

Richard Shirley Smith 'The Paintings and Collages'

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Richard Shirley Smith is one of that fair tribe of talented artists and musicians whom Gerald and Joy Finzi befriended and encouraged when young—one might even say fostered—several of whom went on to make successful careers for themselves from their respective vocations. 'Shush', as he came to be called, was taken under their wing when he was still a schoolboy: a refugee from London bombs, he was thrown together with Kiffer and Nigel, and thus had the good fortune to grow up in touch with a household in which 'making'—creative work—was taken for granted. That, and the unusually liberal spirit which prevailed, and the cultivation of the most discriminating taste in all things, could only be propitious in the development of someone with his exceptional gifts. Another encouraging figure—a more avuncular presence, maybe—was Howard Ferguson, who lived just around the corner from his parents in Hampstead Garden Suburb.

And later there was David Jones; and of course his teachers at the Slade, people like Coldstream, John Aldridge; and no doubt others. What a lot we owe, and how comprehensively, to our guardians and mentors.

As would be clear from the most cursory glance at any one of the plates in the book under review, Richard Shirley Smith is a 'virtuoso': not just in the modern sense of a consummate and versatile master of dazzling accomplishment; but also in the eighteenth-century meaning of the term. He is a collector of objects of virtu; or, rather, ideas, images, iconography, hoarded over years of travel—armchair travel as well as actual—the congruity and incongruity of which make up the texture of his sometimes bizarre imagination. Indeed, he might claim to have made a very fruitful 'Grand Tour' when he spent a couple of years shortly after his first marriage in a hillside village just outside Rome. Long shafts of memory still connect him with those days: that sunlight, those bits and pieces, shards. Later explorations in the Veneto and in the ruined cities of Asia Minor yielded even more; and like his forebears he is not above acquiring for himself, like some trophy or talisman, a lump of classical antiquity (actually a cast of the right foot taken from a Roman copy of the Greek statue of the Apollo Belvedere in the Vatican museum).

Much in Richard Shirley Smith's work is 'fantastic': for all the formality and pristine elegance in the technique and presentation, the archaisms, the subtle and muted range of the palette, there is a startling and highly idiosyncratic imagination at play here. His exuberance and sense of theatre, the slightly foxy air of mischief, sheer fun—all betray a perennially youthful spirit: you have only to mark that keen eye in the photographs. He keeps you on your toes. He is a master of the capriccio: those curious extravaganzas confectioned by Piranesi, Tiepolo and others in the eighteenth century: bouquets of sometimes weirdly disparate items tossed together with a flourish. A short step from there to the alarming confrontations of surrealism: and here he is happy to place himself in the tradition of de Chirico and Max Ernst. Indeed the latter's attraction to dismemberment, and the use of montage/'cut and paste', connect him closely with Shirley Smith's employment of collage, which is vigorous and witty,

but also searching and poignant. ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’.

Nothing is ever simple. Some of the faces that stare out from the pictures impose a disquieting ambiguity upon the carnivalesque or monumental backdrop: portraits of women, quite still; at variance with the operatically gestural postures of the other figures or the grotesque attitudes of the Pulcinelli; looking askance, poker-faced; discountenancing the viewer.

He is an artist who has made a brilliantly successful career—on his own terms. Disinclined to immure himself in an ivory tower, his industry and technical facility, sureness of aim—quite apart from the individual character of the work—have brought immense distinction to the genres of book illustration and mural decoration. Here again he stands, quite contentedly, in a tradition. And if occasionally there may be just a trace of affectation or decorative whimsy, perhaps inherited from Rex Whistler, surely we can relish that as part of the enjoyment?

His place in the tradition of woodcut engraving is another matter: I know of no other British artist who has so consistently invested and contained his deepest insights in this most modest medium. The range of idea, the malleability of technique, the understanding of the material, the concentration of focus: I don’t believe I am alone in considering that his finest work is found here. And there’s a kind of truth as well: in his little pictures of cats, grasses, crockery, babies, he shows a candour akin to Watteau’s drawings.

And what about the book, you might ask! Well, it more than illustrates everything I have found pleasurable in Richard Shirley Smith’s work, although its reference to the woodcuts is inevitably minimal. Beautifully produced, and lavish in the number and quality of the plates, it includes a number of penetrating essays, reviews and biographical material which place him convincingly in a context. Roy Strong’s Preface is especially useful: it doesn’t surprise me that he is a champion.

A personal note: almost half a century ago, when we were both students—he at the Slade, I at the Royal Academy of Music—we shared a tiny flat in the basement of Catherine Powell’s house in Holland Park. (I had inherited my share from Nigel Finzi, who’d gone off to study with Rostal in Bern.) It has been extraordinary for me, appraising this life’s work, this catalogue raisonné, to recall those beginnings: the day Shush brought in the huge press for printing lithographs—I can’t think where he got it: intractable, cumbersome beast like a dolmen; the endless fiddling and re-assembling of scraps for the collages; the infernal treachery of ink; and the gentle way he tested woodblocks for their suitability, weighing them in his hands, scrutinizing the grain: almost as though it were a live thing. It makes a marvellous sound, boxwood. What an education for a composer!

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