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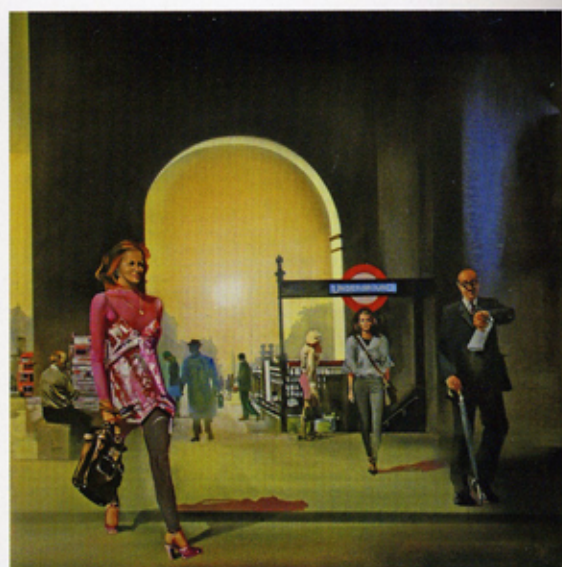
Mike Francis

At Messum's



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MIKE FRANCIS

Veteran photo-realist painter Mike Francis (b. 1938) is known for his glossy, highly-finished pictures of women in ambiguous, often erotically-charged situations. His choice of titles, with their references to song lyrics, double entendre, popular idiom and East-End slang, add to the sense that while everything appears clear on the surface, all may not be exactly how it seems.

above: 'We Never Closed', acrylic on canvas, 101.8 x 76.5 cm

top right: 'Rush Hour, Piccadilly Circus', acrylic on canvas, 92 x 92 cm

right: 'Catch of the Day', acrylic on canvas, 76.2 x 61 cm

opposite page: 'The Gardeners', acrylic on canvas, 101.5 x 127 cm

His is a profoundly contemporary imagination, but his technique is deeply rooted in the Old Masters. While sketches along with photographs may help in the composition of some of his works, he is not a great fan of the airbrush and his studio is littered with the traditional array of brushes, sticks, rags and sponges. He finds the painterly process itself very satisfying, "...especially on large canvases dancing around using a brush like a fencer, thrusting and parrying: 'Touchez!'". Nonetheless, few traces of this process are left visible on the canvases themselves, freeing the viewer to engage with the images without concern for what the artist may have intended us to think.

A number of the paintings were inspired by Francis' memories of life in Soho and Covent Garden in the late

Fifties and Sixties. At that time he was working for a commercial art studio in Denman Street, first of all as a runner. However, his evident enthusiasm, talent and hard work meant that in a very few years he was producing images for the agency on his own account. Many of his weekends were spent at the Tate Gallery on Millbank, at the National Gallery and the Wallace Collection. He studied the works he found there, built a fine art portfolio, and developed a taste for the contemporary French school—the work of Dubuffet and Bernard Buffet being particular favourites. He was later to exhibit work in an important group show at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1977.

Francis looks back on those days in Soho with nostalgia, and a number of his present works are

informed by sketches, photographs and other memorabilia of that vibrant period. He made "...life long friends in pubs, the Lyric, the White Hart and 'The French'". He met Francis Bacon, who once bought him and his friends a bottle of champagne, and he got to know a colourful array of the locals: 'Iron-Foot Jack', Rosie and Billy 'River King' Catchpole, who appears in one of the paintings — "street poets and buskers, all gentle souls". 'Sam the Tramp' appears in *We Never Closed*—one of a number of works that are dreamlike in their intensity, set in the environs of the old Windmill Theatre.

Some of these old haunts are now boarded up and for Francis, and many others of his generation, they house ghosts from the past. In *You don't mess with John's daughter*, he revives on canvas the Tinley Hall Park Dairy, known as 'John's'—a cheap eating place frequented by many of his fellow-artists, along with a

cross-section of the locals including builders, workmen, and budding starlets. John's daughter was an object of desire for all of them, and in *You don't mess with John's daughter* the passage of years and the filter of the artist's memory has bestowed on her a degree of glamour worthy of a Hollywood film star. How real, then, is the reality reconstructed in Francis's canvases? The slick surfaces bring together past with present, memory and allusion with observable reality in a number of fascinating, amusing, and thought-provoking ways.

Mike Francis' exhibition runs 25 June – 12 July at Messum's, 8 Cork Street, London W1S 3LJ. Tel: +44 (0)20 7437 5545 www.messums.com

