. It's partly located in Wolverhampton and also distributed across Birmingham between BMAG, the Barber, and Grand Union, a new canal-side gallery I've not visited before and cannot find at first (though hunting for it in the nascent art and ailing industry quarters of Digbeth proves to be a tonic.) Twenty-three recent graduates from Midland fine art colleges have been given room and wall-space to display their strongest work and

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<sup>4</sup> At the New Art Gallery, Walsall

<sup>5</sup> At the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery

<sup>6</sup> At Compton Verney

<sup>7</sup> At BMAG's Gas Hall

<sup>8</sup> *For the Record* at BMAG's Waterhall Gallery and *40 Years of Women Artists* at the New Art Gallery Walsall

<sup>9</sup> At Wolverhampton Art Gallery

<sup>10</sup> At Worcester City Art Gallery & Museum

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry

perhaps to be rewarded with the title Best in Show, along with cash prizes, gallery residencies, and the seductive possibility sometime soon of a solo exhibition; it's the kind of money, work and attention that earnest artists cannot admit to wanting more than anything! I can be their phantom judge, I think. Here is the opportunity I've been waiting for – a chance of coming closer than is usually possible for an outsider to seeing what new kids on the block might be achieving in the years ahead, a chance to measure my suspicions and my prejudices against a body of fresh, young work, a chance to discover how rusty my reactions have become. Am I'm still young at heart, or old?

I mark my overabundance of choices on *Crow Flies* with coloured stickers. On such a large-scale map nothing seems too far away. So it occurs to me in a moment of playful indulgence that I can visit all these collections, shows and exhibitions in seven days, if I make a dash for it. That can be fun. A challenge even. It'll be a kind of frenzied holiday during which I might adjust to this new home of ours by bagging -twitching is a better word, I think- every single stickered gallery that lies within my crow circle. Certainly, with my wife away and only myself to entertain, I have the time. There is a forecast of unrelenting rain and wind which surely means that I should spend the week indoors. Is there a better place to pass a day -or seven days- when it is stormy and time sits heavily, than in an art gallery?

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My affair with galleries began when I was twelve. My father, not an educated man but bright-minded and ambitious for himself and sons, was far too hesitant and class-defined to take us to London's West End for our cautious experiments in culture, but the East End was a back yard for him and us: Stratford E15 provided our family with new drama at Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, and Islington -then a mostly working-class part of town- was home to Sadler's Wells, the D'Oyly Carte Company and its repertoire of hummable light operas. And whenever we visited the Co-op Warehouse in Lemn Street for cheap school uniforms, the Whitechapel Art Gallery was on hand. This was originally a Victorian and Church of England enterprise, set up in 1901 in "an attempt to fill the minds of the people with thoughts to exclude those created by gloom or sordid temptation" and I remember

feeling just a little cowed and guilty, as if in a hushed cathedral or a bank, whenever we visited.

But the first exhibition I saw there, in 1958 when I was twelve, was far from sepulchral or fiscal in tone. For the first time in my life, I was shaken to the bones by a painter, a dangerously modern abstract expressionist from the USA, come to that. This was Jackson Pollock's first one-man show in Europe and I still cannot forget the mix of thrilled awe I felt in front of the heavy and precarious canvases and the sense -repeated and re-experienced at Mark Rothko's first British show- that my father and I (in my cheap uniform) were trespassing on something rarefied and cryptic which was -like sex, I suspected- hugely important but beyond reason. I knew instinctively that my dad -ever open to the new- was sharing my mix of wonder and trepidation, although he never spoke of it. Not once. We neither of us had the words. He never really had the words for anything, and I was just a nervous adolescent boy. But our responses were the same. And for us it was a bond which I have hoped never to betray.

That was when I started longing for the complicated, visceral joy of galleries. I even dared venturing alone into the refined waters of the West End of London, attracted in 1960 by the Picassomania at the Tate, the world's first "art block-buster" (according to *The Tatler*). How open-hearted, cutting edge and Republican I felt when I later read (from the curator Roland Penrose's notes) that unlike me the Queen had not been entirely impressed: "These are the ones that make me feel a bit drunk, I'm afraid... Why does he want to put 2 eyes on same side of [a] face?" The Duke of Edinburgh, it seems, wasn't even looking. "*Do* realise, darling, there are 270 pictures to see and we have hardly begun," he said, displaying the same level of impatience with testing art that I'm ashamed to have displayed myself of late.

That too was when I first tried being a painter (while also writing pale imitations of Jack Kerouac novels). Mine were dripping abstracts on ply wood in sticky house paints and entirely deserving of the brusque dismissals of anyone I showed them to, particularly Mr. Butcher, my art teacher at school. But that was what I'd aimed for, in a way. Hadn't Pollock himself been told that his paintings were "mere unorganized explosions of random energy, and therefore meaningless?" Hadn't even the *Reynold's News*, the determinedly progressive

newspaper which was our Sunday regular, dismissed the Whitechapel exhibition with the headline, "This is not art—it's a joke in bad taste"?

Such hostility made me value Pollock even more. I pinned to a notice board that celebrated picture of him in his splattered dungarees and surrounded by encrusted pots. I never hoped to be an actor at the Littlewood Workshop, or sing Gilbert and Sullivan at the Wells, but a painting life like Pollock's *-pace* the alcoholism and the early death (for both Pollock *and* Kerouac, come to think of it)- was, I suspected, what I hoped for most. Unlike the dainty or sober work in historic galleries, painting in the Pollock-mode could be a perilous and physical pursuit and one, moreover, not requiring you to wear a tie, no small matter in the early Sixties. Taking risks and making enemies was its defining character. Art was argumentative. And it was heroic. As the critic Harold Rosenberg wrote later, a painter's canvas after Pollock could now be seen not as "a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' an object'", but as "an arena in which to act."

My youthful artistic ambitions were neither thwarted nor advanced but, rather, muddied by my meeting, in about 1960, with Henry Moore. His studio and house, Hoglands, in Perry Green in Hertfordshire, was just across the fields from my Uncle Harold's ill-begotten and black-market funded pile, Harefield, in Much Hadham. My cousin, Margaret, and I would frequently invade the sculptor's bays and corridors of meadow-cut grass to stare at the lines of sculptures or what my uncle held to be "scrap metal tat," a subject on which he could claim some genuine expertise having served a six-month wartime sentence for stealing some. I did not like to say I found them glorious.

And I was too tongue-tied and ashamed to tell the artist himself when he discovered us climbing the plinth under one of his larger bronzes. All I remember is a quietly-spoken, kindly man with a northern accent and silvery hair slicked to one side, who -disappointingly- was wearing a stiffly-knotted tie. If Pollock was my mad-cap cousin, Henry was avuncular. I half-expected him to slip me half-a-crown.

He said, before we had a chance to scarp p.d.q, "I don't mind you touching them or climbing up, but do your parents know you're here?" I'd never been reproved with such

mildness before. Now I was even more mortified at being caught, the trespasser. But I still regret that more than forty years later, when at a Moore exhibition in Wellington, New Zealand, I was caught again, fondling a maquette, I did not tell the forbidding female attendant, "But Uncle Henry said he didn't mind."

These were powerful encounters for a boy my age. As most of them were in the company of my father, they left a permanent and sentimental stain on me. To love the art we saw together was the same as loving dad. It became an article of family faith which I cherish to this day, that we would always *strive* -that verb belonging to the barricades- to find the value in the new. Pollock, Rothko and Moore had shown us how. We had no time for those whose minds were closed. In those adolescent days, you'd never catch me gurning at the art with narrowed eyes and eyebrows raised.

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What happens when you cross the threshold of a gallery? *Threshold* gives the game away; "a point of entry or beginning", says the OED in its leading definition. But more than that, a threshold is "the magnitude or intensity that must be exceeded for a certain reaction"; also it is "the level at which one starts to feel or react."

I start to feel and react, on my whirling, as-the-crow-flies, seven days of art, on the imposing Victorian steps of BMAG, the place I tick off first. I always feel a mix of calmness and energy at these entrances, at the point where the street and weather are abandoned, and I proceed towards the lobby and the stairs, both knowing and not-knowing what I'll find inside. I feel expectant but also dangerously pretentious and not quite myself. I am a *flaneur*, casual and light-hearted. It is a cheery sense intensified by the confidence that entry to these places is nearly always free.

I am a little springy, too. Galleries are sexy places, are they not? And intimate. Romances can be started and continued there. And children, too: an acquaintance of mine became pregnant *twice* at exhibitions. But not with any conventional passion or embarrassing public displays. Thanks to an accommodating gay friend, as keen on art as her, her sons were both

conceived by artificial insemination -a kind of installation, I suppose- in the gallery loos. The two successful files of fresh but cooling semen produced in the Men's were exchanged amongst the canvasses (with what, I hope, was a showy curtsey and a bow) and then returned to body temperature in the Women's. That surely is deserving of a Turner Prize. I wish I could tell you that her two boys were named Hodgkin and Hockney, say, or Raphael and Leonardo.

It doesn't matter much today that I'm alone, although my constant preference is to be in the company of my wife, Pam Turton. She has a degree in art history (from The Barber, actually) and so in our forty years of married life, art bibbing has been one of the shared passions that keeps us close. Generally, we do not view the exhibits side by side and hand in hand but shuffle through at our own paces: she's studied and painstaking while I'm the butterfly, fitful and unresting, quick to judgment, eager to move on: "*Do* realise, darling, there are many pictures to see and we have hardly begun."

But being on my own today is not so bad. Galleries -and trains and buses, possibly- are one of the few places where it is comfortable to be a singleton. During my many years working as a journalist and, later, touring as a writer of books and so stranded alone in unfamiliar cities with time on my hands, I have never felt entirely at ease eating in a restaurant without company, for example. The empty setting on the far side of the table seems to signify a failure in my life or at least an absence. I feel the same in cinemas and -oddly- on a crowded beach: "What's *he* doing on his own?" Even walking by myself in parks can draw suspicious glances nowadays, because I am a man, I guess, and not one validated by a dog.

But galleries are welcoming to loners. These are not places for conversations or for holding hands, although of course no young person just a bit in love with art will deny their gaze is sometimes captured by the lure of other visitors as much as by the paintings. Where there are exhibitions, there are exhibitionists. After all, this is a place where not only are you being asked to have opinions and react, to treat the art works as your sitting ducks, but also where you're *supposed* to stare. You are supposed to ruminate and stare.

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If anybody were to stand and stare at me during my mad week of art, what might they detect, apart from someone missing a companion? I know that I am guilty of display. I like to let my feelings show. So if you followed me you'd hear the hum and tut of my approval or distaste. You'd know that I'm at ease with historic works, Art Yesterday; there is generally for me a settling stillness about the works of long-dead artists - that's up to 1945, let's say. They are beyond my critical reach. They are deaf to my responses. They are too old and established to be irritating. And so I am relaxed in front of them. Even the ones I cannot like entirely have documentary interest, and they are comforting in that.

You'd also see that I am eager to embrace the modern -as distinct from the contemporary- and I will shake my head in wondering disapproval at "those old farts" who still don't *get* the urinal and the brillo box (of Warhol and Duchamp). And I find it hard to understand how Wolverhampton's lively and inoffensive Pop Art collection (housed in a gallery once dismissed -or maybe recommended- by the local Chronicle as "little more than a rainy-day rendezvous for OAPs and teenage sweethearts.") ever caused such affront to the ratepayers of the city. "We are being conned," said a Wolverhampton councilor when the valiant curator, David Rodgers, bought Peter Blake's *Cigarette Pack* for £1800 in the late 1960s. The citizens petitioned Harold Wilson to intervene when Richard Hamilton's *Adonis in Y-Fronts* first arrived. And as late as 1975 even John Salt, the Americanised but Birmingham-born pioneer of the obsessively detailed photorealist school (who, incidentally, was in 1964 -the year I came to Birmingham- the first artist ever to exhibit at the Ikon) ran in to trouble when Wolverhampton purchased his iconic and now priceless *Pink Trailer with Plymouth* at a bargain price. "£5,000 for scrap art – Stop Council Folly," was the Midland headline. It was considered "the most non-essential item on the council's shopping list." Now, of course, it is an asset – and not only to the gallery. Here, the point is that our tastes -in art, as in almost everything- mature and reconcile themselves to what seemed unacceptable just yesterday.

So maybe, if my observers see me bristle with annoyance from time to time in front of, say, Walsall's spindly line drawings by David Shrigley and Tracy Emin which hang in reckless proximity to Van Gogh's glorious and moving pencil and ink portrait, *Sorrow*, and pencil works by Matisse and Rossetti, they might count me as reactionary, blinkered and small-

mindful. Or if -when finally I reach the rooms and spaces set apart for my quest and quarry of the week, *New Art, West Midlands*- it seems I shake my head too frequently, they could well consider me a charlatan. If I were to mutter audibly (and grumpily), then I'd be invoking The Emperor's New Clothes and saying Bah in front of a couple of exhibits which I consider either insincere or shallow. I could well dishonour myself and my father's memory by saying something similar to "These are just displays of random energy, and therefore meaningless?" or by posing the unsophisticated -artless, I suppose- question of the sort expected from the philistine I hope never to become: "Where's the bloody skill in that? My two year old grandson could do a better job than that!"

Let's be frank; some of this new work has made me cantankerous. *New Art, West Midlands* is bringing out my blimpish side. I do not want to name and shame these recently graduated and adventurous talents, though - and not just out of courtesy but more from fear that I have blindly missed their point or that I've morphed into Victor Meldrew or Brian Sewell or, most likely, that making visitors like me uneasy and ill-tempered has been the greater purpose of these experimenters all along. For example, I am not comfortable at first with the playful juxtapositions or "interventions" in the Barber: an otherwise lively and atmospheric acrylic, *Mustard Nightclub*<sup>12</sup>, is required to do battle with Jan Miel's and Alessandro Solucci's somber *The Arch of Constantine* (1640s) and a plastic chair with a seat-load of loose castors<sup>13</sup> sits awkwardly amongst much older and, surely, more lasting works. These new pieces may share space with more aged ones, but they share little else, I feel. They are not equivalents. So, no matter that the labeling would have us think the chair is "powerful and unsettling" or that its intent is to "defunctionalise and objectify", I am not tempted to assert my family rights and sit on it, or even look at it for very long.

But afterwards *Mustard Nightclub* and especially the plastic chair continue to haunt and agitate my cozy expectations of the Barber. It's no bad thing -it's courageous actually- for the reliable tranquility of a gallery to be perturbed once in a while by works that want to make a fuss, that are prepared, let's say, "to import notions of dislocation and upheaval into

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<sup>12</sup> James Birkin

<sup>13</sup> *Untitled: Castors & Chair* by Sikander Pervez

the staid and bourgeois heart of the gallery aesthetic, and to explore issues around plasticity.”

Yes, we’re back to captions once again. I’ve reached a point where I suspect that visual artists never ought to comment on their work. Save me from the bumbling discourse, thank you very much, and let the artworks do the job themselves. If all an artist or curator can say about a painting is that it “examines issues of identity, memory and existence” or that a work presents the viewer “with stereotypes as a way to destabilize and subvert meaning”, then they would be better off saying nothing, in my admittedly soured and obsessive view. It is a shame to mangle language in the name of art or to pretend that to obfuscate is to clarify.

But all is not lost for me. I am no longer counting myself as -to put it plainly- a disappointment to my open-hearted dad. I think I understand the nature of the struggle finally. To wrestle with Art Now is not to maintain a priggish distance but rather to engage with it, hands on, to put my fingers to its throat until it yields its pleasures and its purposes. Age is not a factor here. Mine, after all, is not the only generation with its eyes narrowed and its eyebrows raised. Grayson Perry, a Sixties infant and no slave to convention, has in his recent Reith Lectures gently chided art graduates as trying to “make a living tying string round the banisters or making warships out of cardboard or videos of shadows.” You’d think it was his mother speaking! And it was Billy Childish, an artist a generation younger than me, who convened the Stuckists, *stuck* in their love of painting and “authenticity” and intolerant of “ego art”, by which they mean the kind of post-Modern installations and conceptual work which favour style and medium over “spiritual value”. Yes, these flailing artists are a test, of course, but actually I’ve come to recognize and appreciate what effect they have on me, what rewards they offer even when they are beyond my praise. Not loving much of what I see provides the drama in this fervent week of art. It’s the discord that embraces me. Not liking is as visceral as liking (and maybe more of a reward). I could not be more immersed or *altogether* stimulated than I am today, standing here in the shadow of an emperor who all too often has no clothes.

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My seven days of galleries have passed. Now I'm home, in front of *Crow Flies* in Hive Cottage and it's time to tally up a reckoning. There is no doubt I've found a lot to celebrate. I have my favourites among the living artists. Grayson Perry's six tapestries, for example, are engrossing, cheeky and mightily popular. He attracts the largest crowds. *Walls Within Walls*, seventeen large textured paintings, as nibbed and pitted as the surface of a derelict building, by Dale vN Marshall at the Herbert, reflect on his recent mental illness and, despite the regrettable and perhaps inevitable loss of impact when the subversive, surreptitious spray-can art of the streets is brought indoors and domesticated by a gallery, they are works of considerable drama. They have power, balance, and colour in pyrotechnic abundance. Marshall displays the lapidary studio care and patience of an attentive craftsman without entirely relinquishing the edgy energy and haste of the graffiti artist, fearful of detection.

And there is a new work by Richard Long, a site-specific mud splash and daub of profound beauty on Walsall gallery's longest wall. It took me forty-four long strides to walk its length and it took Long himself several days to apply by dipping one hand, clad in a pink marigold, into a vat of his customary Avon mud. It will take just as long to remove, I would imagine. Implicit in its making is its removal, its destruction. A tide of cleaners will descend with mops, suds, sponges and buckets. I am reminded of that probably apocryphal and certainly mischievous story that contemporary art galleries must nowadays label their most progressive exhibits ART WORK so that the cleaners do not bin them. I am also usefully reminded by Long's exhibit how much in contemporary art the moment matters more than durability. Provisionality is everything. In this the artists have become like jazz musicians, risking failure all the time, daring to extemporize, and valuing performance and disposability over recording.

Most of all, I am astounded by *Dialogues*, the two extraordinary site-specific installations, also in Walsall, by Japan's Chiharu Shiota. One room is entirely spun with black yarn, holding Letters of Thanks (for any good fortune in the writers' lives) sent to the artist. A second huge space is *packed* -the perfect word- to the ceiling with an avalanching fan -an Aberfan- of vintage suitcases, all clearly empty, all much travelled by the look of them, and to all appearances, though secured on red ropes, still tumbling and managing to seem both heavy

and weightless. It is a scene of chaos and stillness, a baggage claim of sorrowful departures and joyous arrivals.

So it is a strange experience after a mesmerizing hour with the Shiotas to walk out past the litter-encrusted canal into the Walsall shopping mall and to find two eerie Shiota echoes: a Louis Vuitton suitcase advert (with the obligatory skinny model perched atop the leather of a tumbling cascade of cases) and a made-to-measure Digitex roller blind (called *Excess Baggage*), which could be -but is not- a stolen snapshot from the gallery, put out there into the street to make us wonder What is Commerce?, What is Art? What is Life, come to that?

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A week or so later, after my gallery blitz has finished, I end up where I started off because there is a work in BMAG that I'm very keen to see again. There are still two rooms set aside here for *New Art, West Midlands*. I have come to ruminate and stare. It is interesting and a bit discouraging to see that most visitors hurry through with barely a glance. They're summoned by the pre-Raphaelites in the adjacent rooms or drawn as if by magnets to the Staffordshire hoard of Anglo-Saxon metalwork in gold which the museum acquired by public donations in 2010. Through the connecting glass door, Sir Edward Burne-Jones's *The Star of Bethlehem* glowers pompously.

I am especially fascinated by the response of those who do linger when they reach Gregory Dunn's *Better than Sex* and *Yn well na ffycin*. The maps (for sale at £300 each) invite them to get close, to press their noses up against the contour lines. "Snowdonia," I hear a couple confirm to themselves but audibly. They're showing off. They may not know much about art, but they do know what they hike. I guess they'd spot the missing motorways on my *Crow Flies* and mutter Heart of England, or Shakespeare Country, or even OS Sheet Seven.

In addition to good work from Barbara Witkowska and Lucy Hutchinson, there is one outstanding artist here whose contribution is clever, colourful and moving. I do not hesitate in celebrating her. I know I have not blindly missed her point. She's Morna Lockie-Anrig. What she has done in *The Maid's Puzzle* (for sale for £3000, though heaven knows how any

purchaser will lift it) is to tessellate the corner of the gallery in shapes and colours, as flat as an aboriginal sand painting. It is reminiscent of both a Minton floor and a patchwork quilt but with each tile hand-made by “pooling pulp” from waste, the paper napkins and the soggy detritus of meals from the restaurant where once the artist waited on tables. There is a key to the ingredients of each tile fixed to the wall. One records, “Grease and dirt from cleaning the grill pan, bits of cheese and fat from cooking, and the kitchen roll I used to wipe it out.” And another says, “Shallot peel and cuttings, garlic cuttings, pasata, tamarind paste, inner tubes and used napkins. (Waste from braising liquid for slow cooked pork.)”

*The Maid’s Puzzle* is a thing of alerting beauty in itself but also an immensely disconcerting and subversive lesson in waste and class, in womanhood and servitude. (Lord help me, I’ve become the caption writer I despise!) Imagine if they floored a restaurant with it. It would make for uncomfortable encounters, self-conscious meals – and very large, guilt-induced gratuities. This is the piece that gives visitors the greatest pause and which has cut the deepest mark in me. We hang around and relish it. We even enter it - there is a sign, YOU CAN WALK ON THIS SCULPTURE. It gives us all permission to take part. Auntie Morna, like Uncle Henry, says she doesn’t mind.

