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Glass encounters Craigie Aitchison and the Beaux Arts Generation at Piano Nobile Gallery

Rowena Chiu November 21, 2019 Art, Exhibitions, Feature

PERHAPS one of the most British of British painters, Craigie Aitchison entered the Slade School of Fine Art in the autumn of 1952, accompanied by his beagle named Somerset. Even as a student, Aitchison's acute sense of observation and distinct palette was recognised by a peer, the artist Michael Andrews, who later introduced Aitchison to Helen Lessore, his gallerist and the founder of Beaux Arts Gallery on Bruton Place in London. It was at Beaux Arts that the careers of Michael Andrews, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Euan Uglow and Craigie Aitchison were launched in the 1950s, forming foundations for the next 50 years of Modern British painting.

Lessore's artists frequented the same drinking spots (such as the infamous Colony Room Club in Soho, London), contributed to the arts magazine X (a British review of literature and the arts co-founded by Patrick Swift and David Wright published in London between 1959 and 1962), and shared a similar experience of post-war Britain. In response to a city which now largely lay in ruins, bodies of vital and energetic work emerged. The Beaux Arts Generation is celebrated for the first time through an exhibition at Piano Nobile Gallery in Holland Park.



Craigie Aitchison, Butterflies in a Landscape, 1956

A decade after the Second World War ended, Aitchison (who was near 30 years old) was awarded a British Council scholarship to study in Italy. During this time, he toured the country, and was particularly moved by the early Renaissance Italian paintings of Piero della Francesca, whose influence can be seen throughout the artist's oeuvre.

One of the earliest paintings in the exhibition, Butterflies in a Landscape, was painted by Aitchison on his return from Italy in 1956. Depicting an unnamed topography, the subject of the painting is a remembered landscape from the artist's time in Italy. The sooty butterflies moving within the composition activate the painting's central bands of orange and red. Painted with a scarcity of means and possessing qualities that are both impressionistic and elemental, this work sets the tone for Aitchison's paintings to follow.

Aitchison's preoccupation with landscape, the sky and the symbolism of his early works develop into a more complex composition in Pear Still Life, 1971. In this painting, the night sky, dawn, a tree, a pear, winter berries and a lemon share the back and foregrounds of the picture plane. Utilising archetypal subjects from still life painting, Aitchison weaves together a hypnagogic scene in which time and seasons converge.



Craigie Aitchison, Pear Still Life, 1971

Portrait of Simon de Wrongal, 1984, is painted with thin washes of vibrant pink and red, showcasing Aitchison's technical ability to evenly distribute pigment. At the same time, the work may be interpreted as a retaliation against what Aitchison termed 'posh paint': the self-indulgent use of thick paint and textured brushwork so often observed in his contemporaries of that decade. Characterised by Aitchison's intentionally guileless use of line and colour, this is one of a dozen portraits in the exhibition.



Craigie Aitchison, Portrait of Simon de Wrongal, 1984

No mention of Craigie Aitchison's work can be complete without observing the series of crucifixes for which Aitchison is celebrated. Of the subject, Aitchison once said, 'The Crucifixion is the most horrific story I've ever heard, they were all ganging up against one person. As long as the world exists one should attempt to record that.' *Crucifixion* 8, 1985-6, physically towers above the other paintings in Piano Nobile's exhibition. The work depicts Christ with a shimmering halo of gold, perhaps inspired by Renaissance paintings from Aitchison's travels in Italy. Whilst Aitchison contributed four panels to decorate the Chapel of St. Margaret in Truro Cathedral in Cornwall in 1997 and commissioned an altarpiece for Liverpool's Anglican cathedral in 1998, this earlier painting from 1985-6 is one of nine large-scale crucifixion paintings executed for the more secular context of an art exhibition.



Craigie Aitchison, Crucifixion 8, 1985-6

Framed within the context of his peers that formed the Beaux Arts Generation, Aitchison's distinct sensibility as a draftsman and colourist is apparent. In a strange twist of fate, long after the Beaux Arts Gallery closed in 1965, Aitchison signed up to be represented by Timothy Taylor Gallery in 1998, thus returning to the premises of 1 Bruton Place, London, the address vacated over 30 years before by Helen Lessore.

by Rowena Chiu

Craigie Aitchison and the Beaux Arts Generation is on show until January 29, 2020 at Piano Nobile Gallery.

With thanks to Roisin O Sullivan and Piano Nobile Gallery. All images courtesy of Piano Nobile Gallery.

- Beaux Arts Generation
- Colony Room Club
- Craigie Aitchison
- Euan Uglow
- Frank Auerbach
- Leon Kossoff
- London
- Michael Andrews
- Piano Nobile Gallery
- Piero della Francesca
- Slide School of Fine Art
- Soho
- The Slade

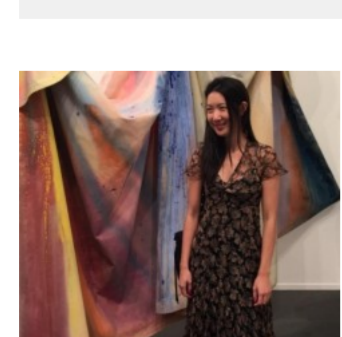
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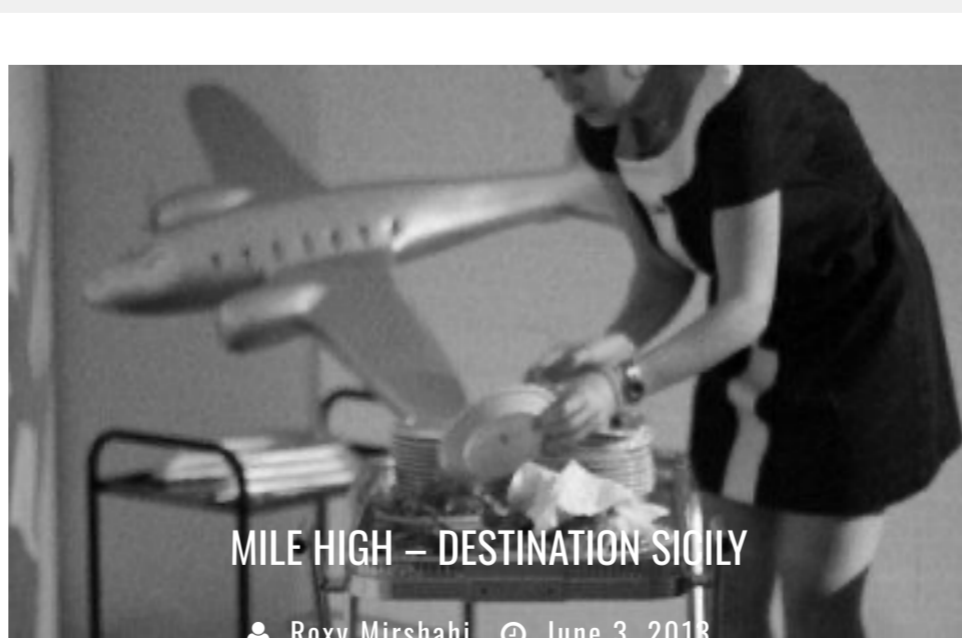
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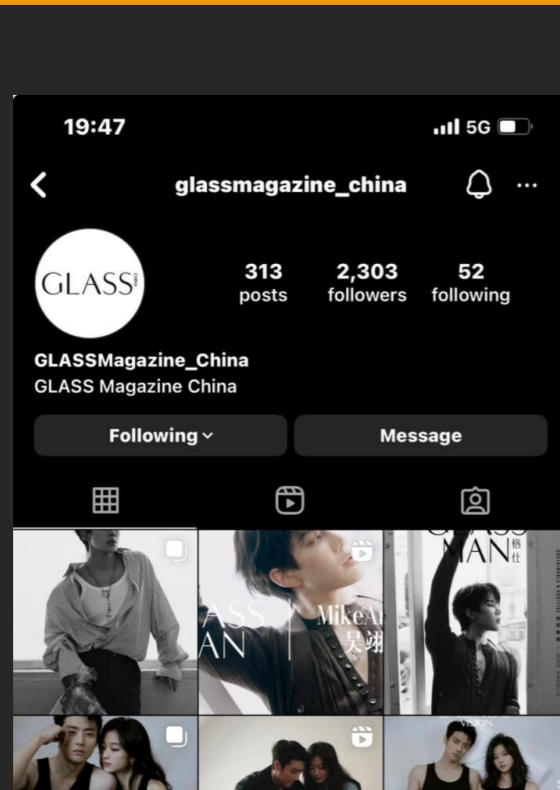


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