

Wylde

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Ghosts in the Machine

THE UNSETTLING ART OF BEN ASHTON

Review by David Newton



A longtime favourite of Wylde Magazine, artist Ben Ashton is a true anomaly in today's art world. Heavily influenced by the art of the past (especially portraiture), his predominantly figurative work is also relentlessly modern, displaying a feverishly enquiring mind that is constantly experimenting; he never pastiches. A mass of contradictions, he displays the classic introvert's self-sufficiency, whilst loving the mental thrill of collaboration. The nerve centre of his empire is a live-work space in North London that he shares with his wife, photographer Fiona Garden, and recent arrival Hiero, their son.

Ashton's latest show: *The King Is Dead, Long Live The King* is the perfect manifestation of the artist's life and (current) interests/obsessions. The whole family; artist father/husband and his wife

and child, all appear naked, except for a range of slightly disturbing, semi tribal, semi ornate masks. Masks have long been a recurring theme in Ashton's work, bringing with them questions of identity, revelation and concealment.

Add to this already intriguing mix the fact that these huge oil paintings (an avowedly "old" medium) are based on experimental photographs that Ashton and Garden took in their home studio, and the plot thickens. Slow shutter exposures have resulted in ghostly light-trails that suggest not only movement but the supernatural and "other" identities, to exaggerate the disconcerting mood already created by the masks. There is a spectral green tinge to the pictures that, to me, evoke infra-red imaging, coupled with an eerie underwater feel.

The pictures also remind me of those attempts by Victorian/Edwardian photographers to "capture" spirits from other dimensions, not visible to the naked eye. Ectoplasm (which has sadly gone out of fashion!) floats in the air, often emanating from the bodies of the human subjects. Whether this remotely influenced Ashton is uncertain, but I'm guessing for such an avidly curious mind, anything is possible. His own press release for the show states: "Ashton explores a metaphor of Dionysian and Apollonian duality. Apollo represents individualism, control and the order of the universe and Dionysus represents emotion, chaos and collective unity. Through the dichotomy of these two powerful forces comes artistic creation, and indeed procreation."

And what greater example of collaboration can there be than the act of procreation? It begs the question: where does the art stop and the artist's life begin (and vice versa)? In Ashton's work the two are now inextricably linked: you are looking at oil applied to canvas (the "art") linked to a couple's photography (more art!), featuring their child (a wonderful art object, named after a 15th Century painter). The term "Renaissance Man" has been bandied about so much over the past 30-odd years that it is virtually meaningless now, but Ashton really does deserve the title. When I visited his home/studio a couple of years ago, I was shown amazingly sophisticated 3-D experiments with lenses/mirrors/light sources that would have had Leonardo salivating.

Highly conceptual, yet undeniably accessible, Ashton's work has something for everyone (to use another old cliché). Powerful, yet deeply sensitive. Strange, yet humanistically familiar. Funny, yet disturbing. He currently hovers under many people's radar at the moment, but this won't last long. If you can't make the show, check out the website and immerse yourself in his unique world.

THE KING IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE KING
is at the COB Gallery