

# Seashaken

# Dave West

*an exhibition of oil paintings, pastels and linocuts*



with an essay by **Ian Fleming** (*Lecturer at the University of Ulster*)

**The Denis Collins Gallery - 20th October - 6th November, 2011.**



Red Boats at Arklow - Pastel - 45cm x 55cm



Low Tide, Passage East II - Oil - 10in x 12in

seashaken... shimmer ripple reflect propeller winch steps dazzle drip spill break bend scrape dent rust sway topple lean  
move fall dappled seaweed lobster sun wind frost snow tangle slide light colour shadow highlight above beneath in front  
behind below alongside huddle shelter pull haul throw drop repair weld repaint texture form angle foreshorten viewpoint  
perspective tiller keel railing ropes criss-cross swing tie-up chain anchor mast waterline oar roll buoy wheelhouse  
fishing working family cast flow rain wave rise flake dull shiny renew fix abandon curve horizontal vertical laughter  
launch harbour seagulls tears leaning drape tomorrow beside climb space

...that tidal flow of words tumbled out in waves as a response to the moods and mysteries of the paintings, pastels and prints in Dave West's current 'Seashaken' exhibition. The title 'Seashaken' is a single word borrowed from fellow countryman, the poet Dylan Thomas and that one word beautifully encapsulates the entire exhibition.

When a Welshman who lives in North County Dublin is invited to exhibit in Wexford, it is no wonder that he should be driven by the saltwater coursing in his veins to produce a series of paintings and drawings in the harbours and inlets that punctuate the east coast of Ireland.

However, it is not as simple as that. Yes, there are works from Balbriggan, Skerries, Loughshinney, Rush and Howth, running along the coast to Kilmore Quay, Ballyhack and Passage East, but this is no sightseer or traveller's guide. I own a copy of the Irish Cruising Club's Sailing Directions book for the East Coast of Ireland - it contains charts and information on suitable approaches to harbours indicating tidal flows, moorings, beacons, sandbars, channels, etc. But Dave West's exhibition offers me no similar help. I also own all of Bourke & Wilson's volumes on Shipwrecks of the Irish Coast and yet even though Dave West's exhibition covers that same coastline and every painting features boats, I am at a loss to find common ground. ...So if this is a maritime exhibition - then there are bound to be clippers and schooners with fully detailed rigging, or maybe more modern naval and merchant vessels, like those of renowned maritime artist Kenneth King from Glencolumcille? But again no!

...In fact even for those who know the above list of harbours well, they may be hard pushed to identify the location of individual paintings. That leaves a series of *why* questions hanging in the air.

Perhaps the best way to understand is to consider the steps in Dave West's process - it involves being in a place, it involves walking around, looking, drinking in the atmosphere and being aware of how the place makes him feel. It involves drawing, usually fast sketches with a few notes about colour and light and it involves taking photos, but the most important equipment is the artist's intuition and awareness of how the place makes him feel.

In conversation with Dave he referred to the way the artist Colin Middleton explained that it is meaningless to go out for a day's sketching - but that he would be drawn to a place "Or rather, you gravitate - when you get there you know you belong - it gets at you. It eats you. It's as though you've been there and always been there". Often Middleton's experience of a place emerged as a painting of a person, not a direct representation of the place. That's an important idea, which we will return to.

In Dave's case, days or weeks may pass before his experience of that place emerges from the sub-conscious and is ready to be expressed in paint. In a similar way to how he mixes paint before applying it, Dave's day dreams, night dreams, half conscious, fleeting thoughts are intermingled, reworked, manipulated until he has become consciously aware of how the painting will be painted. Adjustments to composition and arrangement of pictorial elements are finalised, sometimes in the mind, sometimes on paper, or on a computer, but always the drawing is done and the painting is ready to happen.

Well it's nearly ready to happen - first Dave has to put on the music. So what's it going to be today? Is it going to be Red Hot Chili Peppers or Leonard Cohen, or David Gray? You can probably see where this is going, the mood Dave is setting up in the studio directly relates to what's going to happen on the easel. It's going to affect the colour palette, it's going to affect the contrast level, it's going to affect the shadow detail, it will probably also affect the vigour of the marks that are made... it's going to dictate the mood of the finished painting.



Surcouf, Kilmore Quay - Oil - 1 x 2m

How do I know that? Well apart from the fact that I've discussed it with him, you can see the results for yourself in the work. Have a look at the two largest works in the show, *Kilmore Quay* and *Howth Harbour*. The only thing that unites them is size and that they are signed DLW in the corner, ok and yes, there are boats in the picture. Everything else is substantially different... through deliberate choice. Dave visited both locations at the same time of day, the weather was more or less the same, bright and sunny.

The essence of the Howth painting is the contrast between the frenetically busy melee of masts, railings, aerials, winches and the graphical simplicity of the hulls, reflections and water receding into the distance. It contains high contrast ratios, dynamic paint marks, and compositionally it contains strong positive/negative space. You may or may not be surprised to know that Red Hot Chilli Peppers were on the iPod, but it also relates to another Dylan Thomas line from the seashaken poem, it is 'a rumpus of shapes'.

Leonard Cohen and other members of that reflective and melancholic brotherhood were providing the 'vibe' for the Kilmore painting. The principle characteristics of which are a much more subtle tonal range; a deeper more earthy, dirty, dusty, rusty range of colours; an up close and personal feel. It's less tribal and more intimate - friends or family - there is a distinct feeling of camaraderie. The diminishing scale of the boats communicates to me a Daddy Bear, Mummy Bear and Baby Bear feeling, which I am sure is entirely unintentional, ...but I can hear Daddy Bear singing the Horslips' version of the English sea shanty "You shall have a fishy on a little dishy, You shall have a fishy when the boat gets in. Dance ti' thy daddy, sing ti' thy mommy, Dance ti' thy daddy, my little man." You may not have the same experience, but be assured that if you take the time to be in front of an artwork with your senses switched on, there will be a tangible exchange that is about more than light falling on pigment.

To be more serious, my introduction speaks of the moods and mysteries in Dave West's paintings, and I've referred to Colin Middleton's assertion that his experience of a place often resulted in the painting of a person. In my own artistic practice, over a 20 year period, I have produced a series of works entitled 'Better to have loved and lost', which are boat paintings. At first glance they are all boats in various states of ruin and repair, but they are actually a series of portraits:

self-portraits, my parents, family, friends, loves, and also losses. So I was in no way surprised to hear Dave say that these works were not really about the 'place'. At most they are about Dave West in the places, about the mood they evoke in him and about a way of expressing his mood and feelings, but I also think that on some level these paintings are also portraits.

For me the essence of art is the artist's ability to 'bring to the outside what's on the inside'. Technical excellence, draughtsmanship, painterly sensitivity, all of which Dave West has in bucket loads, are all useful, but it is his courage in plumbing the depths of his intuition that sets him apart as an artist. Many other artists have technical prowess, but what sets them apart is gimmick... the furrows they are ploughing are made from oil paint 4 or 5mm thick which will be out of vogue before the paint is even dry. Without being cruel enough to name names, many other artists working with the same subject matter are repetitively dredging up graphically stilted abstract pop-pic harbour scenes from the silt of mediocrity. Mr West does not fit in this category.

Dave West is working within a tradition, but has developed his own contemporary voice. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century Irish artists such as James Humbert Craig, William Leech and Frank McKelvey were exploring the unique light and atmospheric conditions of the Irish landscape, and like Dave their subject matter wasn't spectacular landmark sites, but the ordinary, everyday scenes of coast and countryside.

To those who are unfamiliar with Dave's work, an entire exhibition of boat paintings is a departure from the norm. In this exhibition he is indulging in one of his obsessions - but they are tackled with the same unorthodox perspective and juxtaposition of elements as his other subjects. I'm unaware of other contemporary painters creating dramatically beautiful paintings with such unlikely subject matter as wheelie bins, aerials, touring caravans, tents, drainpipes, cars, streetlights, rooftops, trainlines, etc. Dave's ability to make concrete surfaces, road signs and motorway barriers become objects of beauty in the early light of dawn or under the glow of sodium street lighting at dusk is a unique gift.

Like most artists Dave is hampered by the need to eat and provide shelter - not only for himself but also for his young family - all the more remarkable then, that he has the courage to pursue his own idiosyncratic visual enquiry in the hope that others will support his efforts. Dave has not looked for alternative methods for gaining recognition, his dedication to the craft of painting and drawing is undeniable, and as it always will, it is beginning to bear results.

...I for one am a believer ...and if the many selections of Dave West's work in open-submission competitions are a good indicator - it appears the various academies and arts associations of these islands are also believers. Dave's work rightly stands alongside other Irish contemporary painters such as Simon McWilliams and Colin Davidson whose work has the same level of visual sensibility, and at this time their names have a wider degree of national and international recognition... I confidently predict that the waves from this exhibition will continue to enhance Mr West's reputation and as the name Dave West is stirred and shaken in the ebb and flow of the art world, those who continue to support his arts practice, such as Denis Collins in Wexford will have their faith justified.

Seashaken is an exhibition of mood and reflection, of drama and romance, of magic and mystery. Seashaken is a prism, it is an opportunity for a viewer who knows how to look - to see with their heart.

Step ashore and walk among the 'seathumbed leaves' of Dave West's dreamworld.....

### **Ian Fleming.**

*Ian is an artist/designer researcher and lecturer at University of Ulster, Belfast. He is a founder and director of Creative Exchange Studios, xChangeVisions and the CommonInterests Trust. As a researcher Ian's major interest lies in how artists develop their creative voice, and in how that enhances their own sense of personal well-being and enriches the wider society.*



Howth Harbour - Oil - 1m x 1.5m



Sunset, Pembrokeshire - Pastel - 20cm x 30cm



Dunmore East - Pastel - 45cm x 55cm



Balbriggan Harbour  
Linocut - 9in x 12in



Kilmore Quay  
Oil - 45cm x 55cm



Boats at Arthurstown I - Linocut - 9in x 12in



Harbour I  
Oil - 10in x 12in

This day winding down now  
At God speeded summer's end  
In the torrent salmon sun,  
In my seashaken house  
On a breakneck of rocks  
Tangled with chirrup and fruit,  
Froth, flute, fin, and quill  
At a wood's dancing hoof,  
By scummed, starfish sands  
With their fishwife cross  
Gulls, pipers, cockles, and snails,  
Out there, crow black, men  
Tackled with clouds, who kneel  
To the sunset nets,  
Geese nearly in heaven, boys  
Stabbing, and herons, and shells  
That speak seven seas,  
Eternal waters away.....

**Dylan Thomas**

Dave West was born and raised in South Wales. He studied at the Carmarthenshire College of Art & Design and is now settled in Balbriggan, North County Dublin.

Dave has held several successful solo exhibitions including one at Art Upstairs, Wexford in 2008. His work has been selected for the Eigse Arts Festival, the New English Art Club and the Royal Hibernian Academy Annual Exhibition. Two of his paintings are currently showing at the Royal Society of Marine Artists Annual Exhibition at the Mall Galleries in London and two of his pastels have been selected for the Royal Ulster Academy Annual Exhibition currently showing in Belfast.

His work is also in many private and corporate collections including the Office of Public Works (OPW), Texaco Corp., BP and Fingal County Council.



Seashaken is presented by The Denis Collins Gallery, Custom House Quay, Wexford  
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