

John Devane: Paintings - The Old Library, Leamington Spa.

This exhibition, perhaps for the first time, gives the residents of Leamington Spa and those living further afield, the opportunity to see paintings by John Devane, the Head of Design and Visual Arts at the Coventry University School of Art and Design. Devane, who lives in Coventry, is an accomplished figurative and portrait painter. This exhibition includes some fine new portraits as well as recent figurative compositions that illustrate important themes and influences in his work.

His ability as a painter is nowhere better demonstrated than in his latest small portrait, entitled *Laura*. In this painting he does not so much paint individual features, the eye, the eyelid, the nose, the mouth and the lips, but the face as an integrated whole. The result appears effortless, even miraculous, without being either slick or mannered. He excels in painting flesh, as seen in *Laura* and *The Uncertain Time*, where the back and shoulders of the seated woman are brought to life with subtle modulations of colour. This play of light on flesh is extended to fabrics: the sunlight on white pillows, bed sheets and the bedspread in *The Master Bedroom*.

As might be expected, Devane has a keen eye and memory for faces. The expression on the face of the woman in *The Uncertain Time*, for example, as she turns towards the viewer with a slightly ironic and amused look, is particularly telling within the context of the painting. Devane is also fascinated in the way the normal proportions of a face and the disposition of its features may be changed when seen from a particular angle. This is most evident in *Laura Resting*, where the head is turned to one side and foreshortened and the profile of the forehead, nose, upper lip and chin are accentuated against a dark background. The way a figure stands or sits, is also significant. In *The Master Bedroom* the female figure stands with her head turned away from the viewer as she bends over to attach an ear ring, and in *Laura Resting* the young woman's arms are closely folded against her body, her thighs crossed and lower legs drawn in. In this painting, and another also entitled *Laura Resting*, the posture and handling of the figure recall something of the powerful depiction of female subjects by Paula Rego.

In paintings with two or more figures the viewer is made aware of a psychological relationship existing between them. We are reminded of the work of artists such as Degas, Paula Rego and the American urban realist painter, Eric Fischl, painters who have been or still remain important influences in Devane's work. In *The Master Bedroom* the interest lies in the relationship between a young boy and his mother. The boy, lounging on his parents' bed and wearing only his black bathing trunks, watches his mother getting dressed up, ready to go out. She is attaching an ear-ring and is unaware of his gaze. Her vanity box lies open on the bed. In *The Uncertain Time*, the relationship between the two people seated at separate tables remains deliberately ambiguous. Are they friends, strangers or ex lovers? Has the artist, the viewer, gatecrashed a couple who would rather be left on their own? The questioning, over-the-shoulder look, of the man and the half-mocking amused expression on the face of the woman suggest a relationship that may be more interesting than it appears at first sight.

The domestic and social aspect of Devane's work is given a twist in the painting entitled, "...and when did you last see your father." A boy in profile, wearing sunglasses and standing very upright, looks across at two young women, one seated

on the lap of the other; both look towards the viewer with pensive expressions. Their closeness and the isolation of the boy suggest the absence of some emotional need in their lives. This painting is also concerned with another theme in Devane's work, that of the observer and the observed. In this instance the boy is observing the two women and the two women seem to be looking outward towards the viewer. In most of Devane's work we are made aware of our presence as observers. We intrude on the couple's private conversation in *The Uncertain Time* and we are voyeurs of the young boy and his mother in *The Master Bedroom*. In the painting of Laura asleep - *Laura Resting* - we watch her without her being aware of us. We can observe every detail of her without embarrassment. This painting is reminiscent of Balthus's paintings of young girls and the age-old story of the elders who secretly observe Susanna naked, bathing. Or perhaps a late etching by Picasso comes to mind, where the minotaur lifts up the corner of a bed sheet to gaze at the beautiful form of a naked female asleep.

Nick Smale.