

Alicia Bruce: *Encore*

1 May – 29 May 2013

Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama

Encore is an ideal exhibition for the format of the Diffusion Festival, with themes of performance, community and inter-generational connections slotting neatly into the venue of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. A short walk down the corridor from the exhibition offers a glimpse of the creative world of the students in the form of stage costumes, paintings and posters for plays, refusing a clear boundary between the practice of Bruce, her subjects and the college.

The exhibition consists of two sets of portraits, both of musicians and both taken during Bruce's residency in the town of Blanaevon. The teenage musicians have been photographed in a pose imitative of the James Ward painting [*A Young Man*](#) (1851). Is Bruce using a younger art form to look backwards, or bringing ideas from the past forward? Should we consider her borrowing of this image an act of inspiration or adaptation?

Encore resembles Bruce's work on the residents of Menie Estate in its examination of a community's way of life through a framework of referencing older works. The use of *A Young Man* as a mould raises questions about authorship and originality in her choice of form, although in the clear, bright faces of the Blaenavon musicians there's a strong sense of who they are, and of Bruce's ability and affection for the community.

There's perhaps a sense of cynicism in *Encore* about the very idea of representing a community like Blanaevon through portraiture. By referring back to the same painting in each portrait the question is raised of whether identities, locations and cultures are compromised by photographic representations, and we're led to consider the limits of the medium's representative capabilities.

But the artificiality of this technique is mostly used to celebratory effect, allowing the subjects to display their love of performance in a manner that works in a visual medium, and picks this out as a cohesive theme crossing generations and responding to history.

As her subjects imitate *A Young Man*, Bruce accompanies them in imitation of James Ward. This sense of empathy between artists working in different mediums is one of many exciting themes throughout the festival that encourage audiences to reconsider the mutable boundaries of photography. It is an accessible approach to this question and as May goes on, it'll be great to see these ideas debated on Twitter and Facebook.

For anyone especially interested by Bruce's reference to Ward, the exhibition is only a short walk away from The National Museum and Art Gallery, which is just across the road and provides alternative historical contexts for enjoying *Encore*. I'd particularly recommend the exhibition 'People, Personalities and Power: Faces from Wales 1800 - 2000'

Ariane Parry