Life & Times Exhibition

Sea of Hull

Hull, 9 July 2016 [City of Culture 2017]. Part of the free exhibition, *SKIN*, the Ferens Gallery, Hull, 22 April–13 August 2017.

TURNING BLUE IN HULL

It's been a while since I last wandered around a city centre at three in the morning (and I am not sure I have ever done it sober), but last July I was walking with over 3000 others into the middle of Hull. We had all answered adverts to be part of a new artwork by the US photographer Spencer Tunick called *Sea of Hull*. I have admired his work for a long time and so jumped at the opportunity to participate without a thought that I might end up naked in the middle of a busy city on a Friday night.

After registering and being handed a pot of paint, I loitered, along with my companions, in the Queen's Gardens awaiting further instructions. Eventually, Spencer explained what was going to happen and we were instructed to get naked and cover ourselves in the body paint, but to hurry, 'as we are off in 3 minutes'. There was so much to do in so little time that I forgot we were removing all our clothes. It was quite surreal a few moments later to look up and realise you were surrounded by naked people in different hues of blue.

We were ushered out of the park to a large rose garden and directed to stand around its paths. Spencer was high up on the top floor of the BBC building looking down. He was using a megaphone while his assistants ran around trying to get everyone in place, thinning out some areas and increasing others to enable a perfect group shot. Although Spencer could see the whole view, we were restricted to seeing a few bodies around us. By now it was dawn and the sun was just emerging, with the city still very peaceful. There was no one else

Will posing for a selfie after the event.

Hull 2.4 (Alfred Gelder Street), Ferens Art Gallery, 2016. © Spencer Tunick, 2016.

around except very discrete, but effective, security and it felt very safe, even in our birthday suits.

AN UNDULATING SEA OF BLUE BODIES

Over the next couple of hours we were moved to different sites around the centre of town. After the rose garden we were laid down in the street outside the council building. The tarmac was cold, but new and clean. (I had just seen the street cleaner leaving.) Again, I had no idea what the bigger picture was until lifting my head afforded a brief glimpse of an undulating sea of blue bodies, as far as the eye could see.

Everyone was chatting as we walked around, keen to know why we were here and marvelling at the experience. We were all very British, not daring to look down at the bodies around us and keeping our gazes at eye level. To pass the time they got us to touch up our colour, as it was beginning to dry in places and rub off. By now it was 6 o'clock and 3200 naked blue people counted out the chimes on the town hall clock as it struck. The atmosphere was amazing, everyone friendly and buzzing. I was surprised at the diversity of my collaborators, all ages, shapes, and sizes were here, disabilities accommodated without a thought, and scars were on show. Some had done this before, whereas others like me were first-timers, many proud locals, plenty of naturists, and a number of international participants. It was cold at times at the edge of the groups but thankfully there was no rain and only a light

breeze from the Humber during the last shot on the beautiful Scale Lane pedestrian bridge. 'Won awards you know, this bridge,' the engineer tells us, a little embarrassed to be clothed, while controlling the swing bridge, as we all walked onto it, 'and a German documentary film crew came to film it, as it's so famous. You can walk onto it, even when open, due to its innovative design.'

Before long it was all over and we headed back to the park to dress before going home. The final, surreal aspect was seeing everyone clothed but displaying their extremities still blue, spreading out around town, stopping off for breakfast, buying a paper, or cycling past. Back in the hotel I washed and joined my family for breakfast, still buzzing. There was a TV on in the background and we all stopped to watch and listen. We were on *BBC Breakfast* and a loud cheer went up across the dining room. Over the next few days news of the *Sea of Hull* project spread around the world. Friends who had no idea why we were heading to Northeast England for the weekend were now very interested.

POSTSCRIPT

Nine months later I am back in Hull in the heart of the City of Culture for the private view of 'SKIN' at the newly refurbished Ferens Gallery. The exhibition, which started on 22 April, looks at nudity in art and includes a number of the *Sea of Hull* pieces alongside works by, among others, Lucian Freud, Stanley Spencer, and Ron Mueck.

The final images by Tunick are stunning and show the architecture of this proud maritime city transformed with a glorious sea of bodies. The genius of his work is that he stops you in your tracks, making you appreciate what is all around you together with the human form in all its shapes and sizes. On previous installations he hasn't had enough people to fill an entire concourse, but, here, the main street outside the city hall is full as far as the eye can see with a mesmerising sea of different hues of blue, and now representing the largest nude installation in the UK.

Next to these images is *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* by Édouard Manet, on loan from the Courtauld Gallery. It depicts a female nude having a picnic with two fully dressed men and, at the time, it shocked the art world, who denied it entrance to the fashionable Paris Salon in 1863. Now, 150 years on, nudity is seemingly still shocking and there remain critics of what is seen as sensationalism. Tunick himself said, '*For me the nude represents culture coming into the city and how culture makes the city a more open and accepting place.*'¹

He has certainly achieved this in Hull, and, at the same time, put its year as City of Culture firmly on the map. The 2017 programme is bold, interesting, and huge — from exhibitions about the first female boxing champion to a sound piece on the Humber bridge, a Nordic folk festival to a children's literature festival. What most impressed me with my visits to the city was the warmth and friendliness of the locals who are proud of their city, without displaying any arrogance.

And before you ask, no, I'm not going to reveal where I was lying ...

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<http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/Ferens>
The exhibition finishes on Sunday 13 August 2017.

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REFERENCE

1. McNulty B. Spencer Tunick: bare with me. *Telegraph* 2010; **2 Aug**: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/7922021/Spencer-Tunick-bare-with-me.html> (accessed 4 Jul 2017).

Night Shift

Debi Gliori

Hot Key Books, 2017, HB, 32pp, £9.99, 978-1471406232

DRAGONS OF DEPRESSION TO SEABIRDS

Night Shift is the story of Debi Gliori's personal battle with her own dragon of depression. Gliori is well known as a writer and illustrator of children's books. However, this beautiful little picture book is for adults, to help express what it can be like to suffer from depression.

The book itself looks lovely with its rich blue cloth colour and thick cream paper, and the monochrome illustrations (except for one showing the dragon's fiery breath) are beautiful and simple, but effectively convey a condition that can be difficult to express with words. The dragon in the story represents the author's own depression, creating a persistent fog around her through its smoke and a constant feeling of dread of something she cannot see or name. I have always been quite fond of dragons but the metaphor of the dragon as the depression clearly conveys the difficulties of having an illness that no one can see and many do not believe exists. The isolating nature of depression, of feeling hollow and lost, and the sense of not being yourself any more (something many patients have said to me) become visible through the illustrations. Gliori states that she published this book to help others going through depression and I can see that empathetic illustrations and text could be useful for patients who are struggling to express themselves, and perhaps to give to family and friends to read.

This book does not have a happy-ever-after ending. It does not show the author as recovered from her depression, or even show the things that may help, which may disappoint some people who are wanting

to find answers. Instead, it finishes with a little message of hope that the depression will not last forever as she stops seeing dragons but starts to see seabirds flying overhead instead. Despite its small size and only taking a few minutes to read, the book is quite a powerful and moving personal expression of depression and a worthwhile quick read.

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