

Francis's tale of two cities: the West End, real and imagined

MIKE FRANCIS

MESSUM'S

by JAMIE WELHAM

THE paintings of veteran photo-realist Mike Francis are a sight to behold. With his glossy depictions of West End streetscapes complete with the waifs and strays of 1950s and 1960s London, they function as an exploration of the urban psyche.

A schizophrenic flaneur-like existence where the streets offer everything and nothing – a gift and a curse.

The subjects range from street poets to buskers, honest souls to city gals. But all are treated with the hearty dose of sympathy to be expected from a man who worked in the area for 20 years.

And with the odd flash of flesh on show, sex trade crusaders will be forced to remind themselves that in 60 years not all that much has changed in Soho.

Combine the characters with the esoteric titles – a melange of idiom, East-End slang and song lyrics, and the glossy flourish of the brush – and you get the feeling that things might not be all they seem.

If the city is a canvas then Francis is painting a canvas of a canvas. Confused? Just ask the question: How real then is the reality reconstructed in his canvases?

That is the beauty of Francis's works – they blur the boundary between the real and imagined to the point where they become indistinguishable. Plunge head-first into the fantasy world and play ghost-hunter.

■ Mike Francis is at Messum's, 8 Cork Street, W1, until July 12



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