

Sam Haile (1909-1948) – Painter Potter

“Life is a constant and relentless compromise between opposites”

Hardly an original thought, but this simple statement about compromise is perhaps a starting point to look at paintings. Art should be more than just lame imitation it should have a purpose. Art should be expressive, provocative and inspirational. Stand among the Rothko murals, saturated in hallucinogenic fields of colour, feel the expression and meaning, provocation, confusion, inspiration, imagination. There are possibilities to interpret, explore, discover. Few art works do this, when they do it becomes difficult to explain why, but offers possibilities and potential.

Art criticism and the narrative around pictures and painting is often so close the fringes of our own experience that it becomes unfathomable. However a small group of extraordinary paintings by Sam Haile has intriguing potential for interpretation, exploration and discovery. Haile, who was killed in a car crash in 1948 at the age of 39, was one of a small and rather random group of British Surrealist and Avant-Garde artist. A man of passion and unrelenting ideas and determination, Haile produced a small body of work. This is frustrating but it does mean that the collection is manageable and does not drain the energy needed to look at it and interpret it.

Haile's widow, Marianne, is energized, informed and charming about her husband and recalls, when asking her husband about the meaning of his surrealist pictures, there was never an answer. So they remain tantalizingly unexplained and open to interpretation. Haile was hyper-active; either drawing, painting, potting, working; always creating something. He was an insomniac and together with an insatiable appetite to create this inevitably meant solitary nights on the fringes of sleep and dreams thinking, sketching and painting. In these dark hours, where the conscious and the sub-conscious drift, merge and overlap, the artist in Haile could inquire, stalk and experiment.

In the early 1940s, in the dead of the night the exquisite lightness and extraordinary concept of *The Suspended Ones trailing the tendons of their feet Across the faces of the Sunken* and *The Sunken and The Suspended Ones trailing their feet, rediscovered in Colorado* becomes viable and accessible. Here on the fringes of dreams and reality, among the chaos and carnage of the Second World War, opposites are laid out and pulled apart, connected only by fragmented sinewy tendons. Here the tension and relationship between light and dark, pleasure and pain, good and evil, war and peace, life and death are stretched across the page

In fierce contrast to these beautiful drawings, how then should we interpret *The Woodman*, 1939? It is apparently a destructive, marching, sexually charge male slicing through the female form. Is this the march of Fascism interpreted by Haile? *The Woodman* is a violent painting, brutally and explicitly sexual which encompasses eyes on waving tentacles that recur in other works. Is the suspension of the eye on ten waving stalks a metaphor for the fragmentation of reality and the impossible task of interpreting good and evil in a dreadful world? Or is it something else? Perhaps the eye is a metaphor for conscience and how we interpret to good and evil. What we see and do from day to day and what we choose to acknowledge are two very different things. Aren't they?

Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), the prophetic vision and rejection of war and a picture which the artist refused to explain, and the Surrealism of Dali in particular, look like direct influences (see Haile's 1940 painting titled '*Stranded Gander*'). The influence of sculpture and perhaps Henry Moore seem to the fore in this powerful and sexually explicit painting simply known as *Reclining Figures*. The lack of the artist's formal title goes to emphasize the sad dearth of information and primary source records about Haile. In the painting, these monumental smooth embracing figures hint towards antiquity and religious painting. The aggressive female form is dominant and threatening and inclined away from the passive and attendant male form – what a contrast to *The Woodman*!

The pre-sale estimates for this group of 40 pictures accompanied by a small group of studio pots range from £100 upwards. This unique collection by Sam Haile will be on view at The Great Hall Dartington on the 18th

& 19th January, accompanied by a talk at 12 noon on each day, and will subsequently be offered for sale at Bearn's Hampton & Littlewood in Exeter on 27th & 28th January.

In reading the sparse information and notes available about Haile one particular statement stands out; 'The three-dimensional aspect of matter is not the whole of reality'. The simple interpretation is that 'things are not everything'. This non-materialistic, non-physical perspective on the world is not original but an apt reminder of one of the purposes of art and an alternative perspective on life – depending on your point of view of course.

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Stranded Gander, 1940, inspired by Picasso's *Guernica* (1937)?

Reclining Figures, 1935, 'sculptural and classical'

The Woodman, 1939, 'the march of Fascism'

The Sunken and The Suspended Ones trailing their feet, rediscovered in Colorado 1944, 'unexplained tension and exquisite lightness'

The Suspended Ones trailing the tendons of their feet Across the faces of the Sunken 1943