

Fish and Ships

JOHNSON, Esther <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8884-4192>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/25612/>

This document is the Published Version [VoR]

Citation:

JOHNSON, Esther (2019). Fish and Ships. *The Critical Fish* (2), 36-42. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Fish

INTERVIEW

We were delighted catch up with SHIPS in the SKY and the opportunity to hear about the progress of their project. Our featured artist in this issue is illustrator Jake Machen and following meetings with Esther and Leigh we suggested that Jake produce an illustrated timeline of SHIPS in the SKY for the poster insert for this issue. The interview questions come from Jill Howitt (editor *The Critical Fish*) and Clare Holdstock, a local artist, whose interest in modernist architecture informs her work.

This interview took place at the beginning of September, since when the council has decided that the external mural can't be saved due to the presence of asbestos.

SHIPS in the SKY overview

Initiated by Hull artist and filmmaker Esther Johnson, SHIPS in the SKY is a social history arts project inspired by the trio of Alan Boyson (1930–2018) murals situated on and inside the now-empty former Hull & East Riding Co-operative Society store, later a BHS. The structure has had many lives – a department store, a market, a dance hall, music venue and nightclubs: The Skyline Ballroom, Bailey's and Romeo's & Juliet's. On closure in 2016, the building canopy acted as shelter for the homeless and now lays empty ahead of imminent demolition and redevelopment. Boyson's murals are emblematic of Britain's postwar rebuilding, and of the rich seam of Hull's maritime heritage, a city no longer with a fishing fleet.

Evoking peoples' navigation and memories of the public realm, SHIPS in the SKY aims to connect local residents with the city's unique built environment, stimulating new perspectives of the familiar. The project strands include a collection of 80+ oral history recordings undertaken with 'Untold Hull'; an artist film and photographic series; memorabilia connected to the building; memory sharing events; and a commissioned poem by Vicky Foster. There will be a exhibition in late 2020 showcasing these project elements. →



Jill Howitt: What are your thoughts on the vision for the external mural?

Is it public art to improve everyday spaces or marketing/branding to attach status to the building and the shopping experience?

Or a bit of both?

Esther Johnson + Leigh Bird: We think Boyson's mural is both an effective piece of public art, and an optimistic symbol of the philosophy of the Co-operative Society. Post-war Modernist buildings commissioned by forward thinking companies and architects have a strong history of incorporating art and artistic architectural detailing into them. Strengthened by the seminal Festival of Britain in 1951, the post-war period was a time of renewed optimism, and it is a time synonymous with public art murals; though many have now been destroyed or lost. Being the second most bombed city outside of London, this optimism in rebirth unsurprisingly resonated very strongly here in Hull.

“It’s immediately recognisable and is geographically and emotionally at Hull’s beating heart.”

A movement to recognise and document murals such as Boyson's *Three Ships* was instigated in 2012 by the 'Twentieth Century Society' with their 'Murals Campaign' to highlight those deemed at risk, and their website states that, 'Post-war murals are an endangered species. Although paintings and sculpture from this same period are seen as fit subjects for gallery display and academic study, murals – often by the very same artists – are still frequently ignored and even destroyed'.¹

Both historian Lynn Pearson, author of *A Fieldguide to Postwar Murals* and *Historic England*, in their publication *Public-Art-1945-95*, have championed Alan Boyson as an important artist and a key proponent of innovation in post-war murals. Boyson was frequently engaged by architects and retailers to come up with flexible and meaningful ways to enhance buildings and the built environment. More recently the 20th anniversary edition of the British Association of Modern Mosaics journal *Adamento* included the *Three Ships* within their top twenty mosaics of the UK.

JH: To what degree are these intentions tied to the Co-operative movement and the building's starting point as a Co-operative Society Store?

EJ+LB: The whole Co-operative ethos is geared towards the community, and their brief to Boyson was to, 'unite the community through art'. The Co-op are also well known for the quality of finishing in their stores and artworks, incorporating artistic and quality cutting-edge materials into their retail spaces, most prominently seen in their post-war buildings. Uniquely, Boyson made three murals for the Hull store – the only three Boyson works still in existence in one place – but the *Three Ships* is the most celebrated and widely known. When we interviewed Philip Andrew – Boyson's good friend and the CWS architect who designed the Hull Co-op – he was thrilled with Boyson's *Three Ships* mosaic, saying that he, '...had to turn the corner, and the two elevations were so banal. I thought, I



can't just take those round the corner we have to do something. So, we did something. And the idea of a mural just followed, and the idea of getting Alan to design it, naturally, because anything I could do to get Alan involved in I did, because I admired his work so much.... I imagine it's the colour of under water, there's no attempt to represent the sky, the sea, the horizon and the sky, no, that would have been banal. This is an imaginative interpretation of an industry'.

Ultimately Boyson's *Three Ships* provided the Co-op's flagship store an appropriate air of gravitas and modernity.

JH: In what ways do the murals connect to the identity of Hull or the North in general?

Of Boyson's three murals in the Hull Co-op, only the recently found abstract sponge-print mural is purely decorative. Incidentally this was rediscovered due to the interview we undertook with Philip and ceramics historian and Boyson expert, Christopher Marsden. The *Three Ships* and *Fish* murals have obvious links with the city. The fish are magnificent both in terms of aesthetics and in their novel craftsmanship. We are thrilled

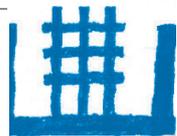
to know that Hull City Council are set on preserving the *Fish* and abstract sponge-print tile murals. The *Fish* mural is particularly typical of Boyson's work of that period, incorporating his trademark outline and skeleton graphic style, using a medley of hand-made ceramics, and recycling fragments of tiles and terrazzo. We believe this mural sits equally with his most recognised work, the *Tree of Knowledge* in Salford, which was grade II listed in 2009. We love how the *Three Ships* trawlers are represented in a reductive abstract way that absolutely matches the outline of trawlers of that period, with their double cross-masts and swing boom.

The *Three Ships*, despite being 'ships in the sky', is a very grounded, accessible and down-to-earth work. Regardless of its massive 66x64ft. scale, the mosaic is elegant and understated. There is no gaudy flashiness here, and thus very representative of Hull and the North in general. This is possibly one of the reasons the mural is so loved and still works artistically over 50 years later. It seems to optimistically point to the future, and is absolutely timeless and yet unique at the same time.

JH: I view post-war public art as quite heroic, allied with a commitment to social change and accessibility. What do the murals have to tell us, or teach us today?

We certainly agree that much post-war public art, including Boyson's work, has a heroic quality about it. As per the 'tonic to the nation' and Tony Benn's 'Years of Hope', postwar art frequently embodies a sense of pointing towards a bright new future.¹¹ At the same time there are wistful glimmers of treasuring what some folk might hold dear, whether it be Lady Godiva or the Legend of King Arthur – what might be called 'polite modernism'. In addition there is a revelling in new materials; experiments that break with tradition including wondrous examples of engineering such as the infamous 'Skylon' made for no other reason than to 'wow'.¹²

As to what public art has to teach us, we believe it's more about the capacity of what it can prompt for discussion, evoke or conjure up for the community that see and live with it everyday, rather than public art having a didactic lesson to tell, unless of course the work is in the realm of propaganda or monument. How public →



art can evoke a conversation and connect communities is really what's at the root of SHIPS in the SKY. The project isn't just about the murals, or the building per se, but rather about what an aspect of the built environment has meant to so many generations in Hull, looking at how the public realm can affect our relationship and memories of the places we inhabit. The *Three Ships* has become almost totemic for people in Hull, and we've chosen it as the emblem for our project. It's immediately recognisable and is geographically and emotionally at Hull's beating heart. It's been a joy to connect with so many people who've played out important and everyday moments in their lives inside that building; from the clubs and gigs where romances were kindled or indeed ended, to wedding parties and the purchasing of baby clothes, to Santa's grotto and special visits to see the store window and food displays. It's a place that really has been with some folk from cradle to grave. In fact expert on Hull's connection to the Co-operative Movement, John E. Smith, told us when interviewed for the project that,

'It was often said that you could get things at the Co-op that other stores didn't have...It was the Co-op's mission to provide everything that people wanted from the cradle to the grave and so they really tried to live up to that. So they had a pharmacy, they had a large photographic department, they had an optician, they had hairdressing, two branches, one for ladies and one for gentlemen, a café on the first-floor balcony which of course BHS kept in the same position when they moved in...so lots of departments for people to look at, there was even a wig boutique.'

Sometimes we need new icons, but sometimes we need to keep what we have and continue to hold it dear, as well as examining things in a new light and with the hindsight of passing time. For some the mural represents a buried, but respected, period in our

city's history, for others it's a tangible reminder of a time and people we've loved, and lost, and for others it's still a beacon of hope and a source of civic pride. Good art continues to resonate throughout time, yet also moves with the times. Boyson's *Three Ships* really is a prime example of this.

JH: Tell us about the intentions of your project and what you hope to achieve.

EJ+LB: SHIPS in the SKY is all about connecting with peoples' histories and we're reaching out for people's memories connected to the various guises of the building. The central theme looks at how architecture shapes and is shaped by local and cultural identity, and at how public art can effect people's navigation and memories of the public realm. The aim is to highlight the stories that you don't hear about, from the perspective of people who designed and built the store, the individuals who frequented the clubs in the building, and those that once worked and shopped in the store. We aim to highlight what Hull folk think of this building, and in particular, the impossible-to-miss *Three Ships* mural made from over a million glass tiles.

The project has multiple strands that are slowly expanding as we go along. With 'Untold Hull' we've been recording oral testimonies and have so far built up an archive of 80+ interviews covering all aspects of the building's history throughout its 72 year life, from the temporary post-war Co-op prefab built in 1947, up until the present day. We've held mini-exhibitions in libraries across Hull so as to reach as many communities as possible and encourage folk to come forward and share their stories. All contributors get a special *Three Ships* badge which, we're chuffed to see, have become very popular.

We've commissioned Hull poet, Vicky Foster, to write a new poem and have given her access to these oral testimonies to use as a springboard,

inspiration and source material for her new poem, which we're very excited about. We're also developing a film, and aim to hold exhibitions next year that will premiere the film alongside archive materials, photography, and artefacts connected to the building.

In addition to oral history interviews, we've been reaching out to folk for exhibition donations/loans of memorabilia connected to the building. We've received Co-op overalls and employment papers; Co-op/BHS badges; placemats; newspaper clippings; photographs; cine film; and Co-op publicity materials. We also have access to architectural plans and archive photographs of the building being built. We're looking for, but not limited to: photos; cine film; branded products from Co-op and/or BHS; shopping bags and receipts; store leaflets and/or posters; clothing from the Co-op and/or BHS – either items worn by staff or items bought in-store; items connected to the clubs such as gig posters, coasters, ashtrays, match-books; clothes folk might have worn to go clubbing in; records; and autographs collected at gigs – especially in the Skyline Ballroom.

During the exhibition we aim to host a public event covering many of the themes in the project including: public art; modernism; people's history; place heritage; importance of design for the built environment; psychology of space; changes in retail; women and the workplace; the Co-operative Movement; and architecture as featured in British New Wave Cinema.

JH: Do you see any connection with other examples of public art in Hull and what is the potential for the murals to be the starting point for new creative work?

EJ+LB: There are certainly other examples in the city of public post-war art, but also contemporary examples such as the vibrant Bankside Gallery and of course the Hull Banksy, and more recently Andy Pea's work down

Newland and Chanterland's Avenue. The latter includes a lovely gold leaf depiction of the *Three Ships*.

In terms of post-war art, there is a medley to be seen around the city, which in part is due to the urgent post-war rebuilding with the centre being bombed so badly. As a flavour of some of our top-spots there are: six wonderful carved stone panels in Queen's Gardens by then Hull College of Art Lecturer Kenneth Carter; at the same time these were made, three concrete reliefs were commissioned for the back of the pond at the end of Queen's Gardens made by Robert Adams between 1958-59; and above the entrance of Hull College (designed by Frederick Gibberd), there is a beautiful resin panel of nautical and mathematical instruments designed by the well-known muralist, William Mitchell. Finally, there are multiple University of Hull Modernist buildings, including the Brynmor Jones Library, with exterior bas-relief sculptures by Willi Soukop, including a stunning owl. As part of SHIPS in the SKY, we aim to host a Modernist tour of the city which will include some of the built environment gems we cherish, and hopefully the *Three Ships*, if it still remains in the new development.

JH: It strikes me that the murals challenge notions about what is art and how we value different aspects of visual culture. Does your project similarly challenge representations and values within history?

EJ: How and what people value as art and as worthy of being in the history books is such fascinating territory. Much of the subject matter in my work relates to social and people's history, the stories that get left behind or are forgotten. I think these are the stories that can connect communities; stories that often get to the nitty gritty, stories we can relate to, empathise with, and that potentially speak a little of our own past and/or conflicts.

EJ+LB: For us murals can be a really prominent feature of the built environment helping communities to connect and ask questions. Of course there are also parallels to political use of murals as seen in the gable end artwork of Northern Ireland. This political use speaks volumes in itself – art that says something in an in-your-face inescapable manner.

There is a tension in certain quarters about whether public art is 'proper' art so-to-speak. For instance one could ask why Tate Britain has very little public art in their collections.^{IV} In some quarters there is a defiant championing of the importance of public art, and murals in particular are preserved and collected in many media in countless institutions; usually museums rather than art galleries. In fact the argument of who owns public art is rather contentious. It is interesting to see that supporters of the listing of the Dorothy Annan panels [see below] included then director of Tate Britain, Penelope Curtis.

We plan for the finished output for this arts project to take many forms. However, it's the intangible element of people's memories and lives that is, in many ways, the hardest and most emotional thing to capture; and why projects like this, and the work of 'Untold Hull' is so important. We've been blown away that the British Library have chosen to archive the project website (which keeps on expanding) and Twitter account; it's gratifying to know that every facet of what we're doing will be captured both locally and nationally.

Clare Holdstock: How do you feel about the idea of a replica of the original Alan Boyson artwork replacing the old tiled glass mosaic structure? Would recreating an original modernist public structure in modern materials devalue the piece?

EJ+LB: We think this suggestion can only appeal to those for whom the budget is the prime consideration, or people who don't really know

of, or appreciate the artistic and historical importance and uniqueness of Boyson's Hull works. It's hard to imagine this happening if this scenario were in London, Manchester or Birmingham. Boyson's works are simply irreplaceable.

CH: Plans are being made to keep the original façade/artwork; but the structure of the building itself including the 'handkerchief' roof is extremely unique. Is there anything we can do to save that as well?

EJ+LB: With outline planning permission being granted to demolish the building, we are sadly too late for that. It would have been wonderful to see the building repurposed as part of Albion Square, but that now looks unlikely. Preserving the murals in situ would have been wonderful, but we do have confirmation of the next best thing, which is a Council who have recognised the artistic importance of Boyson's Hull works, and are committed to doing what they can to preserve and relocate them safely. There are examples of other mid-century mural works being relocated – notably Dorothy Annan's London Fleet Building telecom tile murals, which are Grade II listed, being relocated to the Barbican Centre.^V So it has been done, and the knowledge is out there of how to do this safely with as little damage as possible to the artist's works.

JH: Bob and Roberta said that public art punctuates the public world – how do the murals and your research project shape or reflect ideas concerning public space, the public realm and public histories?^{VI}

EJ: I'd agree with Patrick's statement and this chimes with art being a form of free speech.

Public art can be extremely powerful in both democratic and undemocratic spaces. It can completely change one's sense and relationship to the public environment you inhabit, and can also change or ask you to question your sense of history of, or belonging/ →



exclusion within a place. There is also the question of at what point do certain works of public art become monuments or memorials? These are all very complex and, at times, sensitive sites of enquiry. For SHIPS in the SKY, there is a sense of celebration of a site, and of the interweaving stories over decades that relate to both Hull, and to the broader history and changes seen in post-war Britain. The building and Boyson's works are a portal, a lens, or a diving board to launch into many realms of enquiry. But these threads still all connect. Some histories are difficult to articulate, or can only be fully told or understood with hindsight. The beauty of working on this project is that the history spans decades. There might be a very different council view of what to do with such a space as the Hull Co-op/BHS premises 72 years into the future.

LB: It's interesting that you mention Bob and Roberta, who were a key part of Hull 2017. They tweeted about the *Three Ships*, saying "It's a beautiful part of Hull's post war commitment to rebuilding the city for the people of Hull to enjoy. It's a Phoenix risen from ashes". 🐟

Thank you to Esther and Leigh – we hope to catch up with the project as it nears completion in 2020.

FUNDING

The project is funded by the James Reckitt Library Trust in partnership with Untold Hull at Hull Libraries.^{vii} We're currently in the process of seeking further funding to extend the scope of the project.

LINKS

<http://shipsinthesky.weebly.com>

@shipsinthesky63 Instagram and Twitter

@ShipsInTheSkyHull Facebook

ENDNOTES

- I For the 'Twentieth Century Society' see: <https://c20society.org.uk/about-us/>. For the 'Campaign for Twentieth Century Architecture – Murals Campaign' see: <https://c20society.org.uk/murals-campaign>
- II Gerald Barry, director of the Festival of Britain, 1951 claimed that the Festival would prove a 'tonic to the nation', see: 'The Festival of Britain' available at: <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-festival-of-britain-1951-online>

Benn, Tony, *Years of Hope: Diaries, Letters and Papers, 1940-1962*, Hutchinson, 1994.
- III The steel and aluminium 'Skylon', was interestingly built 2 years after Labour passed the Iron and Steel Act which led to the nationalisation of Steel. In 1952 the Skylon was dumped into the River Lea in East London, which some might argue, could be seen as a metaphor for austerity that followed the veiled optimism demonstrated throughout the Festival of Britain.
- IV For a definition of 'Public Art' on the Tate website see: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/public-art>
- V For more information on Dorothy Annan, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothy_Annan#Fleet_Building_telecom_murals

See also: Kennedy, Maeve, 'Dorothy Annan murals listed as former telephone exchange faces demolition' in *The Guardian*, 25 November 2011, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/nov/25/dorothy-annan-murals-listed>
- VI Cited in *Out There: Our Post-War Public Art* (exhibition catalogue) p.24. The exhibition of the same name took place at Somerset House, 3 February – 10 April 2016
- VII For more information on 'Untold Hull' see: <https://untoldhull.org>