

MARK SHIELDS

COLLOQUY

**Grosvenor
Gallery**

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3—20 December 2008

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At the age of 45, with already an impressive list of exhibitions to his name, in London, Berlin, Dublin and his native Belfast, Mark Shields is hardly a newcomer to public view. He has shown at frequent intervals at the Royal Academy and the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin, been selected no less frequently for the Hunting, the Discerning Eye and the BP Portrait Award exhibitions, and this will be his seventh one-man show with the Grosvenor Gallery. His work is, in short, not unfamiliar to those of us who have cared to keep minds and eyes open. Yet for any but the most blasé and unself-questioning of artists, a show of new work will always be a test and a trial, at once a parade of insecurity and hope. And for all the manifest accomplishment and sympathetic serenity of his work, Shields is the least unquestioning of men.

And this body of work represents for him something rather more radical than simply another straight-forward step in his development as an artist. A steady progress is in no way to be deprecated, of course: each true artist, after all, does what he must, and, as he comes round again, how ever so slowly, on his way up the mountain, he will inevitably find himself not quite where he was, but a bit higher up. But things happen. That usual path may be unexpectedly blocked: another suggests itself, but who knows where it might lead, or at what risk? It may offer a wonderful short-cut to much higher ground: then again, it may prove horribly treacherous and false. In the end, all the artist can do is to trust the work itself, and follow its lead. Which is just what Shields has done.

It is not that he has not been as brave before. These days it takes a very brave artist to commit himself entirely to the image of the figure, especially so in working from its direct study, and the deep remembered knowledge thus acquired. It takes one even braver and more ambitious than to try that acquired knowledge against the long tradition of the large-scale figure composition, most especially so when, beyond the decorative, it engages openly with the narrative, the symbolic and, at times, the specifically religious. Shields has always had the courage of his ambition. Yet hitherto, profound though the study and ambitious the engagement undoubtedly are, Shields' progress has been of just that steady kind, step by step. We pick up in his work the guides he has followed along his way – the young Picasso of the pink and blue periods and the 'Desmoiselles'; Sironi; Puvis de Chavannes;

Millet; Poussin – while remaining all the time entirely himself. We acknowledge his technical command of medium and ground, the self-effacing monumentality of his draughtsmanship, and his scrupulous address to paint and surface. His Classical affinities are clear. All this we know, and admire. But, for all that we recognise the hand so well, what we have now seems so different. So what has changed?

All artists come to that stop in their work from time to time, just as Shields did, that halt on the upward path. It may be a natural enough, no more than a necessary pause to catch the breath: but it may be something more substantial, even though it may not be seen as such – nothing more perhaps than an unspoken disquiet, a vague sense of marking time, repeating a formula, finding nothing new. But there will always be ways over, through or round the block, and not necessarily by way of imagery, intent or any other sort of mental strife. More practical ploys and stratagems prove often the more effective, and not just in the immediate but in the longer term.

Without in any sense disavowing what had gone before, Shields felt just this sense of uncertainty as to how he might take the work forward. He was happy with the imagery, both large and small – the heads and single figures, the larger compositions – but it seemed that the means themselves were closing in on him – the dry, absorbent ground, the close tonality, the gentle, subtle palette. But he bought some new canvases anyway, to carry on, laid on the gesso ground as usual and, as before, began to draw directly onto them in sanguine pastel to set the image up. The only thing was that he went on drawing.

At first he found himself taking them through to a resolution close in spirit to the paintings he had been doing, the figures full in their description, and here the smaller heads especially – some painted, some drawn – span this first transition. Then, finding himself briefly out of pastel, and with only a pale yellow ochre to tint the ground by the time he turned to the larger canvases, he picked up the thickest charcoal he had to hand, and again began to draw and draw. And charcoal is, of its very nature, a broad, quick, open medium.

It has proved a transformation, not so much in terms of subject-matter, which has remained largely the same, but of technical liberation. There is to the work now an

expansiveness and freedom in the statement that is taking it forward not step by step but, at high speed, and with a confidence and openness of spirit to match. So are they paintings or drawings? The short and only answer is that it doesn't matter. For pastel and charcoal are but pigment too, rendered only by different means: and had these swift black lines been laid down as paint on a brush, the question would not be asked. What is more to the point is that Shields has moved on in himself to a point not of abstraction, or anything like it in the accepted sense, but to a fresh and new, and to him clearly inspiring understanding that the mark can be right and true without being at all exact as particular description. A toe, a hand, a twist or gesture of the body can be seen as just what they are, and yet be barely more than an quick, suggestive, indicating stroke or two on the surface.

And with this technical freedom has come a renewed confidence in the narrative content of the work, that moves it away from the former, perhaps safer ambiguities and generalities, to a more direct account of the human and spiritual condition.

Shields calls this show 'Colloquy', which in this context suggests just such inner discussion or conference, a talking with himself. It is a debate as yet unconcluded, full of interest. It celebrates an artist with the nerve to show his work even as it is at a crucial point, caught in mid-transition. Each particular work stands nevertheless resolved in itself, in its own terms. They are complete and beautiful things. But to what will they lead? We can only wait to see, but I doubt there is anything to worry about. It is an exciting moment.

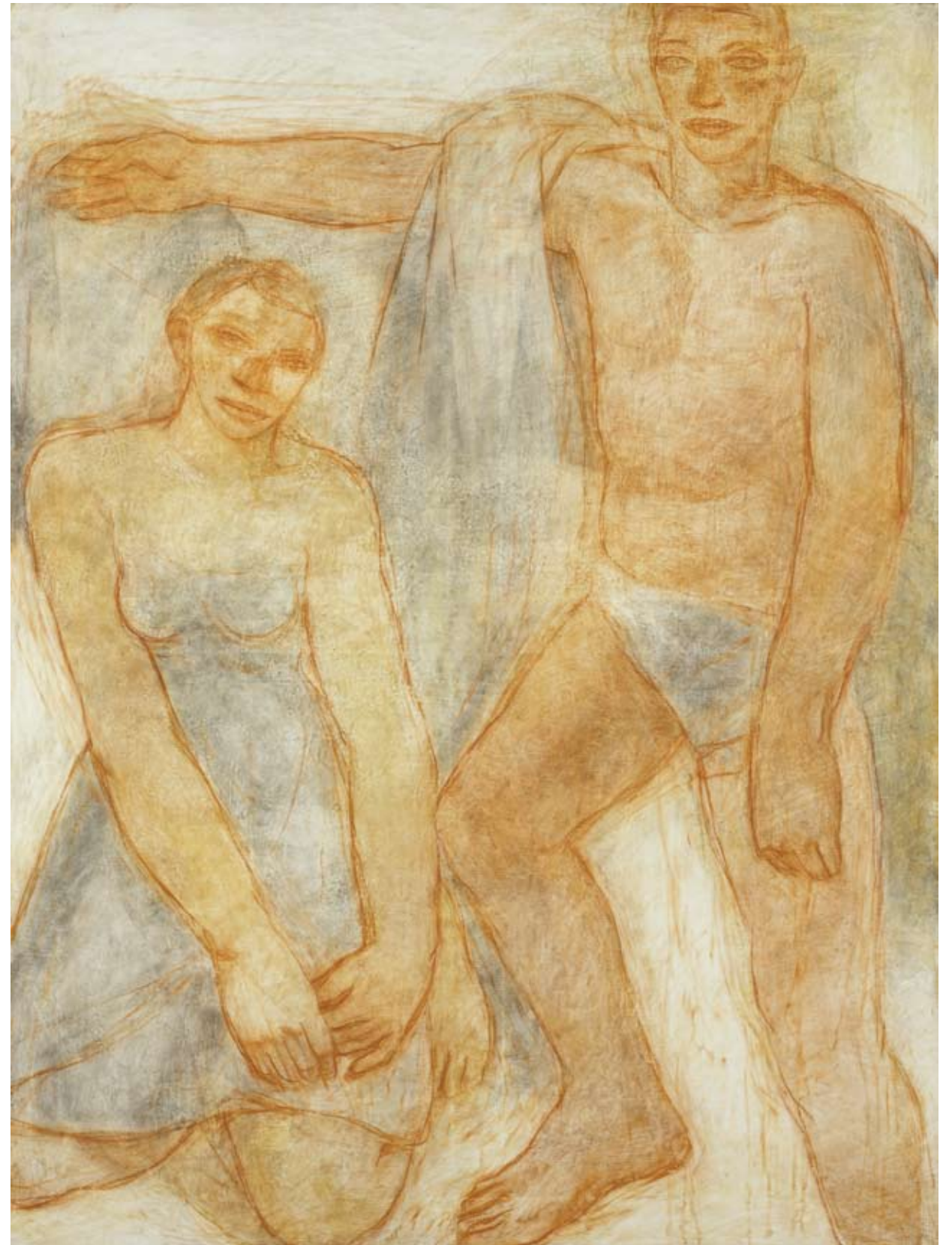
William Packer
London, November 2008



PLATES

[1] *The Abandoned*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
121.9 x 91.4 cm (48 x 36 in)



[2] *Exiles*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
121.9 x 101.6 cm (48 x 40 in)





[3] *Winter*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
50.8 x 45.7 cm (20 x 18 in)



[4] *A Jewish Tale*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
45.7 x 45.7 cm (18 x 18 in)

[5] *Mourners*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
121.9 x 101.6 cm (48 x 40 in)





[6] *Does No One Condemn You?*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
121.9 x 91.4 cm (48 x 36 in)



[7] *Uriah's Wife*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
121.9 x 101.6 cm (48 x 40 in)



[8] *Watching For Ariel*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
121.9 x 101.6 cm (48 x 40 in)

[9] *The Fountain*, (Fold out)

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
127 x 182.9 cm (50 x 72 in)



[10] *Mother and Daughter*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
152.4 x 68.6 cm (60 x 27 in)



[11] *Mother and Son*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
152.4 x 68.6 cm (60 x 27 in)

[12] *Dream and Desire*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
121.9 x 91.4 cm (48 x 36 in)



[13] *The Descent*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
121.9 x 91.4 cm (48 x 36 in)





[14] *The Words that are Not Spoken*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
45.7 x 45.7 cm (18 x 18 in)



[15] *Visitation*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
45.7 x 45.7 cm (18 x 18 in)



[16] *The Piper*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
45.7 x 45.7 cm (18 x 18 in)



[17] *Obscure Impulses of the Heart*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
45.7 x 45.7 cm (18 x 18 in)



[18] *Sorrowing Woman*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
30.5 x 25.4 cm (12 x 10 in)



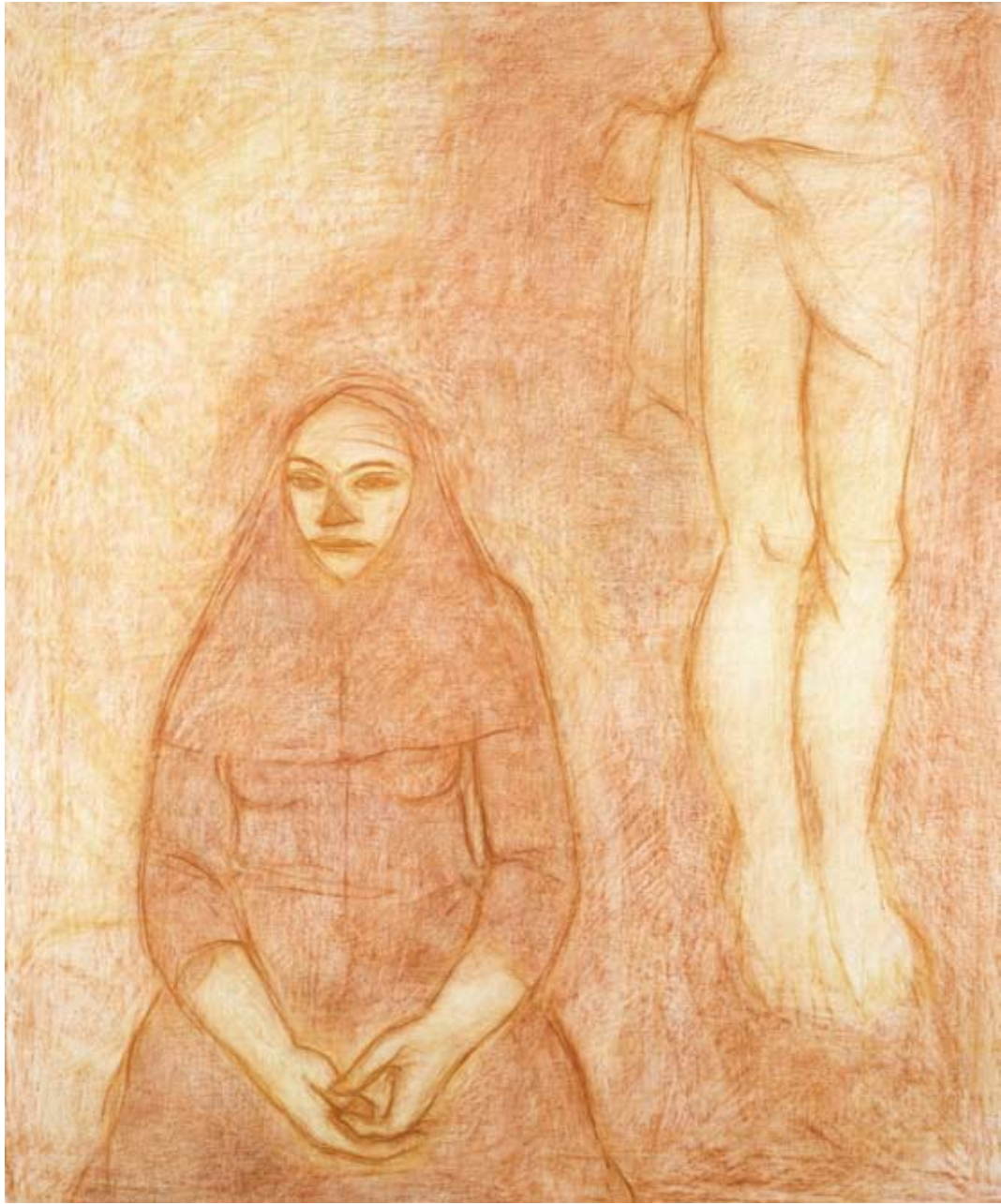
[19] *Poor Girl*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
30.5 x 25.4 cm (12 x 10 in)



[20] *The Kinsman*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
91.4 x 121.9 cm (36 x 48 in)



[21] *I Did Not Talk of my Visions*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
121.9 x 101.6 cm (48 x 40 in)



[22] *The Eternal Song*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
121.9 x 101.6 cm (48 x 40 in)

[23] *Andrianna*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
121.9 x 101.6 cm (48 x 40 in)



[24] *Woman on the Shore*

2008
Oil on canvas
40.6 x 30.5 cm (16 x 12 in)



[25] *Gipsy Girl*

2008
Oil on canvas
30.5 x 25.4 cm (12 x 10 in)

[27] *Father*

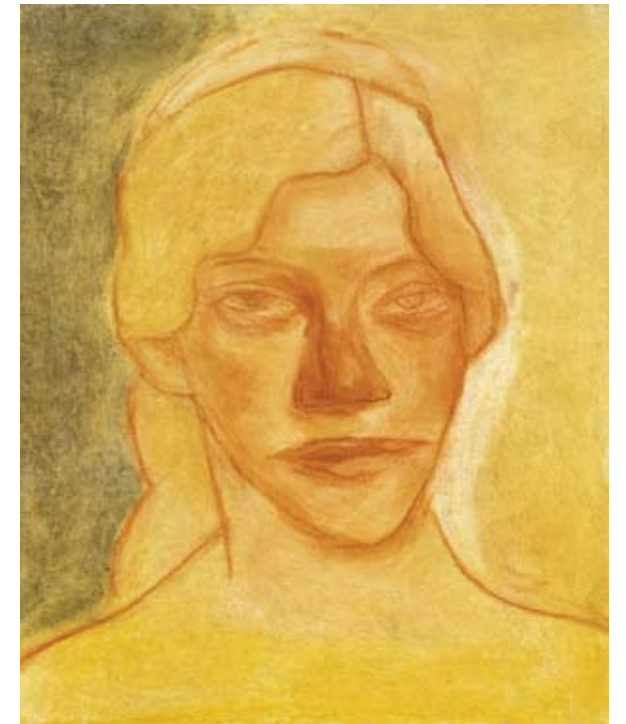
2008
Oil on canvas
30.5 x 25.4 cm (12 x 10 in)

[26] *She Who Sang*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
30.5 x 25.4 cm (12 x 10 in)

[28] *Country Girl*

2008
Pastel and charcoal on canvas
30.5 x 25.4 cm (12 x 10 in)





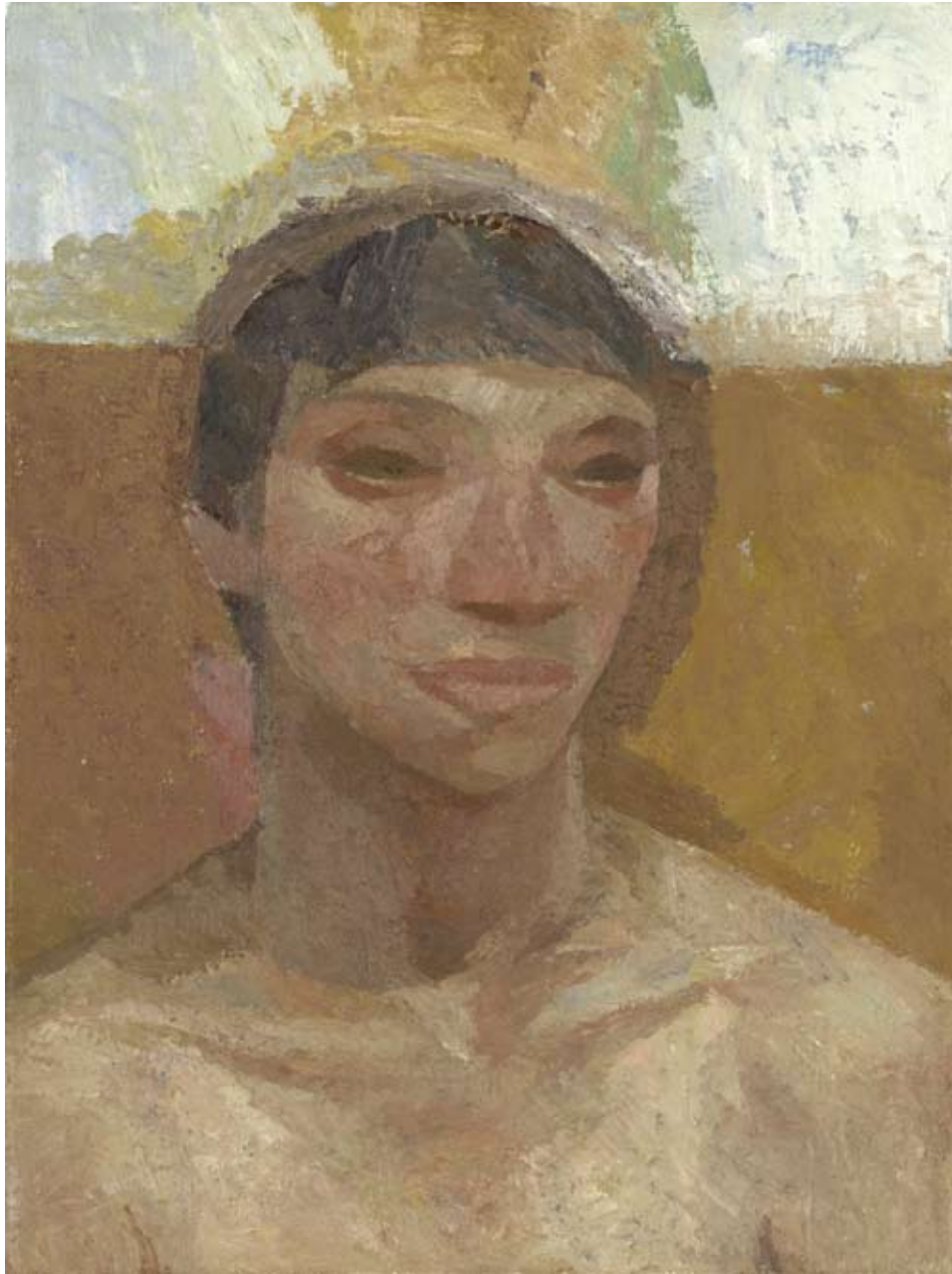
[29] *Mother*

2008
Oil on canvas
30.5 x 25.4 cm (12 x 10 in)



[30] *Girl with Scarf*

2008
Oil on canvas
30.5 x 25.4 cm (12 x 10 in)



[31] *Ancestral Woman*

2008
Oil on canvas
40.6 x 30.5 cm (16 x 12 in)



[32] *The White Countenance*

2008
Oil on canvas
40.6 x 30.5 cm (16 x 12 in)

COLLAGES

*UNCANONICAL FRAGMENTS
A NOTE ON THE COLLAGES*

Ostensibly private, and to an extent unconscious, the making of collages is an activity which I've turned to over the years but have never thought to analyse. In certain respects it is reassuring. I resort to it in times of uncertainty and unease. It is an 'open' medium. Questions of subject matter and technical capability seem unimportant. One's role is more passive. Sifting, selecting, arranging, one is almost at play. Yet it is not an idle activity or without purpose. Rather, it has a deep seriousness and is closely bound with all that motivates the other work, and so for this reason a selection has been included in the present exhibition.

The life of inanimate things is intensely absorbing. The contemplation of the discarded and forgotten, the unnoticed and so-called ephemeral, which has already survived generations and will in all likelihood out-last our own time, is both moving and profound. Piecing together these fragments, this detritus, must reflect at some level a desire for permanence and stability, for order and meaning. An absolute world of Forms. In this respect the challenge and reward of solving the pictorial problem, even at such a simple level, or perhaps because of it, is considerable.

But the unforeseen emotional connections of chance and deliberation prompt other musings on the complex and ambiguous world of memories and remembering. "Used up atmospheres". "The humus of memories". "Storings against forgetfulness". It is perhaps the fragmentary nature of collage which is so evocative. The whole, expressed indirectly through changing patterns of fragments. It is a philosophical medium.

If collage of this kind has a season, it is Autumn. Its components ripen and decay, bide their time, and in the fullness of time, find their place. Providential signs and votive offerings. Memorials, thanksgivings, sacraments, invocations, correspondences, confessions and colloquies.

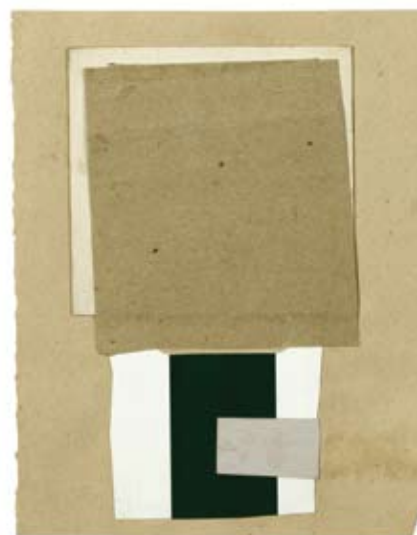
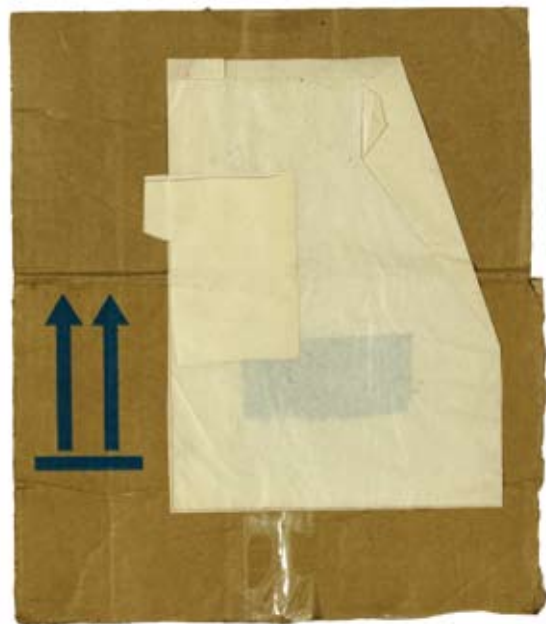
Perhaps the message of the collage is simply this - That we may know the measure of our days and how frail we are. From this point at least, one may begin over.

Mark Shields, *November 2008*



[33] *Composition 10-6-08*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
30.5 x 27.9 cm (12 x 11 in)



[34] *Café*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
30.5 x 21.6 cm (12 x 8 1/2 in)

[35] *Composition 28-4-08*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
33 x 27.9 cm (13 x 11 in)

[38] *Composition 6-5-08*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
27.9 x 21.6 cm (11 x 8 1/2 in)

[39] *Memorial to a Romantic*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
27.9 x 22.9 cm (11 x 9 in)

[36] *Carousel*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
27.9 x 21.6 cm (11 x 8 1/2 in)

[37] *Cigar*

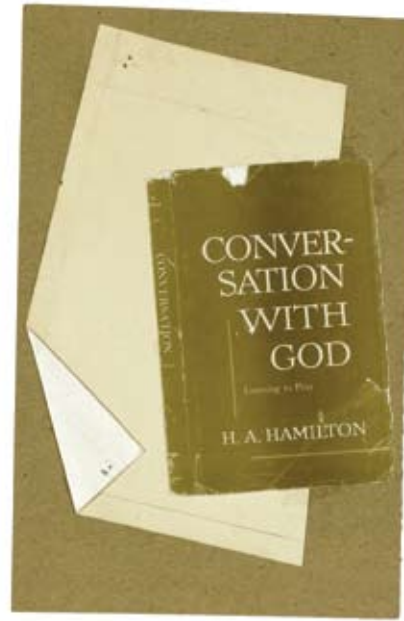
2008
Collage laid down on paper
27.9 x 21.6 cm (11 x 8 1/2 in)

[40] *Chance Encounter*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
30.5 x 21.6 cm (12 x 8 1/2 in)

[41] *Prophet*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
27.9 x 21.6 cm (11 x 8 1/2 in)



[42] *Primal Song*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
27.9 x 21.6 cm (11 x 8 1/2 in)

[43] *Conversation with God*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
33 x 20.3 cm (13 x 8 in)

[44] *King/Knight*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
35.6 x 25.4 cm (14 x 10 in)

[45] *Camp by the Lake*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
27.9 x 21.6 cm (11 x 8 1/2 in)



[46] *Composition 15-5-08*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
30.5 x 22.9 cm (12 x 9 in)

[48] *Document*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
27.9 x 20.3 cm (11 x 8 in)

[47] *Worker*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
34.3 x 19.1 cm (13 1/2 x 7 1/2 in)

[49] *Strange Visitor*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
27.9 x 21.6 cm (11 x 8 1/2 in)



[50] *Composition 9-6-08*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
29.2 x 27.9 cm (11 1/2 x 11 in)



[51] *An early Hour*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
27.9 x 20.3 cm (11 x 8 in)



[52] *Ghost of N*

2008
Collage laid down on paper
27.9 x 21.6 cm (11 x 8 1/2 in)

MARK SHIELDS
BIOGRAPHY

SOLO EXHIBITIONS	
1986	Otter Gallery, Belfast
1997	Recent works, Grosvenor Gallery, London
1998	Recent works, Grosvenor Gallery, London
1999	Grosvenor Gallery, Ormond Quay Hotel, Dublin
2001	Inhabitants of the Dream Courtyard, Grosvenor Gallery, London
2003	Pilgrimage, Grosvenor Gallery, London
2005	Paintings and Drawings, Grosvenor Gallery, London
2007	Twilight and the Unseen, Galerie Brusberg, Berlin

GROUP EXHIBITIONS	
1985	Castle Ashby, Northampton
1987–2004	Royal Ulster Academy, Belfast
1989	Arnott’s Portrait Award Exhibition, Dublin
1990–2005	Cavehill Gallery, Belfast
1991–1994	Otter Fine Art, Armagh
1991	UTV Award Exhibition, Belfast
1992, 1993	One Oxford Street, Belfast
1992	Royal Institute of Watercolour Painters, Mall Galleries, London
1992, 1993	Royal Institute of Oil Painters, Mall Galleries, London
1993–1995 1999–2001 2003–2005	Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin
1993, 1994, 2006	Summer Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London
1993	Spectator Art Awards Exhibition, Christie’s, London
1993	St. James’s Art Group, London
1993	20th Century British Art Fair, Royal College of Art, London
1994, 1995, 1998, 2000	Hunting Art Prize Exhibition, Royal College of Art, London
1994–1996, 1999, 2001, 2002	BP Portrait Award Exhibition, National Portrait Gallery, London
1994	Burlington New Gallery, London
1994	Michael Simpson Gallery, London
1994	The Studio, 73 Glebe Place, London



1995, 1996	Lucy Simmonds Fine Art, Hong Kong
1995	Stephen Somerville Fine Art, London
1997, 1999–2003, 2008	Discerning Eye, Mall Galleries, London
1999	Florence Biennale, Florence
1999	National Gallery of Ireland Portraits of the Century, Dublin
2001	Side By Side, Nashville Exchange Exhibition, Nashville
2004	Bella Figura, Galerie Brusberg, Berlin
2004, 2005, 2007	Art Basel, Galerie Brusberg, Basel
2005–2008	20/21 British Art Fair, Grosvenor Gallery, London
2005	Träume und Mythen, Galerie Brusberg, Art Basel, Basel
2008	London Art Fair, Grosvenor Gallery, London

AWARDS	
1990	UTV Award for outstanding work by an artist under 30
1992	Finalist, Winsor & Newton Young Artist Award, London
1994	Abbey Stained Glass Studios Award, RHA, Dublin
1995	Anderson’s Auctioneers & Valuers Prize, RUA
1995	Associate Diploma, RUA
2000	Meynell Fenton Prize, Discerning Eye
2001, 2002, 2003	Regional Award, Discerning Eye
2002	3rd Prize, BP Portrait Award, London
2002	Elected Academician, Royal Ulster Academy

COLLECTIONS	
Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland)	
Arts Council for Northern Ireland, Belfast	
Ulster Television Collection, Belfast	
Ulster Museum, Belfast	
National Self-Portrait Collection of Ireland, Limerick	
Royal Gurkha Regiment, Portrait of Prince Charles 2001	
National Gallery of Ireland, Portrait of Mary and Nicholas Robinson, Dublin 1998	

**Grosvenor
Gallery**

Design

CHK Design

Print

Creative Group, London

Photography

Bryan Rutledge (artworks)

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