

Friday 25 March 2022

Dear everyone

Headline: Ticket sales have opened for the black tie event, *Strictly Heads* on the evening Sunday 26 June, where Headteachers from 16 London Schools will compete in a spectacular dance competition in aid of the London-based charity icandance. Find them here @icandanceuk

Each of the competing schools have 40 tickets allocated to them, so don't delay in booking.

<https://www.trybooking.co.uk/BNSZ>

A long time ago, a group of my friends would come together each year to 'do' something. On one occasion, we visited a gallery and I remember seeing the Chapman Brothers' monumental dioramas depicting shocking scenes of war, called 'Hell'. The works were destroyed in a fire, and Dino and Jake set about making an even bigger and 'better' version. I think that work is among some of the most disturbing and arresting pieces of art I've ever seen. I was mesmerised by it, and that is both its terror and allure.

For my 40th birthday I cycled on my own across Europe some 1600 kilometres and went gently round the twist as I spoke to almost no one for three weeks other than shop keepers, bar tenders and camp site clerks. On one stop I visited a church, hundreds of years old and situated high on a hill. On its walls are painted the most elaborate murals of heaven and hell on an enormous scale. Oddly, the depiction of Heaven, while serene, looks really boring, while Hell is enticing and full of the riches of indulgence and destruction. It can get to you, this stuff. It's not trivial. Milton understood this when he wrote *Paradise Lost*, the central character is Satan: cast out of heaven, alone, and vengeful. Sound familiar? There is a lot to learn here about the human condition.

Gerry Judah's *Commemorative Crosses*, that remain prominently in the nave of St Paul's Cathedral, depict the destruction by war of cities, constructed in a cruciform, are other works of art that rattle me. I remember clearly the day I came for my interview for the job here. I went into the Cathedral early in the morning before my moment in the sun with the governing body, and sat quietly in a near empty cathedral on a bright spring day and felt extremely unsettled by these works. I still do. And they need to stay there because of that, especially now, so that we don't become beguiled into thinking this can't happen. We can see, that it can and does.

We are only minutes away from Tate Modern. I go there from time to time, and it is never an easy visit. At times I come away agitated and annoyed, at others baffled, rarely calmed by the visit, sometimes amused, and always provoked. On one of the annual gatherings of my friends, we went to a different gallery, the Saatchi, and one room was filled with what

appeared to be junk randomly stuck together. On one canvas (have I told you this story before?) a dried apricot had been glued. One of our number determined to taste this desiccated artefact. A furtive look around for gallery stewards, the angle of the cameras, and in a flash, a lick. “Dusty”, my friend said. Like naughty children we scurried into the next room.

Some art decays in any case, and is part of the point.

Maria Balshaw, Director of the Tate, makes a claim for galleries and museums, in that they can and should be places of dissent. She is also alert to the unhelpfulness of polarised debate, an increasingly problematic contemporary condition. She goes on to say that she does not feel that museums and galleries have a responsibility to sort out tricky issues, but they must be places that help people to think things through. When I read this, it seems to me that schools have a similar purpose, notwithstanding that there are some clear issues of right and wrong, as we are dealing with now.



When German soldiers used to come to my studio and look at my pictures of Guernica, they'd ask 'Did you do this?'. And I'd say, 'No, you did.'

If there was ever a time we needed music and art and dance to remind us of our humanity, it is now. Here is a joyful group of musicians, *Fanfare Ciocarlia* from Romania. Romania, whose country borders Ukraine, has received more refugees than any country except Poland.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mHFjjszcpU>

Best wishes

Simon