The TISH MURTHA PROJECT

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Val Williams and Gordon MacDonald

Some two years ago, Val Williams, Gordon MacDonald and the Tish Murtha Archive came together to work on an exhibition and book project which would examine Murtha’s contribution to documentary photography in Britain in the 1970s and 80s, and which would shine a light on the work of a woman photographer whose work had become obscured by changing fashions in photography, and by the passing of time. Tish Murtha was active in documentary photography for a relatively brief period, producing, from the mid 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s, a group of powerful photo series, all of which were characterized by her own sense of social justice, combined with an uncompromising, yet deeply empathetic set of photographic methodologies.

When Tish Murtha died, in 2013, her daughter Ella began to manage the archive that Murtha had left behind, of negatives, prints and papers. This new exhibition at the photographers Gallery is a retrospective examining six major projects from the archive. Wherever possible the curators have used the vintage prints which remain , plus two sets of prints donated by the photographer to Side Gallery. Though not the entirety of her output in the 70s and 80s, these series can be seen as the creative core of her work. Tish Murtha continued to make photographs throughout her life- in this exhibition we have examined what we believe to be her most significant output.

In the Tish Murtha Archive, there is a photograph of Tish, holding a camera, standing at the top of a back lane in Newcastle. She is around nineteen years old, wearing a dark pea coat and flares. It is one of the very few photographs that exist of her working, and was taken before she left Newcastle, to study documentary photography in Newport in 1976. Her surroundings are familiar – the battered streets and vistas of declining industry were the classic backdrops to Seventies documentary realism, and within them much of post -World War II British photojournalism can be located. Tish Murtha, like many photographers of her generation, stood in the landscapes of modern ruins, of collapse and decay, some, the legacies of wartime bomb damage, others the symbol of Britain’s heavy industrial decline. But for Tish Murtha, this was more than a compelling and symbolic location- it was home ground. Out of this localness, a remarkable body of photographic work emerged.

In 1978, Murtha completed the Documentary Photography course at Newport, (founded and taught by Magnum photojournalist David Hurn) and returned to the north- east. She was appointed as Community Photographer at the Side Gallery in Newcastle, funded by the government Youth Opportunities Programme. From 1979 to 1980, she produced the series ‘Juvenile Jazz Bands’ (1979) and ‘Youth Unemployment in Elswick’ (shown at the Side Gallery in 1981). These two-series were arguably the most important of her career. Both were extensive, and the delivery of two major pieces of work in such a short time is testament to the energized photographer returning home after a stimulating and exacting education in Newport. Hurn’s course had professionalized Tish Murtha- she returned to the north east as a committed working photographer.

Tish Murtha was part of a movement of independent documentary photographers active in Britain in the Seventies and Eighties. They came into the medium not through the newsrooms of Fleet Street, but via a new system of photographic education which privileged artistic expression and documentary energy over technical expertise and ‘commercial’ photography. From being an occupation lodged uneasily somewhere between trade and art, photography began to assume a series of distinct identities, as art colleges and polytechnics began to teach critical theory, and as a system of galleries and magazines devoted to photography emerged with diverse and powerful voices. Photographers emerging in the Seventies and early Eighties were critical, politically aware and involved in a social construction of reality which made contemporary photography a more complex and sophisticated practice than it had been in the days of *Picture Post* and *Illustrated*. The new function of photography was to challenge, to explore society to pose questions and to draw conclusions. Debates emerged around photography and representation in the Seventies and Eighties which were powered by passion, politics and a hunger to describe and analyse photography itself. The act of making the photograph, of performing the role of photographer, became as important as the photograph itself. This new community, powered by innovations in photography education and by an enlightened state and regional funding system, inquired into the purpose of photography, now that its traditional markets were disappearing. Ethical questions surrounding photography were debated- who, this new community asked, has the right to photograph?

Turning away from mainstream press outlets as the classic receivers and commissioners of photographic work, critically informed photographers drew from a number of models to inform their practice. For many, community documentary photography was an ideal methodology. It implied immersive practice and social commitment, with the photographer as an agent of social change, participant not observer. Acting as insiders but with an outsider’s perspective- for instance Daniel Meadows in Barnoldswick or Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen in Byker in the northeast - became the accepted model of community photography. Tish Murtha’s work with young unemployed people in Elswick, and with Juvenile Jazz Bands in Tyneside- was both insider and outsider, as she returned to the north east with honed documentary skills, but was nevertheless self -reflective, insider practice, made in the place where she had grown up in, of people and places with which she was intimately familiar.

Contemplating Tish Murtha’s practice during the course of this project, co- curator Gordon MacDonald noted that it: *was not that of a, predominantly male, photojournalistic tradition of the time. Rather than identifying a subject to study, Murtha made her everyday experience the subject, and made work in response to her keen understanding of her surroundings.   She picked up a camera and recorded what surrounded her, and, as a natural outcome of this process, made intimate and generous studies of her family and friends. Murtha was more likely to have been part of a story, but was bright and brave enough to pursue the role of the storyteller.*

*The works seem to reflect a genuine experience, shared between the artist and subject – almost collaborations. It also manages to show joy, alongside the struggle, and represents a more textured and genuine and less exoticised document of working class life.*