

Morning Departure

Ian Fraser

8 – 23 November 2016
10.00AM – 5.00PM

The Atrium
The Grove Building
Middlesex University London
The Burroughs
London NW4 4BT

Private View, Monday 7 November 2016
5.30 – 8.30PM



1-7-84
1984
Oil on canvas
35cm x 36cm
Estate of Anna Fraser

Website dedicated to the life and work of Ian Fraser:
www.ianfraser-arca.co.uk



Morning Departure

Ian Fraser

1933-1986

My aim is to produce pure poetry, without recourse to secondary imagery. I realize on reflection, that this is a fairly vague definition of intention, but I prefer to leave it so, for I do not subscribe to any particular theoretical credo - I paint according to my intuition and therefore rationality is a subsidiary factor. I seek a kind of perfection, which is a risky confession to make and perhaps not very fashionable. I know that I must inevitably fail, but to achieve even a hint of success (in my own terms) makes it exciting in that maybe I will get nearer next time. The perfection I seek must be distilled from the essence of the activity - the colour, tone, disposition, spatial allusion, paint quality. There must be a tranquillity, which is nevertheless dynamic and therefore poignant. It must be clearly evident that the work is executed by human hand - scale is more important than size. Bravado paintwork must be avoided, however tempting, for it brings the attention entirely to the surface, destroying spatial possibilities the viewer may interpret. Yet the surface must retain its integrity - I seek no optical tricks, but rather to prompt. Colour is, of course, cardinal. There can be no end to the associations it may conjure, it is the inexhaustible stuff of painting, with its implications of light, of life and death. The other important element involved is time, painting being as much a 'time-based' medium as film, although it operates more in a potential than a kinetic form. It is partly for this reason that I 'usually' give my paintings no other title than the date on which it was last worked upon. The other reason is purely practical - so that I may know when I can safely apply varnish as a protective coat.'

IF
Whittington Hospital
London - Nov. 1986

With grateful thanks to Halinka, Alex and Rick Fraser for initiating this exhibition and for the generous support of Middlesex University.



COVER
Morning Departure
1977
Oil on canvas
91cm x 102cm
Estate of Anna Fraser

Ian Fraser

On behalf of Middlesex University, it is a great pleasure to host this exhibition of the work of Ian Fraser. Ian was a full time lecturer in Fine Art at Middlesex long before it became Middlesex University. His teaching career spanned the time that Fine Art was a subject delivered at Hornsey College of Art in Crouch End, through to Middlesex Polytechnic at Alexandra Palace, briefly again at Crouch End and finally at Quicksilver Place in Wood Green, where he was to become Head of Department. This was to be a brief tenure due to Ian's tragic death in 1986, at the age of 53.

For me, this exhibition is a double pleasure: the initial approach from Ian's family, Alex, Halinka and Rick, has given me the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with an artist with whom I worked for ten years, but never really knew. Ian is a part of the history of Fine Art at Middlesex; his story represents the familiar struggle for an artist to retain the integrity of a personal vision in the context of the demands of full time occupation and family responsibility.

Ian's work is the testimony of an unassuming and very private individual. Throughout his life he developed a working practice where the work itself became his muse. The dilemmas that he negotiated are extremely familiar; artists who remain artists do so because they have a reason, it is invariably hard and those who discover other priorities move away from art. For those who persist, the rewards are frequently the insights achieved and the work itself.



For Anna
1962
Oil on canvas
93cm x 91cm
Alex Fraser

Morning *Departure*

For a graduate from the Royal College of Art in the 1950's, the opportunities to earn a living as an artist were stark; Ian was married to Anna and with burgeoning family responsibilities started working full time in what was then further education. For an artist at that time, pursuing a vocation was an exercise in opportunism, catching poetry in flight as it were. This was before the time that a studio practice could be considered essential academic research and enshrined as an aspect of teaching. Reflecting upon this, it is remarkable that artists of Ian's generation were so very prolific, it is indicative of a quietly determined approach to practice that it became his means of reflecting upon the condition and flow of his life. This perhaps accounts for the sheer range of his work, predicated upon the skill and lyrical insight fostered as artist and educator.

The particular model of artist using a specific skillset to reflect upon the ebb and flow of a lifetime's experience is often considered secondary to that more familiar insistence upon a signature style. Then as now, an identifiable concern and stylistic execution was considered a prerequisite for recognition and success. But it fitted well that this, reserved and undemonstrative, Presbyterian Scot should sublimate his vision to a reflection upon the condition of his life and experience and not crave attention.

Shepperton, where Ian lived with his family, is right beneath the main flight path into Heathrow, the presence of low-flying aircraft is constant and intrusive; but in his painting they become ephemeral and transient events suffused with wistfulness and no more concrete than the play of light falling across the house over the road. Matter of fact titles such as "Morning Departure" belie the intense wish to reach beyond the mundane and indeed catch poetry in flight. The discreet intensity of these everyday miracles of weightlessness and transience becomes unflinching in the face of the festering sore of genocide. In the quiet of his studio he entertained and absorbed the universality of the holocaust that single great abuse, and understood that it is a condition of humanity and sadly not singular. From this he painted a substantial series of stark wraiths, present but absent, articulate, but extinguished.

Just as Ian did not avoid reaching deep into himself to give form to inhumanity, he also celebrated the small pleasures of life in the quiet assimilation of landscape as marks, patches and calligraphic gestures spread over the canvas with all of the insouciance of a picnic on the lawn.

Ian made tiny notebook studies for every work as though mulling over in those quiet moments at work what he had waiting in his studio at home. When he was planning to retire he commenced an enquiry into pure form in painting. This gave rise to a huge series of simple and modest geometric paintings, with the stated intention that, given more studio time, they would help eke out his pension. However, judging by the exhaustive and crabbed drawings that served as aide memoire, reinforced by a statement written from Whittington Hospital in 1986, this was a feint for his aspiration to achieve a formal purity beyond reference. This is particularly poignant when it is realised that this preoccupation gave rise to the last body of work before he fell victim to the onset of cancer that very year.

Simon Read, 1 October 2016

On the beacon
1980
34 x 44cm
Oil on board
Estate of Anna Fraser

