

Liverpool Cityscape - Seeking out the extraordinary.

As you may be aware the city of Liverpool was the European Capital of Culture in 2008. As Colin was born and raised in Liverpool we decided to spend a weekend in August, as tourists, enjoying the sights. The showpiece of the celebrations was 'Cityscape' - a 'portrait' of Liverpool commissioned to mark this momentous year. Created by the artist Ben Johnson, supported by 11 assistants, the work was 3 years in the making with the finishing touches completed at the Walker Art Gallery with the public able to observe and interact with the artist. To see a zoomable view of the Cityscape go to:
<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/exhibitions/liverpoolcityscape/interactive/>

'Cityscape' is vast. Measuring 244 cm by 488 cm it depicts Liverpool's celebrated skyline presented from a vantage point high above the River Mersey 220 metres above sea level. The overall view comprises some 8 square kilometres of the city. Ben Johnson made repeated visits to Liverpool chasing different lighting conditions and absorbing the atmosphere, taking over 3,000 reference photos.

The initial impression is one of vastness and familiarity encompassing several thousand individual buildings with all the famous sights clearly visible – the Liver Buildings, Anfield, the Anglican and Roman Catholic cathedrals. And yet there's something slightly odd about it. Closer inspection reveals that the artist has employed a subtle distortion of perspective and geography to combine some of the city's key features. All masts, wires, scaffolding and litter have been removed. There is artistic lighting on the scene. The sun has several positions and there is consequently an ambiguous time of day contributing to the eerie stillness that bathes the city. And then it dawns on you. There are no people. The city is unpopulated.

The overall impression is one of the familiar becoming unfamiliar causing the viewer to re-engage with the city's topography. A view which you thought you knew well illuminated in a different way by the techniques of the painter.

Having gazed at the painting for some time we turned our attention to a DVD playing next to the painting featuring an interview with Ben Johnson. During the interview Johnson recalled an incident which he said he frequently recounted to others.

'Somebody once said to me, "I know you. You're Ben Johnson the painter." I replied, "Yes. I didn't realise anyone knew me". And they said, "Of course I know you, your work is extraordinary." I responded, "Thank you. That's very kind of you." Then the person said to me, "No, I didn't say I *like* the work. It's extraordinary."

Johnson concluded the interview by saying that he knew that not everyone would like his 'Cityscape' but that he hoped that everyone would see it as 'extraordinary', an opportunity to remember Liverpool or have their own view of the city reawakened, rekindled and formed. An opportunity to, 'Put the people back into the painting'.

Six months on I feel there are a lot of analogies between 'Cityscape' and real life:

How often do we meet a situation and assume it's just like a previous one that was similar? We don't notice the differences because we're so focussed on similarities and what we believe to be true.

How often does something seem so familiar that we feel we know all the answers?

Is our landscape so cluttered with our opinions and past experiences that we're not really open to new perspectives? Do we need someone to give us a different perspective?

How often do we instantly dismiss something because we don't like it?

How often do we take an instant dislike to someone and allow that to immediately cloud our judgement of all that they do?

Do we seek out the 'extraordinary' in others and in events?

Food for thought?

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