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'England's most closely guarded secret'

Dennis Creffield is admired by artists but little known to the wider public. *Andrew Lambirth* meets this octogenarian artist as his new show on the theme of William Blake and Jerusalem opens

I'm a peripatetic architectural draughtsman,' says Dennis Creffield, best known for his magnificent series of charcoal drawings of the medieval English cathedrals, commissioned in 1987 by the Arts Council. He has indeed travelled the country, drawing not only cathedrals but also Welsh and English castles, the pagodas of Orford Ness in Suffolk (laboratories that were used for testing the trigger mechanisms of atomic bombs), the stately pile of Petworth House in Sussex, and many aspects of London. He has also drawn and painted people, the living as well as the dead (Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth I, Mozart), and done his fair share of landscape painting. But it is with dramatic, expressive charcoal drawing that his name is most often associated.

Creffield was born in south London 80 years ago, and studied with David Bomberg at the Borough Polytechnic from 1948 to 1951. He was only 17 when he started with Bomberg, one of the most charismatic and influential teachers of the century, and the experience was transforming. (Among Bomberg's other students were Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff.) Creffield's liking for charcoal was nurtured in Bomberg's classes, as was his ability to perceive what Bomberg called 'the spirit in the mass'. Creffield became a member of the Borough Group, whose aim was to promote Bomberg's work through exhibitions and his principles by example. Creffield later went on to study at the Slade where he was a prize-winner, becoming in due course an effective teacher himself and a substantial artist in his own right. He has had more than 20 solo exhibitions in the past 45 years, and his work is in public and private collections worldwide.

His latest exhibition is called *Dennis Creffield. Jerusalem* and runs until 8 October at James Hyman Fine Art in Savile Row, W1. Hyman himself was the prime mover in this new body of Creffield's work. The exhibition really springs from a convivial lunch in 2007, and a conversation between artist and dealer in which Hyman proposed an exhibition with the theme of Jerusalem and William Blake. The work has been four years in the making, and brings together a very early drawing made prophetically in 1948, others

done in 1993, paintings from 1994 and 1999, with the more recent commissioned material. The exhibition thus has something of a retrospective feel, but only to the extent of identifying a particular line of interest that has run through Creffield's career. Most of the work is new, and wonderfully vibrant and inventive.

'It was very difficult to find my way into the subject,' recalls Creffield. 'I went up all sorts of wrong alleyways.' To get himself started, he bought a cast of Blake's life mask from the National Portrait Gallery, and this assumed an increasingly important role, becoming 'my main channel of communication and inspiration with him'. Although the heads he subsequently painted of Blake tended to emerge in bursts of creativity, Creffield established with this cast what amounted to 'a daily conversation through the act of drawing'. He entered into a sort of mystical communion with it, in which he feels he became a conduit for Blake's spirit; the resulting portraits of Blake were 'allowed

'I allowed Blake to encourage me to be more wild'

to happen'. Wryly, Creffield acknowledges the difficulty of Blake's vision: 'In order to understand it you have to become a bit deranged yourself.'

In 1948, when Creffield made the earliest work in this exhibition, a charcoal drawing of King David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant, he was studying with Bomberg and the first Israeli-Arab war was taking place. He still doesn't know quite why he chose that subject, but it lit a trail of thought and feeling that was only to find its proper conclusion in this exhibition. Creffield is a committed celebrator, a positive force among the often negative impulses of today's art world. This can be seen in the lyrical drawings of Jerusalem made on his first visit there in 1993, and in his interpretations of the city at sunrise in oil paint, made on a subsequent stay in 1994. These earlier works form the bedrock for the more visionary drawings and paintings that have recently preoccupied him.

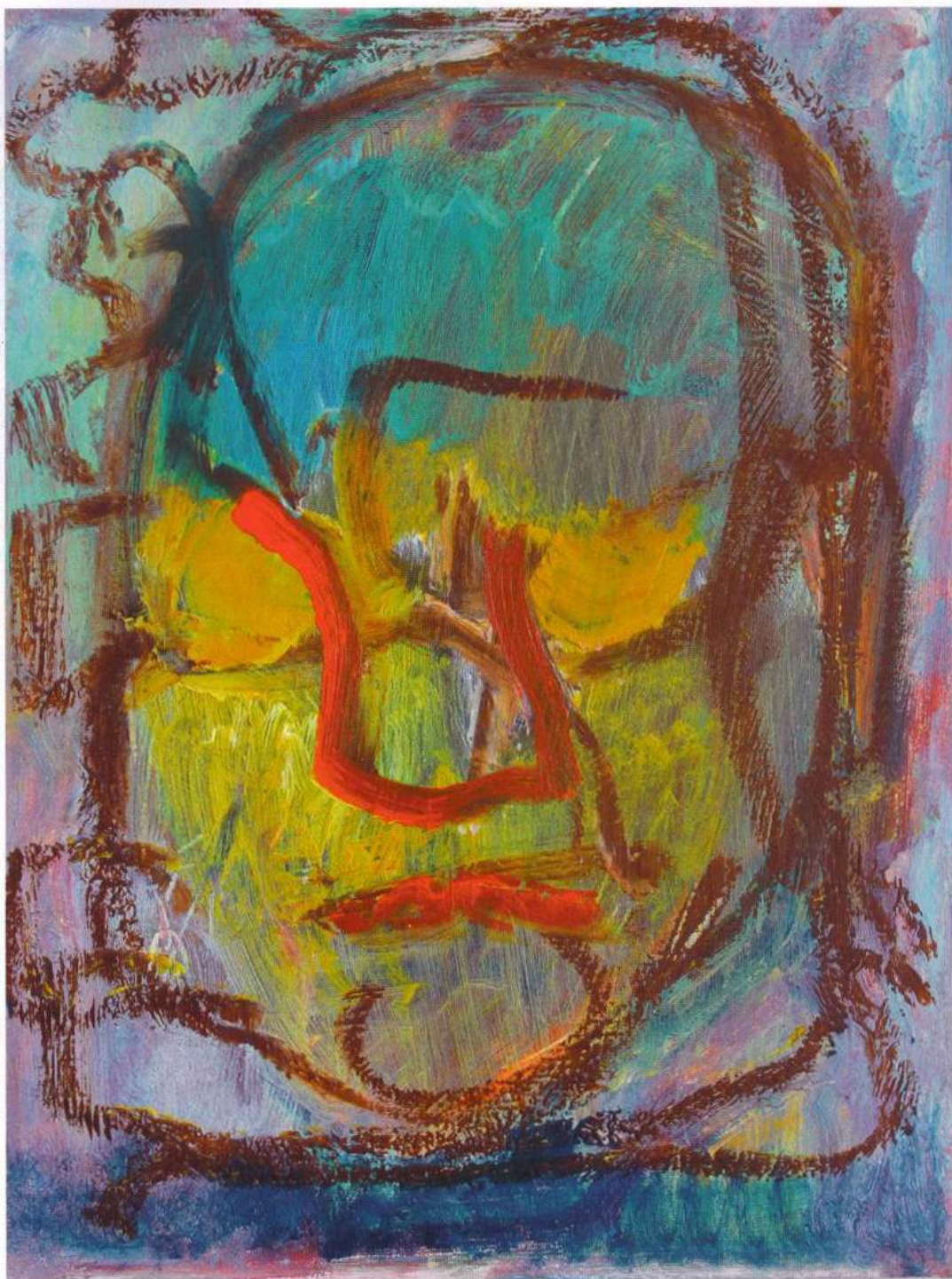
He recognises the challenge: 'The prob-

lem is that Jerusalem is more than a city, it is the spiritual home for Jews and Christians and a very important place to Muslims. It is both an actual place but also a part of their faith, imagination and dreams — dreams of the past and even hopes of the future. Devout believers of the three religions are buried in the Kidron Valley which they believe will be the site of the Last Judgment. . . . For the ordinary Christian it is not only the place of Jesus's death and resurrection but also "The Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2).'

Creffield's task was to interpret Jerusalem the actual place and symbol in parallel with Blake's exposition in the prophetic books. As he puts it: 'Blake's vision of Jerusalem contains all of this but he presents it to us as the London of his time — a brutalised suffering city place — Albion/London. His imagery is personal and esoteric and difficult to understand but it is clear that the message of the poem is that we must all forgive and love each — "for all that lives is holy" — inextinguishable hope of a New Jerusalem.'

From such complex sources, Creffield has distilled an art of rare presence and power. The drawings are immediate in their impact, the paintings unfold more gradually and deserve time spent in looking. The group of 27 small paintings of Blake, from an extended series of improvisations on the life cast, are arranged on the facing wall of the smaller room of Hyman's gallery in a potent group intended to echo an iconostasis in the Greek Orthodox Church. This immensely varied group, which ranges formally from abstraction to representation, from a simple outlined container like a jug, to a more recognisable evocation of Blake's features, offers a gamut of emotional expression, from the mute and glowering to the sorrowful or serene. The broadly swiped charcoal drawings of Blake's head take this investigation further still, at least one transcription recalling the features of the painter Francis Bacon. (It will be remembered that Bacon, too, was drawn to Blake's life mask and made several paintings from it.)

'Improvisation on the Life Cast of William Blake (5)', 2007-10, by Dennis Creffield



© DENNIS CREFFIELD. COURTESY OF JAMES HYMAN FINE ART, LONDON

The great dome of Blake's forehead is, as Hyman points out, neatly echoed in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and Wren's magnificent dome of St Paul's Cathedral. So are the various strands of this exhibition brought together and interwoven. Creffield moves easily from the literal to the metaphorical: from women with arms uplifted in attitudes of prayer, to the city as bride, angels dancing or Jerusalem in the form of a married couple. The word Jerusalem appears in Hebrew script here and there — 'it's the first time I've used any calligraphy in my work' — but the quality that comes across most strongly is the crackle of energy, both physi-

cal and spiritual. These images vibrate with life. As Creffield admits, 'I allowed Blake to encourage me to be more wild.' Has the draughtsman finally turned into a visionary himself?

Meanwhile, in south London, another project is stirring. The collector Sarah Rose is a passionate enthusiast for Bomberg and his Borough Group. She has now decided to give her collection, which includes paintings and drawings by the master, as well as by Creffield, Cliff Holden (born 1919), Miles Richmond (1922-2008) and Dorothy Mead (1928-75), to the University of the South Bank, situated in Borough Road, SE1. Cre-

ffield is delighted by the appropriateness of this: the Borough Polytechnic sheltered Bomberg in the 1940s and 50s when he was unfashionable, and now it once again opens its doors when he is internationally famous and respected. A special display will be unveiled in 2012 to give local point and focus to this historic artistic alliance.

The distinguished American painter R.B. Kitaj once described Dennis Creffield as 'England's most closely guarded secret'. With this remarkable new exhibition, and the forthcoming Borough Group display, he should finally become securely lodged in the art public's consciousness.