

PRESS RELEASE

5 March – 23 April 2010

NORMAN CORNISH

A Shot Against Time



Lee Hall's play 'The Pitmen Painters' now an international hit, focuses upon the 'pitman academies' of the 1930's and in particular Oliver Kilbourn (1904 – 1996), a founder member of the Ashington Group. Kilbourn, spent his working life as a miner. "I wouldn't say I had a driving ambition to get down the pit, I just stayed down there fifty years... After I retired I had quite a lot of time on my hands and I thought it wouldn't be any harm if I painted something I really knew about; and so I did My Life as a Pitman."



Norman Cornish's life has followed a similar trajectory. Born in 1919, he began his working life at the Dean and Chapter Colliery at the age of fourteen. At sixteen, he joined the Spennymoor Sketching Club, which he thought was "wonderful", and with his tutor Bill Farrell's advice, "that he could do no better than paint the life he knew", he embarked on the subject that would preoccupy him for the next seven decades, his 'Narrow World' as the novelist Sid Chaplin (and fellow miner) wrote in an article in 1960.



By the age of 47, after 33 years working in the County Durham coalfields he took the great risk of living by his painting. That it was a successful move is irrefutable. He has been the subject of countless TV documentaries, has his work in many public and private collections, has received and carried out several notable commissions including the mural for the Durham Miners' Gala.

Like Sid Chaplin, he flourished in the stimulating environment of the Spennymoor Settlement, that enlightened educational and cultural project of the late 1930s, that enabled a rich broadening of his artistic horizons. Amongst his subsequent enthusiasms and influences was the work of Van Gogh and not surprisingly, his work too has an underlying reverential spirit. Equally Cornish's images, telegraph poles resemble crucifixes and pit gantries Calvary, while his studies of his wife Sarah knitting, gave her, as he put it, "a sense of sanctity".

Kings Place Gallery, Kings Place, 90 York Way, London, N1 9AG

Josef Herman's mining subjects have a similarly reverential spirit while Henry Moore, who came from a mining family, depicted both miners and war-time Londoners asleep in the "tube" as being kindred catacomb dwellers, almost entombed. There are many other artists who have engaged the mining theme, Keith Vaughan, for instance or Frank Brangwyn, but they were essentially outsiders, visitors to the pit. Norman Cornish worked for 33 years in the mines, most of the time underground and he chronicled an entire way of life.

"A real artist like Goya, or Daumier, or Van Gogh could make a monumental world out of a little place like Byers Green..." ... a tiny village near Cornish's home that lost its pit in the depression. A real artist could make even a forgotten village leap to life. "...but it happens that Goya, Daumier, Van Gogh are no longer with us. They are no longer available, but it happens that Norman Cornish is, and doing magnificently what only he can do. In his perspective, a narrow world has room enough", as Sid Chaplin put it.

In his Guardian tribute of 1960 Chaplin continued, "The living are caught before they go; the pigeon fanciers, corner-enders, offshift miners squatting on their hunkers and soaking in the sunshine and the good crack. In a moment the bus will come and the buzzer blow for the backshift. Now it is all recorded, time cannot take away the seven ages of man and woman – his grandmother, mother, sisters, wife and daughter; or his father and brothers, his friends and pit marras. Soon the baby will be a small boy: he will change: a drawing or painting is a shot against time."



**NORMAN CORNISH A Shot Against Time
5 March – 23 April 2010**

Kings Place Gallery, Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9AG
Monday – Friday 10am – 6pm, Weekends 11am – 5pm
Admission Free. Closed Easter weekend 2 – 5 April

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