

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, now
Episode One

Accelerate
your escape

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello and welcome to 'Hear, Now', a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery, here in the heart of East London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators, and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shape the artworks. My name is Jane Scarth, Curator of Public Programmes, introducing you to today's episode featuring painter, Gary Hume, who has been invited to select artworks for the first of two displays featuring works from the Hiscox collection. Speaking with Gary is Whitechapel Gallery Curator, Laura Smith, who is overseeing the exhibition and has worked closely with Gary throughout the selection and display process. Here, they talk about how slow looking allows us to enter images in more meaningful ways, the role of intuition and instinct, and the work of Edward Burtynsky, Keith Coventry, Thomas Ruff, Alison Wilding, and Willie Doherty. The exhibition is free to view in Gallery 7 and is on display from 25 August 2020 until 3 January 2021.

LS: So we're here today to talk about the exhibition in Gallery 7 at Whitechapel Gallery. Gallery 7 is the space where we host visiting collections. As Whitechapel doesn't have its own collection, each year we invite different collections, usually those that are not easily viewable in the UK, to be our kind of collection in residence and we'll curate two or three displays from that collection over the course of the year. This year, the collection we're delighted to be hosting belongs to the Hiscox Insurance Group and it actually has quite an interesting story. It was begun in 1970 by Robert Hiscox who wanted to introduce art to his offices as a way of offering his employees something to stimulate, excite, interest or distract them. And the collection has grown since then. Now, 50 years on, it consists of almost 1,000 works of art by international contemporary artists, and with no work

ever in storage, it's a very hard-working collection. It appears in offices around the world, above photocopiers or in meeting rooms, enlivening the working environment of Hiscox employees at all levels of the company.

So for the two displays at Whitechapel, we're very excited to bring these works that had never been seen outside of the Hiscox offices to public view, and we thought it would be great to invite two artists who have works in the collection to curate the two displays. The first of these artists is the British painter, Gary Hume, who's here with us today, and whose print series *The Sister Troupe* is in the collection. The second artist is the Venezuelan-born, Berlin-based installation artist and painter, Sol Calero, whose display will open in January next year, after Gary's. Alongside Gary and Sol's displays, you can also see a section of works made from the collection by Whitechapel Gallery's Youth Forum, Duchamp & Sons, but that's a separate podcast. For this podcast, I'm very grateful to Gary for both agreeing to curate a selection from the collection and for talking with us here today. Thank you, Gary.

GH: Pleasure.

LS: So I thought we should start at the beginning, could you tell us how you approached the task of making the exhibition and how you made your selection of 27 works from over 1,000?

GH: Quite a simple and nowadays ordinary genesis of it, which is everything of course is digitalised, so just sat – getting access to the collection database and then sat looking at my computer going through the images and going through quickly and just an old-fashioned pencil and bit of paper, writing down the names of the works or the artists that I was automatically drawn to. And then keep on doing that until I sort of started to bring the list down, because of course

initially I'm both wanting to be generous and I'm looking at things...of course the bolder the image or the object, the more drawn to it I am, and so then trying to slow my breathing down and see whether I can actually look at things that are less automatically impactful and find their value. So that was the simple process, and then from there went to Hiscox offices in London to have a look at...most of the work that I think is in the show I've seen in real life, and occasionally they've had to – because there's no travel or anything – someone's had FaceTime, so I've actually seen it in their offices in Texas or God knows where, so get a sense of its scale and its place.

One of the things I really liked about it was that even though we're using modern technologies to sort of like speed up the process, it also was like going back in time where I remember having art catalogues and looking at these paintings or sculptures and not really being able to...not taking much notice of the material or the proportion, size of the works. And so it was really interesting for me to think that I've imagined that this thing is a really big painting, say, and I go and see it and it's like eight inches by four, and how you then have to readdress what the hell you're looking at if it is so intimate. So I really, really enjoyed that. Then of course some things in real life I liked less than when they were an image.

LS: Why do you think that happened?

GH: All down to material really and about how the artist has used the material and whether I'm excited by that use, and sometimes I think, oh, this isn't quite as good as it is as an image, you know. It's sort of an interesting dilemma, like how do you make some things love being photographed and they look better for it, and other things don't really like being photographed, they only really exist when you're in front of them.

- LS: Can you tell us...can you say maybe a bit about what you did instinctively respond to, because it's a very personal selection which I'm sure we'll come on to talk about in more detail, but it feels very much yours and very much following your intuition. I don't know if that's possible even to articulate, but...
- GH: Well, there was definitely no sort of like academic thesis that I was wanting to explore that I think, oh great, what an opportunity to explore this thesis I've been wanting to illustrate for years, I don't have any of those. So really it was truly instinctive, but a couple of things I'm always drawn to, one is material, I love wet stuff on the end of a stick being moved about and how that can just become fantastic in its simplicity and thrilling, the mark making and colour and the material does something that is sort of like loose and exciting. And the other thing that I really like, which is sort of like connected to that really, is something that is beautiful but has either a hidden sadness in it or it's not just pretty, it feels...as you approach it, you approach it at ease, and then the more you're with it, the less at ease you become, either through its, sort of, daub-like quality and you wonder about what a marvellous simplicity life can be, or the fact that the image is not actually of something pleasant or realistic, realistically pleasant. And I find that dichotomy in work is always something that I really like.
- LS: One of the works that I think does that really brilliantly is – we're looking at a piece of paper, a printout of it – is Edward Burtynsky's oil spill photograph, which is a really incredible aerial view photograph of an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, and I think it does exactly that that you're talking about, it's a very, very beautiful image of a horrible and destructive event.

GH: So what is an artist? Unless they're purely conceptual, an artist is basically an aesthete, they're dealing with aesthetic...they're dealing with materials and aesthetics all the time and about how to move them about to make something. And here is a...looking at the real world at an ecological and maybe physical to human beings disaster, and the image is beautiful. The texture of the water is like physical, it could actually all be oil rather than the darkness of water, the hoses, the boats, there's almost nobody...if you look closely, you can just about see maybe some hardhats on the rig. But there's like no human beings, everything is so mechanised that there's sort of like no need for people to be running around, they just set it up and off they go. So on the first glance at it – well, forever really, it's a beautiful object, it's a beautiful composition and colours and textures everything, and it is of something awful. And that conflict, what do you do as the viewer with those two things, is there ever a resolution with those two things, or is the fact that there is no resolution the thing that becomes interesting in the work. Now, I don't know the answer to that, I haven't resolved my...

LS: I don't think anyone can. I don't know, maybe, maybe someone can, but it doesn't seem like something that necessarily needs a resolution.

GH: No, it's a bit like finding pleasure in lockdown, you know, like there's been so many pleasures to be had, at the same time knowing that other people are suffering and that people are dying and everybody is sort of like...different people are stuck in situations that aren't appealing in any way, but one can still find pleasures. And then do you admit your pleasures, do you go, actually, I had a lovely time, I cycled round London and it was completely empty, or do you like try and hide the...because you want to be with everybody, or is it important to take pleasure where pleasure can be found,

otherwise what the hell was the point of being alive, you know, that's part of the human psyche, to have pleasure.

LS: Speaking of lockdown, your exhibition title is quite prescient to the contemporary circumstances we're in, the show is called Accelerate your Escape, and it's taken from Haim Steinbach's print which is included in the exhibition. Could you talk a little bit...I mean, you chose that title before lockdown happened, it was just a premonition perhaps.

GH: Well, art has always been an escape for me, and it's not an escapism, but it's an escape, it's an escape from what was expected of me by my teachers and my education, an escape from my own sort of like dogma that I can believe that the world is in one shape and then I can see something else. Just the sheer awe in looking, so to practice looking, and the beautiful thing about looking is the more you look, the more you see, and the more you see, the more you think, and there's a very lovely, calm, meditative way to almost analyse the world, but it's analysing and feeling the world all at once by looking. And of course I spend almost every day of the week doing that, and it is to...I basically loved that title because let's speed up our escape, let's accelerate it, let's enjoy the fact that even amongst like Keith Coventry's broken tree from the council estate, that it can be a sign of, get the hell out of there, plant another one, do something, this is the world.

I think, yeah, I mean, I'm really just repeating myself, it's important not for escapism, but for a journey in via looking, because most of the time we don't have any time to be in, it's always about being out, showing your exterior self, and that being the thing that can define one. The beautiful thing about looking at anything, whether it be ledge in a kitchen or a sunset or Keith Coventry sculpture, it can just open up your mind.

So there's a Thomas Ruff photograph and it's really fantastic, he makes them up, so you think you're looking at a real photograph, but you're not looking at a real photograph, I mean a real thing he's photographed, he's made the thing and then photographed it, and it's a gallery from what looks like 1950s Mayfair or somewhere and it's just gorgeous. And then you look very closely at it and you see that there's this like velvet rope that is sort of like pointless and it's just been tied up on one of the stanchions, so that's sort of weird. It's all lovely, then there's – this is a really funny bit, where he's taken out the doormat as you come into the gallery, there once – there's a little recess in the floor where there was once no doubt a regular doormat there to fit, and he obviously didn't like the colour, so he took that up and then didn't know what to do. So he ran home, got his bath mat and put his bath mat down which doesn't fit in the hole properly. But what's really nice is you accept the image for what it is, and then the more you look, you see all of these quirks and strange anomalies of, if that was real, that would be totally weird, not the glamorous Mayfair gallery that you think, incredibly weird space, like a, hello, to the person who owns it. But you revert back to it being a real place without the anomalies, so I don't know...

LS: Your brain fills in the gaps.

GH: Yeah. Yeah, getting rid of anomalies, weird.

LS: There's a work by Alison Wilding in the show which sort of brings me on to another question that I wanted to ask you, which is one thing that was really interesting to me after going to the Hiscox offices and now seeing the works in our gallery is how different they are when they're taken out of that office environment. So like I said at the beginning, the works are never in store, they live in offices with people, with computers, with snacks, with movement and noise, lots and lots of visual noise, and they were strong and beautiful in the

offices. But now this work particularly by Alison Wilding, which is a very small kind of 15 by 15 centimetre sculpture of cast acrylic, in the offices had a kind of quiet presence, but here in the gallery it feels totemic or it feels like it's going to open Indiana Jones' tomb or something, it's got so much power when you take away that visual noise.

GH: Well, you're very kind saying that it had a presence in their offices, it certainly did not have...because it's an object that you can...it's tiny, right, and it's an object that unless you love it, it could just be kept putting to one side until finally it's in a corner of someone's office on a shelf, they don't even know it's there anymore, because they haven't looked at it to love it.

LS: Properly, uh-huh.

GH: And that I think once they see it in the show, that the person whose office it was in will go, oh my God, I had that in my office, I think I should get...can I have that plinth, please, I want to put it in there like that, because I really didn't even look at it. I love it, I completely love its humility and its hugeness, there's, I don't know, there's just something about the architecture – weirdly, I think, you know, you say Indiana Jones, but I think more faith and how architecture makes faith or how faith uses architecture, and here she is using this very small totemic object to...it makes me sort of like laugh at my own desire for size, you know, I think, oh, what an idiot, look what you can do...

LS: On such a small scale.

GH: ...on such a small scale, and that pleasure of falling in love with something that is invisible, can be invisible, once you've fallen in love with it, you feel really good because it's like a secret, everybody else is going to be strolling by but you

know that that's really, really fantastic, and you get a double pleasure out of it.

LS: I think Indiana Jones and faith, I think maybe – I hope we maybe mean the same thing, I just mean like an object that has its own power and energy outside of...that occurs naturally. It's almost to me – it's really hard to describe for people listening, but it's quite a geometric cast tower with a sort of ascending top, and the bottom half of it is filled with this swirling dark black and red pigment and the top of it is almost translucent white grey, it's very beautiful. But it feels like something that exists in the world anyway, it feels like a mineral or one of those stones you get in a gift shop...

GH: Yeah, because it's got that quartz-type layering, hasn't it?

LS: Mm-hm.

GH: And laying down of geological time and all that stuff and Aztec temples.

LS: Mm.

GH: But yeah, it's... Again, I don't know whether the whole lighting thing is...because in this photograph, the lower section seems really intensely coloured, whereas...

LS: Upstairs it's more subtle.

GH: Yeah, it's much more subtle and it just feels like real rather than...it feels real in the whole thing rather than the whole thing is there for that bit of colour action, you know what I mean...

LS: Mm-hm.

GH: ...it's more complete.

LS: I guess one of the other works it would be quite nice to discuss with you is as you come into the gallery, the first work you see, which is Willie Doherty's photograph of a border crossing in Northern Ireland, and it's the biggest work in the show, and you've positioned it exactly opposite the doorway as you enter. So as you enter, you're approaching this road and the photograph is, as I said, very large, almost two metres long, and there's a photograph of a road in Northern Ireland leading to a border crossing. So at the foreground of the photograph, the road fills that foreground and then the perspective takes you up the road and the white lines sort of chart your path, and I think it's a really exciting way to enter the show, especially given the show's title, because it sort of takes you to another place immediately without you even having to try. And at the same time it's a very, very beautiful, very luscious image of something that has a very complicated and difficult history that is definitely not beautiful.

GH: Well, I haven't seen this work for years, but I did see quite a lot of it in the 1990s, and I never looked at them as beautiful images, I mean, because the Troubles were...

LS: Because of the content.

GH: ...still on and I could only see that with like fear and trepidation and being frightened of the soldiers at the checkpoint and frightened of the IRA or the UDA in the hedges. So not beautiful, it was only threatening, and of course this is going back to what I was saying about what I really like in art, is that now, I mean, partly because the Troubles are over, I'm sure if the Troubles – well, almost over – if the Troubles were still on, then I don't know whether I could see the thing that Willie must have been looking at at the same time, he wasn't just photographing anxiety and trepidation, he must have seen... He chose a spot, the spot

maybe any spot is beautiful, but this spot turns out to be beautiful when you look at it with the prescience of fear taken away. And so you can...it sort of like becomes hopeful, you know that it was made in a time with very little hope, and now you can see some hope in it, and I love the fact that there's the, you know, because Ireland, bloody rains all the time, and you can see the tyre marks, moving the water away, the hedges and the light and the strange little kink in the white lines, like the person was a bit drunk doing that. And partly in this show with the things I've chosen, its aesthetic qualities are being pulled out from which you then go into its historical moment and what's happened there now. I found it really exciting because I saw him as a polemicist, and not that, you know, probably being really unfair because I've seen a few shows but I don't know it really in any depth, but I saw him as a polemicist, so sort of like a bit bored. But it was really lovely for me to see the possibility of a polemic in it but via aesthetics and via...and now being imbued with some hope in it. So, yeah, that's why I liked that, beautiful. Weird, isn't it, that one object can change...

LS: Your whole perception.

GH: Yeah.

LS: Yeah.

GH: It's like the crucifixion, isn't it, who wants to look at a man nailed to the cross, it's only the resurrection that makes it bearable.

LS: Yeah. I mean, that's probably quite a good point to end on, but I have a final question which is – well, it's kind of two, is how has this related to your own daily work of making paintings, if it has at all, and would you want to do it again, have you enjoyed it?

GH: I've enjoyed it, it's been fun, it's been nice, and you and Grace are both great to work with.

LS: Thank you.

GH: I don't really want to do it again, no, there are professional curators out there – I think it's a nice idea to ask artists to do things and in this sort of methodology when you're using peoples' collections, it's a nice way of trying to open up eyes. Because one of the things that was interesting is that the artist who's showing next this collection, I thought, oh my God, I had first pick, so I thought, she's going to be really like, oh no, what a nightmare, oh, I've got all this rubbish, but in fact she didn't want any of my stuff anyway.

LS: She didn't.

GH: So it would be really fascinating, so the next show, same collection, a completely different view no doubt, I mean, I don't know what she's chosen, and you think, oh my God, so I thought this collection...

LS: Did one thing, uh-huh.

GH: ...looked like this, but in fact this other artist has now made the collection look like that. So I think that's really interesting. And the relation to my work is really what I've just been banging on about all the time which is that the relationship between what I love, which is moving wet stuff about until it dries and it looks like something, and how to make something that can bear being looked at via aesthetics or lack of aesthetics of one sort or another, and it containing... I mean, like all art, finally it contains loss, even David Hockney's Oranges, they won't always be that lovely, and you've just caught a moment.

LS: Thank you, Gary.

GH: Pleasure.

JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of 'Hear, Now'. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org. Don't forget to visit the exhibition, Accelerate your Escape, Gary Hume selects from the Hiscox collection, on display from 25 August 2020 until 3 January 2021. Goodbye for now.

End of transcript

Transcribed by 1st Class Secretarial Services