

Garry Barker is a local artist. For many years he's made drawings of the streets around where he lives in Chapeltown, Leeds, and then worked this imagery into larger drawings. Garry Barker is also a local man. By this, I don't mean he was born there but rather that he knows his neighbours and takes an active interest in what's going on. He campaigns about local issues, takes part in things, he's created a gallery in his house, he walks to work.

Living local with this kind of intensity bucks the trend: the feeling that everywhere is interchangeable; the dislocating effects of the internet; communication by email and mobile phone; the daily commute. What's more, we have an increasingly global economy: whenever capitalist enterprise detects advantage elsewhere, it simply moves on, with scant regard for what's left behind. Even the most prosperous location has only contingent value and significance.

The historian Paul Kennedy writes:

... the 'privileging of the global' ... has led to a situation where place, and those who struggle to engage in the place-making activities appropriate to it are at best regarded as marginal and, at worst, the locations they inhabit and the lives they create are in effect discursively erased.<sup>1</sup>

Garry Barker's drawings work against this erasure. For one thing, his portraits of Chapeltown – the streets, buildings, people – are inked, large-scale, clear and emphatic. And, for another, they embody the life he has created, in particular his creative inner-life. Yet his work is not only about local matters but also world events – the latter always from the perspective of his immediate neighbourhood. During the banking crisis, when total collapse seemed possible, he pictured an agrarian revolution happening outside his kitchen window – people digging up the road, planting crops and raising livestock. And the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq war has given rise to 'In Memory of Forgotten Truths', a fantasy of total revelation in which monsters surge out of underground chambers in Chapeltown's parks.

To identify as a local artist is not without cost. Look no further than The Economist, mouthpiece of the free market economy:

To be a good bet against near-zero interest rates and unpredictable currency fluctuations, art needs the potential of a global market. Thus, 'local artist' has become a synonym for insignificant artist and 'national' damns with faint praise. 'International' is now a selling point in itself.<sup>2</sup>

This place where Garry Barker lives, the focus of his work, is also economically 'off-stage' – in the north and not the south, in a suburb of Leeds and not the centre. The once-grand houses built for nineteenth century industrialists have in large part fallen into disuse or been divided into low-rent flats, attesting that capitalist enterprise has moved on from or skirted around Chapeltown, many times over.

On the other hand, in Chapeltown there's a particularly high degree of exposure to global events: the fall-out is strongly felt. His neighbour is Palestinian; next-door-but-one lives a Russian; there's an Iraqi family further down. As Garry Barker reflected: "Chapeltown soaks up people". Now, with the migrant crisis, there are particularly high numbers of new arrivals and a new sense of uncertainty. As the artist told me,

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Kennedy, 'Local Lives and Global Transformations: towards global society', 2010

<sup>2</sup> The Economist, 24.06.2010

“The immigration wagon came next door at four in the morning, trying to find illegal immigrants”. He also pointed out a cluster of tents in another neighbour’s garden that are used to store emergency supplies such as blankets and clothing.

This gives a particular kind of immediacy to Garry Barker’s sense of himself as the grandson of Polish Jewish immigrants. And it’s spawned in him a more angry kind of drawing. In ‘The bloody eye of God’, the outer shell of a huge building, rendered in red, hurtles over the Chapeltown skyline, while lightening strikes and thunderclouds roll. In ‘I stand in deep mire, where there is no sinking’, another up-ended, red, hollowed-out building tips a lone human into a wind-whipped flood. The artist explained how he arrived at this imagery: “the West is talked about at the Refugee Centre as being the answer to their problems, but this gives the lie to previous immigrants who are still struggling here. To me, the West is hollow.”

It becomes clear that the rapid intensification of local conditions has served to change this local artist’s practice. In terms of content, his scenario is now something like a present-day, doomed version of ‘Exodus’. And the increasingly phantasmagorical imagery, the sudden shift to red, the dramatic, looming angles, the spills of ink – all of this signals an acute sense of upheaval and urgency.

Garry Barker is experimenting as never before with new materials. Finding he can’t contain what he wants to say within his drawings, he’s been working with computer imaging, animation, ceramics, installation, and, most surprising of all, woven textiles. ‘The Promise of Arrival’ is a drawing of a small boat overloaded with refugees – one of the most potent media images of this crisis – which has been converted into a woollen weaving. As the artist explained: “I made a drawing, which was then scanned as a very large file. It was then worked on digitally, at the same size as the final output, so that each pixel was seen as a ‘thread’. A test weaving gave me an idea of colour change between monitor and actuality and then the final image was sent off for weaving on a Jacquard loom.”

‘The Promise of Arrival’ is the size and shape of a Muslim prayer mat: it’s a gesture of sympathy, a reaching out by the artist. Several transformations have been necessary to create this artefact and its symbolism, and it chimes with the current desire among artists to “discover innovative means to forge social bonds with transnational conditions”.<sup>3</sup>

The West’s promise of arrival may be hollow – but the gesture of the local individual, in Chapeltown, can be one of humanity, nonetheless.

Angela Kingston

Garry Barker solo exhibition at Leeds College of Art Gallery, 15.05.2016 to 01.07.2016

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<sup>3</sup> T. J. Demos, ‘The Migrant Image’, 2013.