

'When I Lived in Modern Times': Archive, artefact, album.

Exhibition dates: 16 Sep – 12 Nov 2005

Preview: Thursday 15 Sep 6:00 – 8:00pm

Samuel Herbert

"The fault line between [a] mythic past and the 'real' past is not always easy to draw – which is one of the conundrums of any politics of memory."

Andreas Huyssen, 'Present Pasts'

Samuel Herbert's recent paintings draw upon photographs from 19th and 20th century archives and the media, to remake images of Britain's imperial heritage and aristocracy. Herbert's work, though uniformly monochromatic, in both size and subject resemble paintings made for country houses and gentlemen's clubs. The images initially appear to be from distant Victorian times – the artist's great-great grandparents' generation. However, Herbert likes to upset our expectation of what is historical and what contemporary. If his work could be easily seen as being 'history painting' in the most literal sense, several features complicate such a reading.

Herbert's sources include both photographs from the relatively distant past and those which are surprisingly recent. Rather than having the comfort and certainty of historical distance from scenes that are ideologically unpalatable, we sometimes find that they are barely one generation away – that is to say, 'within living memory'. In so doing, Herbert reveals the full extent to which, as novelist LP Hartley has written, "the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there". Across Herbert's body of work, the repulsive aspects of our past can appear alarmingly close and even homely, whilst remaining unfathomable.

In 'Up in Arms' for example, Herbert blew up a photograph of the Queen visiting Africa to a monumental scale. To play with our sense of time and not 'reveal' the starting point, the artist removed the central figures including the monarch. Though the image resembles the earliest photography from the 1860s, the source was actually a photograph taken in the 1960s. Similarly, 'Tour of Duty', reproduced here, recalls Victorian fiction such as 'Heart of Darkness'. The modern vehicle though, and the seated figure who bears an uncanny resemblance to

Tony Blair, alert us to its proximity in time to us. Herbert has an eye for an image with the potential to become iconic, and yet remain strange and discomfiting.

Whilst our initial reaction is related to the ridiculousness of Empire, and the ceremonies attached to it, Herbert prompts us to sympathise with both those claimed to be oppressed and oppressors. In 'The Age of Austerity', imperial grandeur and pomp are offset against the most mundane activities needed to sustain it. An English 'gentleman' is seen in front of an enormous column and balcony, having his feet washed by an Indian man whilst perusing what appears to be a newspaper. Whilst representing a master-and-servant relationship is provocative, Herbert leaves it open what we are supposed to think. Elsewhere, he selects source material which allows him to echo the compositions of old master paintings: these images become read as painterly tableaux rather than through their origins. Working at the scale of aristocratic pictures where the figures are seen at life size, Herbert's protagonists seem to inhabit a continuation of our own space – making them seem convincingly real rather than simply historical actors we can watch with detached bemusement. As Jean-Francois Chevrier has argued, the tableau is "a frontal form which produces an experience of physical confrontation with the viewer." Accordingly, Herbert's paintings, even though lacking colour, are both physically and morally confrontational, even if laced with several layers of irony and wit. Moreover, Herbert's loving treatment of his scenarios allows them to become "seductive worlds which people can also find sympathetic".

One series of work illustrates the push-pull process of distance and identification that the artist sets up most vividly. Taking fox hunting as his starting point – an anachronistic pastime based around causing suffering for some and a living culture for others – Herbert leaves it open-ended whether his paintings are set in the present or past. He also titled the work to elide British horse-riders with the mythical heroes of the Wild West. Entitled 'Unforgiven', the reference point is the Western starring Clint Eastwood and the hunters are recast as rebels, maverick cowboys breaking the law.

Herbert's technique complicates our empathetic response to the images. His method is fastidious and laborious. Though working on canvas, he primes the surface with gesso then sands it back up to 20 times. Where we expect to encounter a canvas weave ready to receive our empathetic gaze, we instead encounter an unnaturally flat, pristine plane over which liquid colour seems to float. Thinned-down oils are made viscous with turpentine and linseed oil so that they skate across the picture plane rather than suggesting depth. Herbert also applies his

paint with cotton buds and tissue paper, so that there are no emotive 'autograph' marks to lead our response. Rather, the effect is what the artist calls "pared-down": a crossbreed of Edwardian illustration and contemporary styles. We read Herbert's technique as one which could, theoretically, have been made at the time of the source material. It is as though his painting were an elaborate form of ventriloquism, speaking in the voice of an earlier generation. The artist has, in the past, expressed a particular fascination with Sidney Paget, the original illustrator for Conan Doyle's 'Sherlock Holmes' novels. If Herbert's technique is almost counterintuitive in its obsessiveness, his palette develops organically and pragmatically in relation to the subject and scale of each work. The common denominator between his warm damask reds, rich umbers, coffee like browns, and subdued greys is that they are all colours 'in keeping' with the décor of gentlemen's clubs, colonial outposts and aristocratic residencies. His monochrome palettes are "filters through which we can view these fictional worlds". They act as pictorial equivalents for the ideological 'filters' which coloured our predecessors worldviews. The artist leaves it to us to decide whether our own ideologies are as equally restricted, or as tragi-comic in their consequences.

