



[Democratic Promenade](#)

at the [Bluecoat](#) , Liverpool until 27 November 2011

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) October 2011

Someone in Liverpool’s art sector must be working their way through a list of nouns or adjectives and is ticking them off one by one; counting down to Year Zero. This year the word is ‘Radical’ and as part of *Liverpool City Of Radicals 2011*, the Bluecoat’s artistic director, Bryan Biggs, has overseen this exhibition which looks at how the artists engage with the radical, through their work. The exhibit draws on works from the 20th century onwards.

Admittedly the celebration of Liverpool radicals takes place a century on from three events that happened in the city: the first post-impressionist exhibition of British artists took place at the Bluecoat; the famous Liver building, a radical architectural development, was completed and Liverpool became paralysed by a transport strike, which some say was near to revolution. The work of David Jacques's work features prominently. His *Serif types* (2011), that can also be seen as a sort of *Sopas de letras*, dominates the publicity.

For the exhibition a new commission is a film of his [Irlam House Bequest](#) (If you cannot get to the exhibit you can watch the film [here](#)).

Jacques poses some interesting questions in his work, especially about myths: the creation and the necessity of them. With

*Irlam House Bequest*

, like the best mythology, there is a blurring of the lines between fiction and reality; the whole story has a plausibility about it and yet we know it is not real. What is refreshing about Jacques work is that although it is concerned with ideas and propaganda, the work itself lacks any partisanship, but this should not be seen as a lack of commitment. The standard of his work displays a strong willingness to engage with the audience. His lack of 'message' allows the viewer to take so much more from it than one would normally expect in a work of art. This is true for all his work, though

*Irlam House Bequest*

is, perhaps, his most successful work to date in the execution of that approach.

What is interesting, about Bryan Biggs's approach to the curating of this exhibition, is that he doesn't seem to confuse the idea of 'radical' with 'progressive' and the displays highlight those movements which distanced themselves from the establishment at the time.

Aside from the works by artists, the exhibition also includes examples of the radical propaganda including *Defend Your City* an anti-ring road poster from the late 1970s by Brian O'Toole. The poster seems to suggest that the Council were bulldozing communities when in fact the communities were those of the predominately Catholic population of the Scotland Road area, considered one of the worst slum areas of Britain at the time (e.g. see Jane Turner's review of Paul Trevor's [photography](#)).



Of other interest are the Smash Robots made, in the 1970s, by Ford workers at the Halewood plant. They pay homage to the Robots from the legendary [Cadbury's Smash Potato advertisements](#). The model robots were made using company resources, by workers, and sold in pubs. The end products are beautiful replicas, some looking better than the actual robots on TV.

In Gallery 2 Rose Vickers draws on the Utopian Socialists such as William Morris for her work. Delicate paper designs using socialist and trade unionist banner styles. Though one has to admire the craftsmanship of the work, the end result is so weak that it makes the sickly Romanticism of William Morris seem positively revolutionary. The blandness of the slogans: "We Make Our Own Future" or "Yesterday Is History, Tomorrow Is A Mystery"; may sadly, reflect what often passes for profound thinking these days by an increasingly detached political

elite.

Also in another section are works from some of the artists, predominately Adrian Henri. There are photos, publicity posters, handwritten poems and paintings. For me Henri was one of those people who happened to be in the right place at the right time. Like John Lennon there are many myths surrounding him and like Lennon he played the buffoon, perhaps as a way of hiding the fact that his talents were mediocre at best. Whilst poets like Brian Patten and Roger McGough got on with the work of being poets and, especially in the case of the former, produced some worthy poetry, you get the impression that if Henri exhibited some of his used toilet paper it would have met with approval.

His influences were the French Symbolist school of poetry and surrealist art and although he attempted to ape the American Beat poets he never quite matched the energy of their writings. He took to T S Elliot's dictum about writing for one's tribe, but whereas Elliot's tribe were the highbrow literati, Henri claimed his homage was to the ordinary people of Liverpool. But rather than produce anything of real value, I feel that the majority of Henri's work was just spontaneous trash, much of which is on display at this exhibition. I think that Henri was aware of his limitations and whilst he condemned McGough and Patten for appealing to the 'London scene', truth is that he would have been exposed as a charlatan had he attempted to move away from the cosiness of the radical sixties Liverpool. That is not to say that Henri's work does not have a place in this exhibition. Much of the displays of the radical sixties and seventies local movements are amateurish at best, and was carried over to the early eighties, as can be seen in the works of Graham Williams and Brian O'Toole.

