WHERE WE LIVE

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Where We Live presents paintings of five locations across England seen through the eyes of five contemporary artists. It brings together artists who have chosen to paint a specific place over a long period with the intention of showing how painting as a medium can make visible under-regarded and over-looked aspects of the landscape we inhabit. The resulting series of paintings have a cumulative, collective impact when seen together, and the exhibition as a whole aims to contextualise the artists' investigations of places that in their different ways each expose some of the social tensions and faultlines underlying England's contemporary social landscape and architecture.

One starting point for the exhibition was to ask what the idea of home looks and feels like in the midst of the multiple displacements and disorientating political, social and environmental change that we are living through. Though it was conceived before the Covid pandemic struck, in the wake of the traumatic impact of the virus which confined us to our homes, its focus on the idea of home will no doubt resonate with many viewers.

The five locations are distributed across England, placing the highly localised and specific focus of each artist in a context that provokes wider social, environmental and political reflections on the state of the nation. Whilst the pictures themselves focus exclusively on visual observation of urbanised landscapes, they may be best described as "social landscapes". Two of the artists, Mandy Payne and Judith Tucker, have collaborated with poets, Helen Angell and Harriet Tarlo, in visiting the locations and I have been working with the collective, Eyesore, to record podcast interviews with people who have come to live in London. In this way, the exhibition aims to bring to the fore the voices of the communities who inhabit the depicted locations.

There is a proposal animating the exhibition, that the processes of repeated observation, visual investigation and interpretation which are inherent in the making of paintings can be deployed to make visible aspects of our social environment which do not receive attention. Put simply, paintings bring us to look at and lead us to see what we hadn't seen before. Looking at these paintings of these places opens questions about the potent legacies of the past layered beneath England's landscape and architecture. In examining multiple facets and topographies of a place, the paintings reveal conflicted visions of the present and the future.

These are issues and concerns which inform my own painting, and they served as starting points in curating the exhibition. It includes a selection from my series of paintings, A Place to Live, depicting London homes. In these paintings I used transparent glazes absorbed into the grain of unprimed plywood panels, transposing into paint the "graininess" of the badly reproduced photos that appear in estate agent property ads in newspapers, which were the source of the images. The paintings raise a question whether it is possible to recover the everyday visual experience of the urban landscape and the notion of home from the commodification of the London property market.

I found strong affinities in the paintings of Jonathan Hooper, who has been focusing exclusively on painting his immediate visual environment for over ten years, bringing a modernist colour perspective to bear on depicting the suburban housing of Leeds. Visiting Hooper's studio in February 2020, I was deeply impressed with the consistency of his painterly vision focused on where he lives, and particularly in the way the paintings evoke an enveloping light and weather atmosphere through surprising and finely judged transmutations and intensification of colour. The resulting paintings

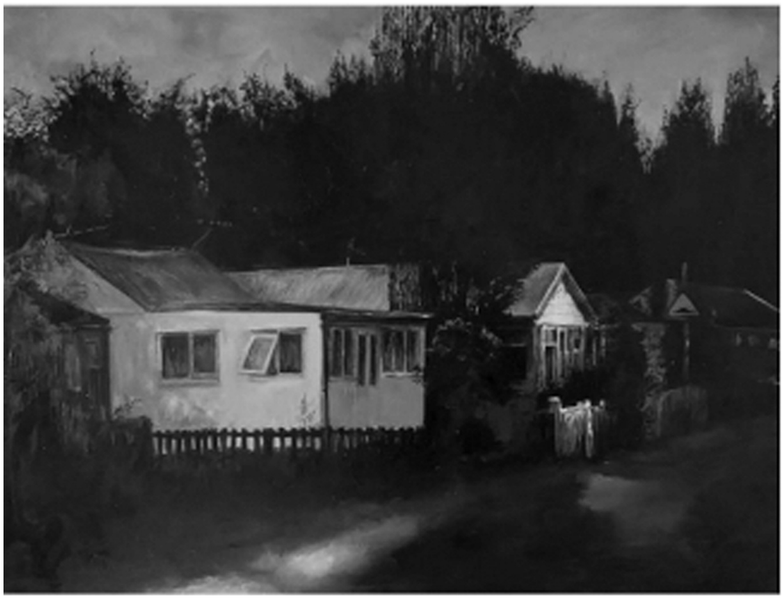
might be said to apply the principles of fauvism to the urban landscape of the north.

My initial idea had been to focus on our paintings of London and Leeds with a provisional exhibition title of "A Tale of Two Cities". However, in discussion with Hooper, we thought it would be interesting to expand the scope of the exhibition to other painters who have similarly engaged deeply with the social and urban landscape of specific locations in other parts of the country.

Mandy Payne has devoted nine years to paintings focused on Park Hill, a Grade II* listed council estate in the centre of Sheffield, one of Britain's largest examples of Brutalist architecture. In contrast to Hooper, the modernism in these paintings is expressed in the architecture, and this is taken up not in the style of the paintings, which is meticulous and finely detailed, but in the facture and use of materials that have a physical connection to the sites depicted. The paintings are on cast concrete, using materials such as spray paint and roofing sealant to reference elements of the architecture and yes, the graffiti. **For the idea of home embodied in the utopian modernism of Park Hill is in transition.** During the period that Payne has been making her paintings, much of the estate has been derelict and empty, in process of regeneration into luxury flats, and the paintings provide keenly observed evidence of the displacements and loss.

Narbi Price's paintings employ a lucid yet varied painterly language, always with a pronounced abstract scaffolding, to paint places that would appear to hardly merit our looking. Yet the pictures are based on study, akin to that of a social archaeologist: the sites he selects invariably contain submerged layers of history, often now expunged by subsequent development and barely visible. His series of paintings of Ashington, Northumberland depict what was once the world's largest mining village. Now, since the pits closed thirty years ago, it is utterly changed, with little to recall its industrial past and the working community that lived there. The town was also home to a tradition of painting – the Ashington Group, known as the Pitmen Painters, who, by the end of their lives, experienced the evisceration of the town's main industry. Price studied the group, and starting in 2015 walked the streets of the town during a period of the biggest political shifts since the mines had closed, revisiting the sites they had painted. The resulting series of paintings are as much about what is not there as they are about what we can see: the Ashington Group painters would barely recognise the physical appearance of this post-industrial landscape, but Price suggests that the current socio-political climate might be all too recognisable to them.

Judith Tucker's paintings also evoke the long history of a place whose traditions and community are marginalised and under threat. The Humberston Fitties in North Lincolnshire are one of the UK's last remaining plotlands, with a history going back to the early 20th century, where people were able to erect diverse dwellings by the seaside. Tucker has been painting this environment intensively for the



last four years. The exhibition will bring together for the first time paintings from her ongoing series 'Night Fitties'. They are predominantly dark tonal paintings, shot with sharp uncanny lights and descriptive details of inclement weather, encroaching nature, fences, flags and signs of disrepair that signal their precarious vulnerability. Here, the exhibition's themes of place, English identity and notions of home are embodied in portraits of individual chalets flying flags in the dark.

Where We Live opens at the Millennium Gallery, Sheffield on January 15th.