

Graham Dean exhibition shows athletes get “Fitter, Quicker, Longer”

A unique insight into the hearts and minds of Olympic and Paralympic athletes is captured in a new exhibition at Bath & North East Somerset Council's Victoria Art Gallery.

Graham Dean's "Fitter, Quicker, Longer", running from 7 July to 2 September, explores the mental discipline and physical form required of elite athletes through a colourful display of huge watercolours on handmade Indian paper.

The internationally-renowned contemporary artist visited Olympic and Paralympic training camps over the last year to make small studies of athletes, which were then converted in the studio into large scale exhibition pieces.

As well as documenting sportspeople in action, the paintings also explore their emotions in the moments before and after a competitive event has taken place.

Councillor Cherry Beath (Lib-Dem, Combe Down), Cabinet Member for Sustainable Development, said: "We are delighted to exhibit Graham Dean's latest magnificent creations at the Victoria Art Gallery as part of Bath & North East Somerset Council's Olympic and Paralympic celebrations. His fascinating portrayal of these passionate athletes at the peak of physical fitness should appeal to sports fans and art lovers alike."

The artworks cover a cross-section of Olympic and Paralympic sports – from the grace and streamlined beauty of the diver to powerful displays of strength from weightlifters and wrestlers.

Commenting on his latest public work, Graham Dean said: "When invited to produce a show inspired by the Olympics, I was tempted to decline knowing how rarely sport is tackled by contemporary artists. What got me on board was an American critic's claim to have never seen a good sport-themed painting in a museum.

"The project spoke to my 35-year engagement with the body, born out in paintings including skinheads, fashion models, gamblers and identical twins. Athletes similarly push their bodies to an extreme and, in the case of Olympians, are competitors who spend years preparing for this moment.

"One of the best days was with the Paralympics squad – in some ways challenging, yet bringing a definite feeling of uplift. Wheelchairs were an issue because it's sometimes difficult to see beyond the equipment, but I wanted to make them part of the athlete's body. In one painting of a basketball player I made the spokes of the wheels resemble a union jack. Likewise the 'blade runners', whose mobility and grace surprised me.

“I found athletes’ bodies fascinating, including the skin – noticing its incredibly healthy glow at a long jump event, for example. These athletes really were at the physical peak of their lives.”

For this exhibition Dean has reinvented the traditional use of watercolour paint through an innovative technique he has dubbed ‘reverse archaeology’. Contrasting layers of paint are applied separately on thick, handmade paper, made of ‘khadi’ a cloth which in this case is made from recycled t-shirts imported from Kerala in Southern India. Each sheet is torn by hand and overlapped to create a final composition of paper.

Graham Dean will lead a tour of his exhibition on Friday 20 July, from 1pm to 1.45pm. Admission is free but early arrival is advised. Collectors of Graham Dean’s previous artworks include the musician Peter Gabriel and Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop.

The Victoria Art Gallery, near Pulteney Bridge in Bath, is open Tuesday to Saturday 10am to 5pm, Sundays 1.30pm to 5pm and closed on Mondays. Admission is free. For more details call 01225 477233 or visit the Gallery’s website www.victoriagal.org.uk.

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