

*'Global News'*, James Brewer, Freelance Arts Writer

This could be the start of something big. It is tempting to use those words when an inaugural show makes an immediate impact, but it is clear that this venture is already something big - the outcome reflecting the intense passion and thoughtful talent that has gone into the work.

Five members of a London-based group of artists named The Memory Collective, formed in September 2009, offer what they call "independent art works which engage with the co-related issues of time, memory and identity." No less than 85 of their works have made their public debut early in March 2012.

The creators' ambition to explore profoundly these themes is not as abstract an undertaking as it sounds: in fact by way of some solidly attractive pieces, we are invited to travel along quite specific pathways of cultural discourse.

So let us start with the words of the founder of the collective and curator of this exhibition, Angela Summerfield, who makes reference to key contributors to two artistic cultures, the English and the Norwegian. John Constable (1776-1837) and Johan Christian Dahl (1788-1857) never met, but their landscapes offered penetrating insights into the mind.

Late paintings by Constable in particular were impressions of his psychological state, as he grieved over the death of his wife Maria. Dahl in his way brought new context to landscape painting. Both men were fascinated by the movement of clouds as they explored the moods of light.

The effect of landscape depends greatly on different seasons, and as Constable said: "The sky is...the chief organ of sentiment ...the sky is the source of light in nature, and governs everything."

Our experience of landscape informs the development of our sensory faculties, Angela says. This forms the basis of memory, and the exhibition is structured so that we go on a journey starting with landscape. Angela's appealing oil canvases are explorations of clouds, of summer meadows, of skies of eventide between dusk and night, of skies at night. "My response to landscape takes account of often multi-sensory impressions of sight, sound, smell and touch," she says. Her use of the colour blue evokes calm and thoughtfulness. She adds: "I very much believe that art can be life-changing for people, and this is behind the formation of the Memory Collective, addressing the experience that is common to us all. As an artist, we can use memory in a very sophisticated and very structured way."

As to the driving force of the collective: "We want people to slow down, so moving away from the very fast-glance experience people have in our contemporary world. We are trying to encourage people to have deeper and more lasting experience of the world at large, the way they perceive the world." The Memory Collective wants to bring on board poets, writers, musicians, and even neuroscientists, to collaborate with visual artists. At the large NoFormat Gallery which makes good use of former industrial space, there was too an examination of the

forms of personal identity and private mythology, the latter a particular concern of much Nordic art.

A series of sculptures - the work of Angela's sister Caroline Summerfield - looks at the beginning of life, and therefore the beginnings of memory, and the traces that we leave behind. With *Traces Male Form and Life Begins*, Caroline sets out to recreate the human form with pieces that look as though they might have been dug up by an archaeologist. This is done by suspending pieces of fired clay with faux bronzing in transparent blocks of highly polished resin, so that the fragments "are remains frozen in time that we cannot touch." Caroline was very conscious of not appearing to make them look machine made. Another challenge was to create the impression of air trapped within a block: "it was a technical nightmare to create."

Many of the techniques she uses are highly labour intensive, and she likes using both classic and very modern materials: Another piece, called *Life Begins*, is made from gold, Perspex and resin. She takes delight in reinterpreting the notion of sculpture: "Sculpture should be pushed to its technical limits."

*Her Family Group*, in grey cast stone, contrasts with the treatment of the same theme of Henry Moore in his first large-scale public bronze in 1950. Moore in his representation reduced the size of the heads, making the figures body-dominated, and suggesting what could be seen as an undercurrent of violence resulting from his having lived through two world wars. For Caroline, this subject was very much a labour of love: she wanted to see the parents in contemplation of themselves and of their children so that what is fashioned can appeal to people from any background. A benign feeling emerges that owes something to her admiration of Leonardo da Vinci. The harmonious effect comes from her appreciation of the flow of the stone which dictates the approach: "You have to look at the piece and not be too rigid about what you are going to sculpt," she says. One edition of the family group is in Cotswolds cast stone, and another in grey cast stone; each is mixed very carefully and has to be hand finished. Bath stone is very crumbly, so it is indeed a delicate task.

For her studies of a new-born baby, Caroline delved into other materials (glass wax and gold, cold cast bronze, black wax and wood, Portland stone) sculpting the originals in clay and using a double matrix mould. Jesmonite, a combination of plaster and resin, is used for another work, acid-etched and allowing quartz crystal to glint through.

Hjørdis Dreschel, who says that her paintings and prints are provocative statements about the human condition in a landscape of memory and the past, impressed with her work including her *Passionflower* series, as mono-prints and oil on Japanese paper. Sara Lee, "intrigued by the paradox of landscape; seemingly permanent, yet constantly evolving" offered compelling studies in pastel, mono-print and woodcut of darkness and shadows; and Therese Nortvedt, dream-like scenes of people gifted with memory allowing them, as she says, "to gaze into the future as well as holding the moment of time." A memorable show, indeed!