

In the Peaceful Dome

Fri 13 Oct - Sun 8 Apr

Roderick Bisson / Sean Borodale / Fanny Calder / Edward Carter Preston / Julia Carter Preston / Paul Clarkson / Dan Coopey / Philip Courtenay & Yellow House / John Davies / Jacob Epstein / Fab Lab Liverpool / Edgar Grosvenor / The Grantchester Pottery / Janet Hodgson / Nathan Jones & Scott Spencer / Juniper Press / Sumuyya Khader / Donald Lynch / Joanne Masding / Syd Merrills / Grace Ndiritu / Uriel Orlow / William C. Penn / Jo Stockham / Visual Stress / Herbert Tyson Smith / Edmund Tan / Ann Whitehurst

Concluding Bluecoat's 300th anniversary, this exhibition brings together historic and contemporary art, new commissions and archival material, to set up conversations across time. It takes the idea of a continually evolving building to look afresh at some of the art Bluecoat has presented, reinvigorating it by finding contemporary resonances. How the past informs the future is explored through several themes: the building, its architecture and the passing of time; global trade and legacies of Empire; Modernism and fine and applied arts; gender and militarism; and the gallery as a site for critical engagement.

*- Yon calm retreat, where screened from every ill,
The helpless orphan's throbbing heart lies still;
And finds delighted, in the peaceful dome,
A better parent, and a happier home.*

Galleries One and Two

The exhibition title is from William Roscoe's 1777 poem 'Mount Pleasant', the extract above describing Bluecoat when it was a charity school. While *dome* signifies home (*domus*), might it also refer to the building's distinctive rooftop cupola? Roscoe suggests a place of refuge and succour, but behind the building's calm exterior lies a more contradictory reality: the harshness of school life, education supporting an exploitative mercantile system, and the sources of the wealth that funded the school.

Janet Hodgson questioned the philanthropic nature of this 'happier home' when in 1994 she projected repeated handwritten lines - "I must learn to know my place" - onto Bluecoat's façade. Referencing school punishment, she was also questioning the place of art, its public engagement beyond the institution and capacity for a more civic role. Represented here by a lightbox image, this was one in a trilogy of Hodgson's Bluecoat commissions. Film documentation of *History Lesson* (1999) reveals an imagined episode in the life of the 19th century school. The gallery was turned from 'white cube' into a film set, and back again, the resulting videos projected back into the spaces used. Completing the series, *Re-Run* (2008) is a disorienting film where reality and fiction collide, the past recreated in the present.

Pursuit sequences from famous films are staged, using Bluecoat staff as actors, in the empty building during refurbishment and construction of the new arts wing, where the film is now projected.

Several other artists have interrogated the building's past, as seen in documentation of interventions by **Susan Fitch** and **Geraldine Pilgrim** that drew on the school's history, and are shown alongside historical prints, including **Richard Ansdell's**, based on his 1844 boardroom painting. A Blue Coat old boy, he donated the painting in gratitude for his schooling, after which he became a successful artist and Royal Academician. His painting, *The Hunted Slaves*, hangs in Liverpool's International Slavery Museum.

Henry Hulsbergh's 1718 print of the building, still under construction, contains features long gone or, like the checkerboard paving, never realised. The idea of a building in a constant state of flux is reflected by artists who saw it ravaged by war over two centuries later – **Roderick Bisson's** painting of nearby devastation, and a small engraving by an unknown artist showing the building damaged in the May blitz. More recently, **John Davies** photographed the effects of a fire in the building in 2008, while **Edmund Tan's** animation imagines a post-apocalyptic future.

Bluecoat began life as a school for orphans, and was closely connected to the thriving port as maritime trade brought wealth to Liverpool's merchants, many of whom funded the school. As the 18th century progressed, the transatlantic slave trade became a significant source of funds, with successful slavers like Captain Crow, depicted here, contributing. This contradiction between barbarity and philanthropy has been interrogated by several artists' interventions, including **Andrew Roberts** in 1988, when he shackled cast concrete feet to Bluecoat's railings. That year, Liverpool performance group **Visual Stress** connected this history to the still unfolding story of rapacious global capital, in their first 'Urban Vimbuza' ritual, *Death by Free Enterprise*, which 'cleansed' the building of its slave past through a dramatic multi-media performance, captured in this video, staged the week *Tate of the North* (Tate Liverpool) opened in a former warehouse at Albert Dock.

Master mariner and Blue Coat school co-founder **Bryan Blundell** was also an amateur artist, painting ships including his own *Mulberry* (1696), the first to leave Liverpool's Old Dock. Built by the same engineer, Thomas Steers, and mason, Edward Litherland, who then constructed Bluecoat, the dock kick-started the global trade from which Liverpool prospered. International trade was a starting point for **Philip Courtenay's** 1992 live art project *LODE*, in which he traversed the globe, returning with symbolic cargoes that were brought from Albert Dock and unpacked at Bluecoat by young people from arts project **Yellow House**. 25 years later the work is being revisited in the context of globalisation's unstoppable march and the instant communication of the internet, and will evolve through public interaction during the exhibition.

Britain's global reach and the legacies of European colonialism are explored by two artists whose films reclaim histories relating to the African continent. In *Still Life/Textiles - White Textiles*, one of a video series that uses West African textiles, **Grace Ndiritu** takes control - through wrapping and revealing her body - of our gaze, provoking different emotional responses. In *The Fairest Heritage* **Uriel Orlow** appropriates films of the 50th anniversary in 1963 of Kirstenbosch, South Africa's national botanical garden. Flowers were excluded from the country's international economic boycott until the late 1980s, so botanical nationalism and flower diplomacy flourished unchecked. The films' protagonists (scientists, visitors etc.) are white, the only Africans featured being labourers. In this video, actor **Lindiwe Matshikiza** puts herself in these loaded images, inhabiting and confronting the found footage.

Liverpool has one of the oldest diasporic communities in Europe and, by the turn of the 20th century, one of the most diverse. Born in the city - his father from Barbados, his mother Irish - John Archer, went on to become London's first black lord mayor, in Battersea, in 1913. A Pan-Africanist, his political radicalism is celebrated in this painting by **Paul Clarkson**, also Liverpool born, whose ongoing interrogation of the port's largely unacknowledged black history began with paintings shown in 1992 Bluecoat exhibition *Trophies of Empire*.

Clarkson's portrait normally hangs in Liverpool Town Hall. Here, in 1964, The Beatles, having conquered America, returned to the city as honoured guests. Local MP Bessie Braddock had influenced the choice of musicians to accompany them: local black vocal group from her Toxteth constituency, The Chants (one of whom would later find chart success in The Real Thing), seen here with the Fab Four. The photograph speaks volumes, taken at a time when the Town Hall, focus of local political power itself adorned with symbols of Britain's imperial conquest, was exclusively white, a situation that appears to have barely changed.

In 1907, the *Sandon Studios Society* established an artistic presence at Bluecoat after the school moved out, securing its future as the first UK arts centre in 1927. Around this time, Sandon artist **William C. Penn** painted these distinctive portraits of black men, probably in his studio here. Their identity unknown, they may have been Liverpoolians, or passing through the port.

In contrast to these powerful yet conventional portraits, **Roderick Bisson's** *Red Woman, Black Man* (1932), is uncompromisingly modern, a startlingly original composition by an artist who has been overlooked in the history of British Modernism. Recently rediscovered, the painting is depicted in **Donald Lynch's** humorous pastiche of William Frederick Yeames' popular painting *And When Did You See Your Father?* in the Walker Art Gallery. Bisson, the committed avant-gardist, is being interrogated by the Sandon committee, his painting brandished as evidence of a radicalism at odds with the Sandon's prevailing conservatism. Completing this group of paintings is **Syd 'Spike' Merrills' The Village Funeral**, also featured on the wall of the Sandon dining room in Lynch's composition. According to Bisson's colourful history *The Sandon Studios Society and the Arts*, Merrills was a Liverpool prankster, credited with anticipating the Theatre of the Absurd.

Other Bisson paintings reflect an early adoption of Surrealism and currents in European art he was exposed to in the interwar years. His openness to Modernism echoes that of **Edward Carter Preston**, one of several Sandon artists who showed alongside Picasso, Matisse and others in the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition at Bluecoat in 1911. A version of Roger Fry's ground-breaking introduction of the European avant-garde to an English audience, staged in London earlier (and in Liverpool shown, significantly, with British artists), the exhibition had an impact on the Sandon. None more so than Carter Preston, whose two drawings from 1911 must have been completed shortly after. His rarely seen watercolours demonstrate an exploration of abstraction and distinctive approach to landscape and still life that has been overshadowed by his reputation as Anglican Cathedral sculptor and war medallist.

Gallery 3

A selection of Carter Preston's war-related work comprises medals and a wooden 'plychrome', designed as a recuperative model-making kit for disabled soldiers returning from World War One. An apparently anti-fascist Christmas card included here was probably produced in the late-1930s during the descent into war. His lost sculpture *Arms and the Man*, a futuristic robot figure in metal inspired by Fritz Lang's dystopian film *Metropolis*, has been interpreted as a 3D print using the latest digital manufacturing technology by **Fab Lab Liverpool**, based on little more than two photographs and a written description.

In 1931, nearly 50,000 people each paid sixpence to view **Jacob Epstein's** *Genesis*, the country's most debated sculpture, generating £1,000 for the hard-up *Bluecoat Society of Arts*. Its showing was a sensation, the subject of fierce controversy. Sermons were preached in local churches about the sculpture, which was later exhibited as a sort of curious entertainment at Madame Tussauds in Blackpool. Epstein said of the work, "I felt the necessity for giving expression to the profoundly elemental in motherhood, the deep down instinctive female, without the trappings and charm of what is known as feminine; my feminine would be the eternal primeval feminine, the mother of the race". In contrast to *Genesis's* first dramatic presentation at Bluecoat - with black velvet backdrop, security rail and top light, and entrance by ticket only - it now faces busy College Lane. It is accompanied by contemporary material, including **Herbert Tyson Smith's** audio account that mentions a thwarted publicity stunt proposed by Sandon artist, Syd Merrills.

Jo Stockham revisits works shown at Bluecoat in 1990, alongside other pieces reworked for the exhibition - a response, informed by feminism and peace studies, to war and nuclear proliferation, which, given the present geopolitical context, takes on added resonance. Themes relating to gender and militarism echo those found in Epstein and Carter Preston, while her use of ephemeral materials such as fabrics and found objects, contrast with traditional, predominantly male forms of sculptural expression, such as stone carving.

The Cloister

Reflecting a revival of interest in the crossover between fine and applied art, **The Grantchester Pottery** have created a new wallpaper, commissioned for the long wall in the Cloister overlooking the garden. Picking up on Bluecoat's 1911 and 1913 Post-Impressionist exhibitions, they adopt motifs reminiscent of some of the art from those shows.

Other artists' work is presented on the wallpaper and relates to literature and printed text, starting with a bookplate by Sandon founder member **Fanny Calder**, who was instrumental in the group moving to Bluecoat and led the campaign to save it in 1927. An accomplished artist, this design pre-dates her Bluecoat involvement but, with elements relating to music, craft and design, it anticipates the arts centre's multi-art form nature. **Sumuyya Khader** has been commissioned to interpret a quote from Calder, resulting in a drawing printed on a Risograph digital duplicator, while **Jonzo's** screenprint, produced in our print studio for 2015 exhibition *RESOURCE*, also references the arts centre's founding principles - 'the diffusion of useful knowledge' in the *Bluecoat Society of Arts* constitution.

Artists have been central to Bluecoat for over a century. Current studio holders include **Juniper Press** who celebrate the continuing appeal and vitality of letterpress. The prints here include quotes from **Beatrice Warde**, attesting to the importance of printing over five centuries. Current Bluecoat writer and artist in residence, **Sean Borodale's** *Lyriographs* (from Greek, concerning the lyre and writing) are transcripts of acts of writing made on location, screen-printed in negative, while his *Memory-Blocks* are metal castings of writings scratched into wax, records of the un-vocalised, or whispered utterance. Previous poet in residence, **Nathan Jones**, presents visual poems created with **Scott Spencer**, whose titles - *Orphan*, *Museums* and *Stairway* - have echoes of the building's history and architecture.

The Cloister also houses *sgraffito* ceramics by **Julia Carter Preston**, who had a studio overlooking the garden for many years, one of several Sandon artists who developed distinctive decorative arts practices, a tradition stretching back to the applied arts training of the 'Art Sheds', the University's art department from which the Sandon broke away in 1905 to form an independent art school. Craft and design continue to be supported in the building by Bluecoat Display Centre, one of the UK's earliest designer-maker galleries, founded in 1959. The lettering of its original wooden sign was cut by **Herbert Tyson Smith**, who ran a sculptor's studio next to the Display Centre for over 40 years and is known for his prominent public realm works, notably the reliefs on the cenotaph at St George's Plateau.

Tyson Smith's bronze sculpture was presented to Viscountess Leverhulme, whose husband (as William Lever) purchased the Bluecoat to help Charles Reilly, Liverpool University Architecture Department's head - in tandem with the Sandon - transform it into a cultural centre. Echoing the sculpture's mermaid subject, **Ann Whitehurst's** prints, shown in her 1994 Bluecoat exhibition *On the Map: Placing Disability*, reclaim the mythological female figure as a symbol of resistance against systemic discrimination that the social model of disability articulates. The exhibition interrogated disabling environments, and Bluecoat's own access shortcomings, through an installation involving a life-sized board game and fax communication.

Tyson Smith is one of four Sandon 'types' caricatured by **Edgar Grosvenor** alongside an expressive, great-coated painter, understood to be **Augustus John**, who was associated with the arts centre's early years. Another cartoon, similar to Grosvenor's later graphic style (and probably by him), depicts Tyson Smith in bow tie at the top of a cascade of acrobatic Sandon members. The swimming costumes being worn are perhaps a reference to the improvised pond that once occupied the secret garden outside the Sandon Music Room

Gallery Four upstairs

Plates by **Julia Carter Preston** are paired with works by two contemporary artists, **Dan Coopey** and **Joanne Masding**, that reference history and craft. For Coopey's rattan sculptures he employs one of the oldest forms of craft, basket weaving. Whilst appearing as useful vessels, and containing small objects such as gum and precious metals, these have been entirely sealed. Accessing the

curious items inside would require breaking the sculptures, destroying their status as artworks but allowing them to function as baskets.

Masding invites the viewer to consider the allure of artefacts and the way histories are written through their collection. In *New Rehang (Series 1)* the text of a catalogue of British Museum artefacts and antiquities has been erased. Removed from the book's binding, each double spread now features pages entirely out of order, creating surprising collisions between objects of different eras and geographic origin. *New Rehang (Series 3)* uses similar imagery, fixed with a holographic finish onto hand moulded plaster.

Just as Coopey works between craft and contemporary art, decades earlier Carter Preston straddled fine and applied arts. Settling on a distinctive style, her work also moved between the commercially successful and artistically experimental. Her metallic glazes share the same allure as Masding's contemporary holographic sculptures.

Bryan Biggs, Bluecoat Artistic Director and *In the Peaceful Dome* curator.

In the Peaceful Dome continues until 25 March 2018, open daily 10am -6pm (and from 11am on Sundays).

The exhibition is accompanied by a programme of talks, tours and other events. to find out more visit thebluecoat.org.uk, or speak to a member of staff at our Tickets & Information desk.

Bluecoat



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