

Once upon a time there was a man

HELEN NORTON

New Collectables Gallery

Reviewed by Geoff Vivian

Most of you will have seen *Newsman*, the image on our November front cover. A tortured and world weary soul lies exhausted in his prison cell, while a hungry hound looks in at the barred window. How many of you, though, realised that it was a humorous portrait of our beloved ABC news reader, Peter Holland?

The painting was a good indicator of the exhibition's theme.

Norton has chosen not to pursue her preoccupation with life in the North West, concentrating instead on a theme that she has hinted at in earlier shows. It is difficult to sum up in words, but it has to do with the way in which, as children, we gradually learn of the hard realities of adult life. (Can you remember the first time you realised that politicians lie, for example, or that animals are killed for food?) How then, as adults and as artists, do we maintain our integrity, and our sense of wonder, in the face of all of this?

Norton has managed to achieve this by using her child's eye to focus on adult life and institutions.

Angel and the Naughty Man, for example, has a worried looking angel trying to protect a tulip patch from a mocking, cynical figure who has already picked a clump, and doesn't care. It's just the sort of thing that the naughty kids used to do at school, and that the good kids were powerless to stop without calling on adult intervention. In adult life, it still goes on, and once again it is hard to find a parent or teacher to stop the naughty men who uproot and take what is dear to most of us.

Apart from the lack of pindan red, the Norton style hasn't changed. Her colourful, figurative style seems almost naive, until you look at the structure of her figures. All of their limbs bend in the right places and so on, but she has exaggerated certain parts of the body, the parts that her subjects are feeling at the moment, to achieve a sort of tactile realism.

In *Man Painting Flowers*, for example, a little man in overalls is painting a living flower with a small brush. One of his ears is disproportionately large, giving the impression that he is listening intently. Perhaps he is worried that his deception will be discovered, so he is listening for footsteps.

My favourites were a pair that deal with the childhood problem of God's gender and marital status. The bearded patriarch of our Scripture lessons was obviously male, and respectable adults were all married, so what does Mrs God look like?

Helen Norton answers the question well. She is an elderly lady in a cotton frock and farmer's hat, who spends her time making toys for children and drinking tea with the CWA ladies.