Tish Murtha

VW

Newport 1976-78

In 1976, Tish Murtha enrolled on the Documentary Photography course at Gwent College of Further Education in Newport, South Wales, led by Magnum photographer David Hurn. As one of her college assignments, Tish photographed the regulars of a pub in a deprived neighbourhood of the town. She produced images which were powerful and uncompromising, while preserving the dignity of her vulnerable subjects.

Elswick Kids. 1978

After completing her studies in Wales, Tish returned to the North East. She worked in the Elswick area of west Newcastle , a neighbourhood in decline as the shipbuilding industry collapsed. She was fascinated by the lives of children in Elswick, and concerned by their poverty and lack of opportunity. But the photographs she made there show not only deprivation, but also vitality, energy and exuberance. Elswick Kids is shown in this exhibition for the first time.

Juvenile Jazz Bands. 1979

When Tish returned to the north-east in the late 1970s, after completing the course at Newport, she was employed under a government funded scheme as Community Photographer by the Side Gallery in Newcastle.

During this period, she produced two major series, Juvenile Jazz Bands (1979) and Youth Unemployment (1980).

Children’s marching bands were an important part of life in the north east, and Tish portrayed both the ‘official’ bands and the impromptu ones which sprang up among groups of local children. Always aware of social inequities, and critical of the militaristic natures of the bands, Tish’s portrayal was not always popular locally.

Youth Unemployment. 1980

Tish’s interest in unemployed young people grew out of her own childhood experiences and an earlier project she had made in Newcastle for the housing charity Shelter. Made in west Newcastle, Youth Unemployment is probably her finest series, combining sharp social observation with a lyrical sense of place and form.

Soho/London by Night. 1983

In 1982, Tish moved to London, and was commissioned by the Photographers Gallery to produce a series for the group exhibition London by Night. She collaborated with Karen Leslie, who worked as a dancer and stripper in Soho. Karen’s text accompanied Tish’s images, and together they still stand as a powerful critique of the sex industry.

Elswick Revisited. 1987- 1991

When Tish returned to the North East in 1987, she made the series Elswick Revisited. A decade after her first photographic study of Elswick, she focussed both on cultural diversity and the rise of racism. With her commitment to social justice as strong as ever, she used her photographic practice to document the decline of the North-East and the resilience of its population. Elswick Revisited was never exhibited and was Tish’s last major photographic project.