



A chance meeting with Tim Smit at a charity auction led to the brilliant contribution of Paul McGowan becoming artist in residence at Eden and the appearance of his vibrant paintings in the Mediterranean Biome. On previous visits to Eden with his family Paul had been impressed, without feeling the need to commit to a whole year of expressive imagery – until of course he fell into conversation with Tim.

He was inspired by the education programmes at Eden and began work in a purpose-built shed – a third of the size of his Bath studio – to create the work called ‘Living on the Edge’ which was shown in the Mediterranean Biome until December 2008.

This work confronted issues about diverse species which live on the edge of existence; an existence that is controlled by us – we are all culpable. Mixed in with these abstract wildlife paintings were images of abstract mask paintings, pieced together from anatomical elements of extinct or endangered animals. The paintings reflect our awareness and feelings of guilt and responsibility. They are a riot of colour and can be appreciated for their raw energy and vibrancy in the height of summer, but especially on a cold November day.

Paul explains: ‘By painting the masks in a very minimal but aggressive manner, I was attempting to infuse the direct power of raw tribal art with a sense of contemporary graffiti. Very simple, very direct and open to interpretation, I wanted people to find their own way around and I wanted people to find something profound.’

This sentiment will also apply to the new work coming in Spring 2009. With a working title at the moment of ‘Entrances and Exits (The Antechamber)’ this installation is about life and death, or to put it more lightly about walking into a room by one door and walking out by another.

This piece, which will be of mixed media and 3D work, will be constantly evolving with time, with dark beginnings and then brighter futures. He hopes to work with schoolchildren to paint individual large pictures which will make a massive collage for the rock face in the Outdoor Biome. These are very ambitious plans and we will bring you news of how the work is progressing throughout the coming season.

Paul comments: ‘By bringing together a group of artists from different disciplines I am taking on the role of a creative director as well as artist with this piece. I am looking to infuse different skills and work practices. The work will bring darkness to Eden at a time that’s about light. Examining the troubled human psyche along an unpredictable path. The work will echo the traces of a destructive human presence. Aware of the human condition.

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The mystery, the misery. Fragile and unstable, Isolation and alienation. The antechamber.

‘This will be one of my last works concerning urban society for some years. I have decided to look at a larger landscape of concern. Hopefully I will be able to go on the next Cape Farewell trip and my work will then take on a different set of implications. Something bigger than just analysing what we have done or who we are.’

Paul has an infectious enthusiasm about his work; he whirls into the office and is so passionate about what he wants to achieve and how we will help him realise his vision. In his first installation he had a vision of flying triptychs – a first for Eden – but we have the skills in our team and we made it happen! In the meantime, as well as preparing for the next installation, he will also be working with Chris Stocker on designs for t-shirts and says, ‘The designs will be challenging. They will question the way we live, remaining open to interpretation.’

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