

# John Byrne selling 'cheap' at Bourne Fine Art



John Byrne is everywhere. Go to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery and you will see the exhibition of his work featuring portraits of his children and self-portraits too.

An exhibition of new works by Byrne opens at Bourne Fine Art on 5 July 2014. As part of the Edinburgh Art Festival, the exhibition will run until 30 August.

One of these works illustrated here is Binky which the artist is going to offer for sale from Friday 4 July 2014 at 10.00am. BUT there is a catch. This is one of six pieces which have been priced lower than other works on sale. To buy the art you have to be under 25, and before you all rush off to form a queue, you may have to prove your age with appropriate ID.

The gallery tell us that the exhibition takes its title from the picture of the same name and pursues largely nocturnal themes: moonlit woods occasionally populated with a lone hunter; the streets of 1950s Paisley; the self examining artist, alone and wreathed in cigarette smoke. The moonlit woods and the hunter are a counterbalance to Underwood Lane, where the pernicious teddy boys are the aggressors: the hunters are as likely to be the hunted. The huntsman has made appearances in John's work in the past but this "sporting" element has been upended. Where once the hunter was an alpha male, brimming with menace, here nature has turned on him. In some pictures, such as *The Huntsman and the Snowy Owl*, creatures spectate with a subtly comic effect. Either that, or the menace is coming from within, from the subconscious.

*John Byrne's art poses dynamic puzzles: his pictures invite the viewer to look for narrative or verbal interpretation,*

*but they refuse to be conclusive – even the artist won't be drawn on what they mean. As Jean Cocteau once put it, "An artist cannot speak about his art any more than a plant can discuss horticulture". When Byrne describes his work, he doesn't explain it; rather, it leads him to tell personal anecdotes, or even to express surprise – mirroring the viewers own puzzlement – about what a character is doing, or why an object is present. He doesn't analyse the process, either of painting or of making meaning. Fellow Paisley alumni, sculptor Sandy Stoddart, says that to think too hard is not the business of art or creativity; instead, the image should appear formed in the mind's eye – which is as far as Byrne is ever likely to describe how a composition or subject has come to him.*

*Nevertheless, threaded through his work is an extensive iconography that has developed over 50 years and which reveals a coherent thematic development. It may not reveal analytical meaning, but there is an insight into the artist's inner workings amounting, in some cases, to a kind of pictorial autobiography. His pictures of 1950s Ferguslie Park – Feegie, as it is known locally – capture what was once a new invention, the "teenager", as this strange new being emerged in the artist's own youth: both the physical environment and his internal landscape. In his so-called "Underwood Lane" series, the Teddy Boys who loiter – some idle, others with intent – are reminiscences of his own past. Dead End takes its title from the film showing at the Astoria cinema, featured in the picture and known locally as the 'Bug Hut'. A 1937 crime drama featuring Humphrey Bogart sets the opulent lives of the rich against what were then the slums of east-side Manhattan. It follows the Dead End Kids, a petty gang of street urchins on a path to a life of crime. The parallels aren't hard to see. Byrne's incredibly complex masterpiece of Paisley nightlife seethes with activity. All the action – bar the man roaring on top of the roof of a Riley – takes place in alleys, dark corners and roof tops,*

peopled like vermin. Graffiti proliferates and shadows are cast, long and spindly. John is equally revered as screen writer and artist and the presentation of the Underwood Lane pictures reference filmic and theatrical worlds, their backdrops lit like stage-sets.

Driven less by narcissism than the problem of the elusive self, Byrne has produced many self-portraits over the years and has long continued to examine his own physiognomy. Using the vernacular of our time, the super-sized Big Selfie shows the artist staring out through red rimmed, sleep-deprived eyes. Smoke envelops him. There is physical truth and sometimes caricature in his self portraits, but what he sees looking back at him we, the viewer, are never given to understand.

Nor perhaps is the artist. The face has become mask-like by dint of our familiarity with his finely-cultivated hirsute visage, crooked nose and hooded eyes. But this intimacy only serves to distract us from what is really staring back.

This exhibition coincides with a major retrospective, *Sitting Ducks*, at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh. It concentrates on Byrnes portraits of his family, of celebrities, or of actors and performers in character. They are individuals and types we identify with or those who, through the media and TV, have come into our homes and with whom we make a misplaced connection. By contrast, *Dead End* is a result of the artist's introspection, producing something personal to Byrne: a vision of the outsider, at once Everyman and his own self.

Byrne's biography reflects his diverse talents, as well as being an accomplished fine artist and a designer of theatre sets and album covers, he is one of the most notable playwrights of his generation. 'The Slab Boys' (1978) won him the Evening Standard's most promising playwright award. In 1983 there was a New York production of 'The Slab Boys' with

*Sean Penn, Val Kilmer and Kevin Bacon. Three years later, Byrne wrote the immensely successful, six-time BAFTA award-winning television series 'Tutti Frutti' starring Robbie Coltrane, Emma Thompson and Richard Wilson. This was followed by countless other plays and films to the present day.*

Bourne Fine Art 6 Dundas Street EH3 6HZ

Opening hours Monday – Friday 10am-6pm Saturday 11am – 4pm

T 0131 557 4050