

# COLCHESTER ART SOCIETY

Founded in 1946 for the promotion of the visual arts



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70th birthday

# newsletter

## Colchester Art Society at 70

Thank you to all those who came along to the opening of our Summer Open Exhibition at The Minories. I hope you all agree that the event was a great success.

An anniversary is certainly something to celebrate and enjoy but it can also be a time to reflect. Over the last 18 months, as we approached this celebration, the committee and I have done just that. We have gone back to look at the founding principles from 1946, thinking about what we, as an Art Society, are for and how we might now work in the 21st century. We have also tried to look out from the Society into the wider visual arts community of Colchester and the surrounding area. We have acted to engage with the town's other visual arts institutions and enter into conversation with them. We have sought both to honour our past and its traditions and to act progressively to secure our future.

These dual aims are summed up by the new Nash Medal. As many of you know, artist John Doubleday very generously designed and struck a medal to mark our 70th anniversary. There is an edition of 10 medals which we will award over the coming years to those the committee deems to have made a significant contribution to the arts in the Colchester area. We were delighted to award the inaugural Nash Medal to James Dodds. The awarding of this medal appeals to our sense of tradition but also encourages engagement with the wider arts community.

When members look back from some future anniversary our hope is they will see we have not just taken care of things but that we have actively worked to continue the illustrious history of the Colchester Art Society.

Simon Carter, President



John Doubleday, Bryan Whiteley, and James Dodds

Photo by Alison Scott.



The Nash Medal



James Dodds.

Photo by Alison Scott.

# CAS at 70 in the Minorities, August 2016

A sense of place. A whiff of sea air, the squelch of marshland, an explosion of seagulls. Looking inland, lush gardens, woods, rocky places. I was not surprised to count 75 land or seascapes in the Minorities show, and there were probably more if we include the abstract ones inspired by landscape. Perhaps there is something about landscape that enables it to float between abstract and representational better than most genres, and it was interesting to see how many of us love hovering at this juncture.

There were 100+ artists and 178 works exhibited. The show was a bit overwhelming, a dense mosaic of pieces that took time to digest, but perhaps this is inevitable when you try to represent the best of such a large submission.

The big square paintings in the Girling Room gave a sense of the vastness of sea, fields and sky. Pam Dan's canvases were a distillation of reeds. David Marshall's "Broad Acres" held us in its quiet rhythms. Bryan Whiteley's waterfalls tumbled down in glowing prints.

The show was of its time, taking on board the lessons of modernism while remaining in the great British descriptive tradition; making the forms adventurous, pushing the technique to make the subject more itself. This is professionalism, even though many of our exhibitors may not describe themselves as professionals. Fine examples of another British tradition, watercolour, were Donald Myall's "Patience Bridge" and Felicity Young's "Colours of Slate", where composition and contrast were skilfully used.

The urban scenes and interiors belonged to a different genre, here it was about atmosphere and even more about a sense of place. Perhaps the most original work was in this category, and I was drawn to Chris Wenlock's two paintings, "Brown House" and "Brick House", where, as Paul Nash pointed out, precision of detail creates more mystery than vagueness.

I found myself intrigued by the muscular and expressive animals and birds - often drawn rather than painted - avoiding tweekiness in this most difficult of subjects.

And what fun people are! People in heavy conversation in a cafe, or emerging steamily in a green turban or being human in contrast to some very realistic cows, reminding us of who we are. I would have liked to see more.

The hanging of CAS shows seems to me a prodigious feat. Given the number of works, it was impeccable, and even, at times, witty, as when paintings from different people were placed side by side, echoing each other's shapes.

Showing an artist's pieces together is useful in helping us form an impression of their work. Brenda Jones, Julie Watson, Linda Michael, Christine Fenn all benefited from two works being hung side by side, enhancing each other and broadening the impact that only one would have had. I quite liked the way Sarah Milne's incandescent paintings kept cropping up in different contexts as though playing hide and seek with us, but one day I would like to see several of her pieces side by side.

I received many positive comments on the exhibition, but a friend of mine thought there was too much emphasis on "finished" and sometimes overworked pieces, and would have liked to see more spontaneity. I find personally that it takes more courage to show something that takes risks, and often these pieces stay in the studio. But it might be just those experimental works of ours that would appeal to a younger audience.

Paintings in oil, acrylic or watercolour predominated; there were about 12 drawings, 20 prints, only two photos (a pity), two artist's books and about 15 mixed media works, textiles and reliefs.

There were 17 three-dimensional pieces. I thought this was an impressive array although I am not sure there were more than in previous shows. The work was exciting: I particularly liked the way distortion in Joyce Knight's "The Lad" gave energy and, paradoxically, realism to the horse and rider. Di Humphreys' "Tall Vessel" is about both water and earth, and has a powerful presence. Our commemorative plate by Michelle Connell is fresh and lyrical.

Showing videos is not always easy. Those of us who are hard of hearing were basically watching silent movies; if the sound had been louder it would probably have been intrusive. But the images were entertaining, and I would have liked to see more. Many of us, I'm sure, have videos of our work: could we show them next time?

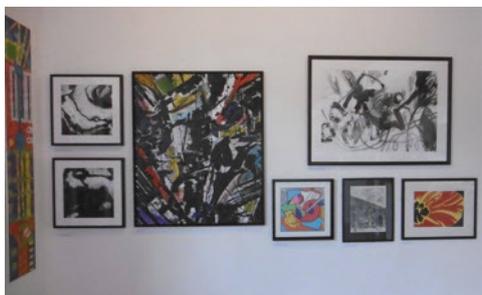
And this brings me to my next point: what about some different media? Maybe artist's videos, ones that are not about our work but works in themselves? Installation and performance are a bit hard to show in this context, but I would be fascinated to see, for example, time-based work made by landscape painters. I bet there are a few and people are shy of digging them out.

Finally, looking around the exhibition, some of my favourites, for their freshness and originality, all small works: Maxine Fitter's "Tulip", Pauline Fletcher's "Eclipse", Wendy Bailey's "Suffolk Sea Storm", Christine Woodman's "Shell".

I didn't seem to be the only person enjoying the show on a weekday afternoon - I counted 9 or 10 visitors at one time. What a pity hardly anyone wrote in the visitor's book! This was a vibrant exhibition in a splendid venue that was the best possible showcase for our work.



Jean McNeil



Photos courtesy of Daphne Sandham

## CAS First Exhibition, August 1946

Saturday, Aug. 3. 1946

*A beautiful warm and sunny day ..... At 2.30 I presented myself at Colchester Castle and found the place swarming with members of the Art Society and visitors. After meeting the Opener of the Exhibition, Mr. Samuel A. Courtauld, I was busily occupied, helped by John Bensusan- Butt, in acting as a sort of Master of Ceremonies, meeting people, making suitable remarks and introducing them to one another. The place was loud with a Babel of chattering.*

*At 3 o'clock the Exhibition was officially opened, Mr. Courtauld making a brief but pleasantly-phrased speech; he was followed by John Nash who was obviously uneasy and ended a few halting remarks with evident relief., calling upon me to wind up the talking; so I obliged by thanking Mr. Courtauld, then referred to the aims of the Society. The Exhibition was then declared open. Then I was kept busy answering numerous questions from prospective members and talking to many of the visitors. Finally, at Poulter's request John Bensusan- Butt and I stored the rejected pictures ready to be collected by their owners.*

*From the diary of Tom Moody, first CAS Secretary.*

## Colchester Art Society Archive Exhibition at Firstsite,

The exhibition of the Society's 70th anniversary exhibition at Firstsite runs until October 2nd and is really well worth going to.

It is seventy years since the CAS was founded by artists with a national reputation. This exhibition serves to remind us of their strength of vision and originality. The Second World War had just ended and there was a feeling that something new could and would be created after the devastation of the difficult years of privation.

This small exhibition includes a painting by Cedric Morris, one of the founders, displaying his robust technique for depicting his beloved plants as if they were communicating characterful individuals; Arthur Lett Haines with his surrealist perception and delicate technique; John Nash, the first president who remained so up to his death in 1977, with a characteristic landscape; Blair Hughes Stanton's exquisite wood engraving showing his unrivalled quality of line and technique; Valerie Thornton's redolent architectural rendering; Anthony Atkinson, the Society's recently retired president whose mellow fields depict the passage of time with trees sculpted by decades of soft, prevailing wind amongst others, all making an important contribution to the very enjoyable exhibition.

The painting which particularly captured me was by Joyce Pallot called " Floating Flowers". It was a mysterious painting of an ethereal, symbolic quality with one eye looking out at the viewer.

I was thrilled to overhear a conversation in the exhibition of some tourists who were impressed that a town like Colchester could show such a clutch of international names.

Let's hope it can become a regular feature with more of Colchester's superb art collection revealed to a wide audience in a public venue like Firstsite.

Philippa Dow



*Paintings from the Collection, at Firstsite*



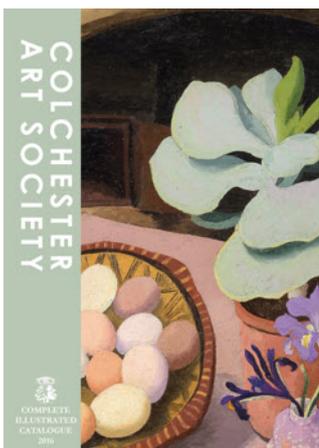
*Ronald Blythe*

The Art Society's Summer Exhibition was opened by Dr Ronald Blythe whose involvement with the Society is considerable as he knew many of the founder members well. He also gave occasional lectures and talks.

Although he looks back on the days of parties and events with Sir Cedric Morris, John Nash and Christine Kuhlenthal with great fondness it is the words which he said to me at the opening of the Summer Exhibition party which I find vital and almost necessary to have as a mantra for the Society.:

" Living on one's own as I do it would be very easy to live in the past but that's not the way to live. Living is about living in the present. This should be the essence of the Society"

Philippa Dow



### **DON'T FORGET TO BUY**

Our complete illustrated catalogue of the society's Permanent Collection.

With full page colour pictures, and text by Evelyne Bell, M.A., including biographies of the artists;

143 A4 size pages.