

EXHIBITION EVALUATION

Still Small Voice: British Biblical Art in a Secular Age (1850-2014)

Venue in Cheltenham: The Wilson, second and third floor galleries

Summary:

Still Small Voice was developed in partnership with the Ahmanson Charitable Foundation, The University of Gloucestershire and The Wilson. All works within the exhibition came from the Ahmanson Family's Private Collection in California. The layout for the exhibition was devised by Angus Pryor of The University of Gloucestershire; the interpretative text was created by Lyrica Taylor, Azusa University.

The exhibition was generously supported by the Friends of Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery and the Ahmanson Trust. It also received generous support from the Ahmanson Trust.

There was an accompanying catalogue created by the Ahmanson Charitable Foundation, a workshop and talks programme.

Summary of Display

The exhibition showed 36 artworks, 4 historical, the rest 20th century from the Ahmanson Collection. This exhibition was the first time that these works have been drawn together in a public exhibition in the UK. The works included a diverse range of media, including major paintings, drawings, prints, and sculpture by some of the most important and beloved 20th century British artists, including Stanley Spencer, Eric Gill, Jacob Epstein, Barbara Hepworth, Edward Burra and Graham Sutherland.

The exhibition was curated in collaboration with Lyrica Taylor (Director, M.A in Modern Art History, Theory & Criticism, Azusa University, LA) and Angus Pryor (Reader in Fine Art, University of Gloucestershire), and was organised by The Wilson in partnership with the University of Gloucestershire.

The inspiration for the curation of the exhibition arose from the concept that all these works are reflections on biblical texts, translated into the visual language of art. The gallery was painted in distinct blocks of colour for each painting to be displayed against and these were arranged following the story of the bible.

In response to Stanley Spencer's painting 'Angels of the Apocalypse', Pryor created his own work which was installed in the Atrium space on the ground floor of The Wilson. This included a large painting/collage with a floor piece created from space hoppers.

Visually, the exhibition made a great impact on the third floor; some paintings worked less well on the colour backgrounds but it was good to experiment with a different display format and prompted interesting discussion about the display of fine art with visitors.

Visitor numbers:

Total Visitor Numbers: **10,859**

Days open to the Public: **109**

Daily average: **99**

Visiting Trends Consistently lower numbers of visitors in the 3rd floor gallery (in spite of great appeal of content in 3rd floor).

Visitor comments

Comments for the exhibition were overwhelmingly positive. Themes within positive comments include the use of the coloured walls to display the works in an unusual way, the standard / prestige of work in Cheltenham and works which struck a specific chord with individuals. Comment include:

- Cracking exhibition despite the subject matter
- Terrific exhibition - love the gold colours, different genres and periods of work.
- Exhibition is very thought provoking. Will meditate on it.
- Wonderful exhibition – very prestigious for Cheltenham
- More than expected. Pleasantly surprised. Disappointed the talks are sold out.
- ‘Lovely lovely. Will come again.’
- This is a marmite exhibition. Love the paintings but not sure of the coloured panels.
- The paintings are beautiful; the colour panels are extraordinary and very eye-catching
- Fantastic exhibition, will be back for the Turner
- I’ve lived here for 40 years and never came into the Museum. I’ll never miss an exhibition now. Love it! Thanks you.

Themes within negative comments include navigating the exhibition, individual works which people didn’t like and the labelling. Comments include:

- Unclear which way to view exhibition.
- Very annoying the labels were not next to the paintings. Overall exhibition is spectacular.
- Where does the exhibition start? It is confusing in the gallery.
- Didn’t realise that there was another floor for the exhibition.

Visitor Services

- When visitors entered the exhibition they tended to walk in the ‘wrong’ direction. This was only an issue before the interpretation followed the chronological route of the bible.
- There was a lot of feedback about the labels being on the end of the wall rather than next to the paintings even though a large print guide was provided.

Customer Services

- The catalogue sold out, which was surprising, priced at £25. People were happy to pay as the quality was very high and the works included were of international standard.
- Struggled to secure strong retail offer related to the show due to the time frame in which the project was delivered.

Learning & Engagement

Due to the theme of the exhibition it was difficult to create a specific school programme but creative sessions were delivered on the theme of reading and painting. Through the support of the University of Gloucestershire, these were offered free of charge to four secondary schools and colleges and all sessions were fully booked.

Family visitors were not a key target for this show but there was a well-used family trail offered free of charge.

The exhibition was accompanied by a public lecture series, led by experts in the fields of fine art and theology. Lectures were held in The Wilson's Foyle Learning Centre. Admission per lecture was £7 / £5 concession. All lectures were fully attended.

Marketing/publicity

The marketing for *Still Small Voice* was led by a visual identity provided by local branding agency, ASHA. This identity consisted of a lower case title, reflecting the content and themes of the exhibition, and one visual to be applied across all marketing.

The benefits of the visual identity were that the work chosen for the visual was striking in colour and form, and that this quality made it recognisable across the marketing campaign.

Marketing and publicity consisted of mix of online and offline activity, including; a poster campaign, heavily distributed through Friends and volunteers, leaflets (promoting the lecture series), external banners outside The Wilson, AA signs around Cheltenham, a series of print advertisements, social media activity tracing the install and the exhibition once opened, press release and the press visits which followed, coordination of press reviews of the exhibition, and inclusion in Cheltenham Town Hall's e-newsletters.

The initial print marketing was continued online once the exhibition was opened, with regular updates on social media feeds from The Wilson. The level of press interest was good, and the exhibition was reviewed for Cotswold Preview, Church Times, featured a volunteer review on Artlyst.com, was featured in the Echo, in Art & Christianity Review, by writer Michael Garaway, and on BBC Radio Gloucestershire.

The reach for this exhibition was predominantly local, but the exhibition received attention from further afield in press relating specifically to religion. Christianity. The feeling was that apart from organised school and university groups, the audience was largely an older one. Of the recorded visitor feedback from staff positioned in the galleries, there was a noticeable trend for some visitors to have come to the exhibition because they admired the work of one or more specific artists.