



Clare Allan: Burnt Wood and Paper
at **The Portico Library** , Moseley Street

Reviewed by [Simon Belt](#) **November 2012**

I first saw [Clare Allan](#) 's fabulous drawings earlier this year at the opening exhibition of the [Spring Bank Arts](#)

Centre in her native New Mills, Derbyshire. Clare's talent for drawing what she feels rather than literally sees, expresses

warmth and grit

, grandeur yet grounding, so that her subject's personality talks to us more than her technique.

Indeed, the title of this exhibition, ***Burnt wood and Paper***, typically understates Clare's delightful technique of focussing the viewer's mind on the content of the matter rather than its form. Not long after seeing her pictures, especially the ones of New Mills and surrounding locations in the High Peak, she took the headline spot in the town's Art Trail as part of its annual festival. Perhaps one of the strongest artists in the New Mills Art Trail this year, Clare does represent an unusually high concentration of visual artists in the High Peak, including

[Louise Jannetta](#)

working out of Buxton. Perhaps the breadth of local competition is working to push Clare's

imagination and technique, in a similar way that Hebden Bridge does to push the many writers based there.

The Portico Library strikes me as a very natural home for an exhibition of Clare Allan's work in Manchester. The Portico was built in 1806, after a meeting by a small group of Manchester businessmen in 1802 resolved to found an '***institute uniting the advantages of a newsroom and a library***', and established as a private subscription library, which it remains today. The library was designed by Tomas Harrison as the first Greek Revival building in the city, clearly taking its name from the Italian portico, meaning a colonnade porch - this one being the tetrastyle with its four columns, typically used by the Greeks and the Etruscans for small structure public buildings.



Most people who walk past the imposing and elegant building, or indeed have frequented the **Bank Pub**

on Moseley Street, through the portico entrance downstairs, will not know of the library upstairs. The pub took over from the Bank of Athens which leased the downstairs division, created in 1920 by adding a ceiling to help sustain the library financially, which ever since has occupied the first floor, and is accessed from a side entrance on Charlotte Street. Although not in your face as a public building, The Portico Library has had some illustrious historical figures associated with it, perhaps best known of which would be

Peter Mark Roget

, who began his famous

Thesaurus

at the Portico.

So why is The Portico Library a natural home for an exhibition of Clare Allan's drawings when it is clearly organised around words? Clearly not at the philistine end of life in and around Manchester, the library has a long history of promoting wider artistic expressions, alongside the promotion of literary endeavours, but its more the **embedded history of industrial achievement**

that makes the fit so perfect for me. The library's tightly packed collection, creaking floorboards, leather-backed chairs and [stunning glass dome](#)

takes you right back to 19th-century Manchester, yet in a delightfully peaceful way and with some heartfelt romance evoking the spirit of industrial growth.

For example, Clare's picture here of **Albert Square (after Valette)** captures the mood of Victorian Manchester and the neogothic architecture of the Town Hall. It also captures the tenderness and intimacy of Valette, drawing it from the same vantage point that he drew his original in 1910, yet giving it a more optimistic and vibrant feel. Clare's cityscapes of Manchester owe a great debt to [Adolph](#)

[e Valette \(1876 - 1942\)](#)

, who indeed inspired her ever since she visited the

[City Art Gallery](#)

as a child with my father, and was struck by Valette's large smoky paintings of Manchester. A few of her pictures come from revisiting some of the locations of his cityscapes, where she tries to find the exact spot Valette once stood, and attempt to interpret the iconic views again, seeing

how they have changed since his time. The girl on the bike, cycling against the one-way city centre traffic ensures we are definitely having a conversation with the subject of the moment rather than simply rehashing what has been. This is an example of the romance and spirit of ambition and adventure I see in Clare's pictures.



This appreciation for the hard work, grit and industry of the subject of much of Clare Allan's pictures, dovetails with the earnest hard work of an intellectual and practical character that surely must have gone into develop such fine drawings. Trained in printmaking at Hull (BA in Fine Art, 1991), Clare consistently makes a point of saying that she draws from life, from what she sees in front of her in the simplest way possible, capturing the feeling of the places she draws, places with stories and histories that are part of her daily life. This is not the emotionally dull '**feeling**' work of Tracey Emin's unmade bed, but a highly refined and well constructed piece of art that brings out our feelings when thinking about our contextual relationship to industrial history. Capturing the essence of the skilled calico printers of her home town, she says she 'likes the **directness of charcoal** drawing, the connection of hand, eye and paper...

enjoying the simplicity it brings'. ; no complicated equipment, just some paper and burnt wood.

There is a strong showing of figurative drawings in Clare's catalogue, but it is **New Mills** and the surrounding area that form the majority of her work to date. These landscapes and townscapes feature scenes reflecting many Northern town and country settings, and the hills beyond the rooftops along the Pennines. Maybe I'm biased living in sunny New Mills, but I find these pictures really do capture the straight-forward and grounded experience of life in this part of Derbyshire. The road down and up to the Swizzles Matlow factory in

Swizzles hill

has a rather dark satanic mill feel about it, though lacks the overbearing drudgery of a Lowry, reflecting a better working and living experience in such areas.

Again, there may be a tendency to have a **romantic view of life** in small Northern towns, especially as a sense of disappointment with city life and recessionary trends impact to encourage a retreat to simpler and cheaper lives around the periphery. There may be an old toll-road collection point, but their return is far more likely in Manchester than outlying towns. So is it nostalgia for a rural idyll that gives these drawings such purchase and allows them to talk so directly to the zeitgeist? They certainly do have a warmer feel about them in contrast to the bleaker Valette and Lowry takes on the subjects.



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