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Review of the exhibition “Edward Burne-Jones: Pre-Raphaelite Visionary” at Tate Britain (24/10/2018 – 24/02/2019)

Ludovic Le Saux

- 1 A few days before the opening of the exhibition on Edward Burne-Jones, Tate Britain released a tantalising trailer¹ for this unique event, as no exhibition devoted to the Victorian artist had been held since 1998 – in his hometown, Birmingham – and for over forty years in London. Featuring three mesmerising *tableaux vivants* of pictures by Burne-Jones (*Laus Veneris*, *Love among the Ruins*, and *The Rose Bower*), the trailer highlights the approach adopted by Chief Curator Alison Smith, and Assistant Curator Tim Batchelor: the exhibition sheds light on the universality and complexity of the artist’s intriguing dream world.
- 2 With over 150 pieces – including lesser known or more rarely exhibited ones, such as drawings, jewellery, or a decorated piano – in very diverse media, the large exhibition showcases Burne-Jones’s multi-faceted personality and artistic practice. From the eerie series on Perseus and Sleeping Beauty, to striking stained glass panels and intimate portraits, or comic drawings, the seven rooms of the exhibition act as so many layers of the artist’s mind, which the viewer is invited to explore thanks to clear plates and accessible explanations. The succession of rooms is organised in a more or less chronological order, thus foregrounding the artist’s developments from his first exploration years, his achievements as a draughtsman, to his large pictures of the 1870s, his portraits, and series paintings. The progression of the exhibition also minutely underlines Burne-Jones’s peculiarity as an artist who studied at university, and not at art school; and the different figures in his circle, who influenced or fuelled his art, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti – who encouraged his imaginative powers – or his life-long friend William Morris.² The last room offers an enlightening conclusion to the exhibition, by grouping together multiple examples of Burne-Jones’s talent as a

designer for the decorative arts, which he practised throughout his life, notably thanks to the firm Morris & Co., which he co-founded in 1861. The spacious display in most of the rooms allows for pleasurable moments of contemplation – most needed in the breath-taking third room, which brings together most of Burne-Jones's large-scale paintings.

- 3 Upon entering the first room of the exhibition, a feeling of intimacy prevails. Although the dim lighting sometimes obscures the works on display – especially his early drawings in pen and ink, often hard to take in completely with so little light –, it also introduces the viewer to Burne-Jones's dream world. His striking use of colour – though less nuanced than in his later work – catches the eye in these early pieces. The viewer is immersed in the composition of the three panels of *The Annunciation and Adoration of the Magi* (1861), in which gold plays a structuring role amidst the blues and reds. Likewise, the mystical quality of his stained-glass panel *The Calling of Saint Peter* (ca.1857), completed before the creation of Morris & Co, is mostly conveyed by the otherworldly blue eyes of the three figures. The artist's intricate attention to detail – of colour, line, figure, texture – appears quite clearly in his early works and is further illustrated in the series of drawings displayed in the following room, devoted to "Burne-Jones as a Draughtsman". The large number of drawings and studies is both daunting and highly moving, as it reveals Burne-Jones's industrious perfectionism and self-taught assimilation of earlier models – notably from the Renaissance for his drawings, as Colin Cruise underlines in the catalogue, on the subject of his studies of Titian and Tintoretto (Smith 78). Although they were mostly preparatory works for larger painted compositions, many studies of hands, feet and other body parts are works of art in their own right, emphasising Burne-Jones's fascination for the beauty and materiality of flesh and skin. For instance, his study for the Michelangesque King in *The Wheel of Fortune* (1883) focuses on the twisted lines of muscles and the tormented ruggedness of skin, while the face is barely sketched.
- 4 Pleasantly enough, the room also offers a lighter counterpoint to Burne-Jones's minute studies by unveiling a lesser known trait of his personality through his comic drawings and caricatures. Although only a small number of these comic drawings are displayed, they enable the viewer to discover the artist's tongue-in-cheek and sometimes unapologetic humour, as well as his self-mockery – for example in the illustrated letter endearingly signed "Your poor Bapapa"³ which he sent to his granddaughter Angela when he had "caught a bad cold", and in which he is seen bundled up in a blanket. The favourite target of this humour was probably his friend William Morris, of whom he drew many caricatures teasing Topsy's (Morris's nickname) "enslaved passion" for Iceland and "raw fish"⁴ or the long evenings they spent reading poetry. In his 1861 pen and ink drawing *William Morris Reading Poetry to Edward Burne-Jones*, a slumbering, emaciated Burne-Jones painfully endures a reading session by a large and dishevelled Morris, thereby revealing Burne-Jones's affectionate, though nonetheless mordant use of drawing, sometimes at the expense of his friends, but also of himself.
- 5 In sharp contrast to the more intimate studies and drawings, the third room acts as a pivotal moment in the exhibition. Burne-Jones's large-scale paintings take up all the space, in a stirring display of colour, light, and mythical settings and characters. The explanatory plate at the entrance of the room details Burne-Jones's explorations between 1870⁵ and 1877, during which his imagination was given free rein, leading to an impressive number of varied pictures that were to establish his international

reputation. Probably one of the most celebrated of these large-scale paintings in the room, *Love among the Ruins* (in a private collection) was completed around 1873 and provides a striking example of the artist's unique intertwining of contradictory qualities. The picture is characterised by the feeling of both peacefulness and uneasiness it evokes. The composition foregrounds the two figures, as they take up almost half of the picture. Their unstable posture conveys an impression of fragile balance which points to the ephemerality of the protection provided by the blossomed briar. Just like the zither the male figure is barely holding between his legs, the female character is in an intermediary, indefinite position: her body is twisted, as she is half kneeling, half leaning against her lover's body. The shelter offered by the ruins - a sort of shrine for love to bloom in like the briar - is therefore counterbalanced by the precariousness in which the two figures are frozen. Loosely based on a Robert Browning poem of the same title, the painting highlights Burne-Jones's ideal of love and passion as the ultimate expression and experience of the senses.⁶ As the trailer for the exhibition shows, the frailty and, at the same time, the power that the picture conveys make it still very accessible to contemporary viewers. Indeed, the trailer pays homage both to the androgynous appearance of Burne-Jones's male figures and to his universal sense of love and peril by casting two women in its reenactment of *Love among the Ruins*.

- 6 Perhaps one of the pictures that is most suggestive of Burne-Jones's appeal to ambiguous situations or characters, is his 1886 *The Depths of the Sea*, which first catches the viewer's eye by its size and unusual vertical disposition. In her article "At Work: Burne-Jones's Studio, Materials and Techniques", Alison Smith notes: "For an artist known as the quintessential Victorian visionary dreamer, it may seem something of a paradox that Burne-Jones's creations should have a hard crystalline quality. Far from being light and airy, his pictures are workman-like and solid, so that draperies have the weight and feel of stone, and flowers a precious metallic nature" (Smith 23). I would not go as far as Alison Smith, for I believe that the uniqueness of Burne-Jones's art lies precisely in this constant mingling of conflicting properties. *The Depths of the Sea* does have a "light and airy" quality at first sight. The verticality of the frame as well as the elongated position of the mermaid and of the man she is clasping, echo that of the stone columns in the background which seem to extend beyond the frame. The impression of weightlessness is further reinforced by the instable glittering depths, as well as the bubbles at the top of the picture, which direct the viewer's gaze upwards. The watery element suffuses the whole composition through the gracious curves described by the man's body and hair, the reduced palette shading off into subdued colours, and the surreal, almost diaphanous⁷ light emanating from the two figures⁸. Yet this "airiness" is perplexing: the viewer is made uneasy by the no-less intriguing smile of the enthralling mermaid, whose silvery scales are coloured in a metallic hue. And as Alison Smith suggests, all the elements of the composition are counterbalanced by something of "the weight and feel of stone". The composition of the painting is structured by a subtle balance of opposing forces. While the airy bubbles float upwards, the viewer's gaze is dragged downwards by the mermaid's clutch. Likewise, the spiralling light conveys a feeling of ensnaring which emphasises the corporeality of the drowning man.
- 7 Throughout the exhibition, the intricate intermediality of Burne-Jones's artistic practice is thus highlighted. The curators indeed chose to include William Morris's lines that accompany *The Briar Rose* series - albeit in poor lighting unfortunately.

Thanks to this, the viewer is offered a reading of the paintings: Morris's poems somehow complete the story as they invite the viewer to imagine the next panels by "smit[ing] this sleeping world awake" (Morris IX 190). The last room displays yet another intermedial example of Burne-Jones's art with the tapestry panel *Pomona*, which he designed around 1885. Here again, the panel is framed by verses written by Morris, who also designed the foliated background. Very rarely exhibited, the tapestry is first unusual because of its large dimensions and the swirling elegance of the acanthus leaves. As Suzanne Fagence Cooper explains in her article entitled "Burne-Jones as Designer", the size of the leaves was criticised at the time because they dwarfed the figure of the goddess (Smith 207). Yet the leaves also draw attention to the somewhat faded colours of the drapes, as well as to the intriguing melancholy of Pomona's face. As Morris's line suggests, Pomona seems to emerge from the mirthful plenty of acanthus leaves, as "[f]orever more a hope unseen" (Morris IX 193). Burne-Jones and Morris did revive an "unseen" subject typical of medieval weaving, just as they revived the art of tapestry.

- 8 By displaying a large number of Burne-Jones's achievements in very different media, the exhibition therefore allows the viewer to grasp the complexity and ambiguities of his art, which oscillates constantly between fleeting ethereality and incarnate fleshliness. A ramified, appealing and rich figure of Victorian England, Edward Burne-Jones is honoured in this exceptional exhibition at Tate Britain which, much like the reclining woman in the trailer's *tableau vivant* of *The Rose Bower*, who symbolically opens her eyes, invites us to take another look and brush the "dusky cobwebs"⁹ aside to delve into Burne-Jones's atemporal world of painted dreams.

NOTES

1. The trailer was directed by James Henry, with music by Tom Ashbourne, and can be found at this address: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WaS3QkZsCMU>
2. The catalogue of the exhibition explores these different periods and influences in even more detail. See especially Alison Smith in her article "Burne-Jones on Show: Exhibition Pictures, 1877-98" (Smith, Alison (ed.). *Edward Burne-Jones: Pre-Raphaelite Visionary. Catalogue of the Exhibition*. London: Tate Publishing, 2018. 124-125)
3. The letter is reproduced in the catalogue (Smith 117).
4. Burne-Jones is reported to have announced William Morris's return from Iceland in these terms: "Mr. Morris has come back more enslaved with passion for ice and snow and raw fish than ever – I fear I shall never drag him to Italy again." (Morris, May (ed.). *The Collected Works of William Morris, With an Introduction by his Daughter May Morris* (1911). 24 vols. X. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 13). I am referring to a caricature of Morris as a fat Eskimo eating raw fish in Iceland that was not on display.
5. Following his resignation from the Watercolour Society, after his 1870 picture *Phyllis and Demophoon* caused too much of a scandal due to the male nude – which Burne-Jones refused to cover up.

6. A feeling he shared with most of his friends and in particular William Morris, who wrote a long poem in the form of a morality in 1872, the title of which, *Love is Enough*, brings to the fore the importance of love.

7. To take up an adjective Walter Pater indirectly used in the title of his 1864 essay "Diaphaneité" published posthumously in 1895. In his introduction to the Oxford edition of Pater's *Studies*, Matthew Beaumont explains that Pater's dream of a "utopian society" is embodied in "the 'diaphanous' type... – innocent, transparent – [which] incarnates 'the human body in its beauty'. (...) It effects a perfect communion of body and spirit." (Beaumont xii) There is something of Pater's "diaphanous" ideal in Burne-Jones's wan figures and ambiguous use of light. The strange, otherworldly quality of Burne-Jones's characters may also echo the diaphanous type defined by Pater in "Diaphaneité" as "a relic from the classical age", with its "eternal outline of the antique", as both men shared the same passion for an idealised past. (Pater, Walter. *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 138)

8. Many pictures exemplify Burne-Jones's fascination for the materialised rendering of thin, almost impalpable materials or surfaces, such as the reflections on water of the male figures in the background of his 1882 picture *The Mill*.

9. Taken from William Morris's poem "Another for the Briar Rose", which did not appear with Burne-Jones's series, but was subsequently written and included in his 1891 collection *Poems by the Way*. (Morris IX, 191)

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