

10.07.2015 — Review

The Unspeakable Freedom Device

Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool

by Bob Dickinson

Entering the Grundy, the writing is literally on the wall: “HEAR GET WYSDOM OF THE 3 GREAT WAIES/THEYRE MAGICS/THEYRE POWER/THEYRE POLICIES/DECYDE FUR YERSELF FROM WHOM TO TAKE THE FEED”. These words are especially relevant to the people of Blackpool, who have had to wait a while to see them, due to a political intervention that caused some consternation in the art press. Last autumn, the local council saw fit to delay this exhibition on the grounds that it might have an influence on the way people would vote in May 2015’s General Election. The council were stretching somewhat the terms of a “purdah” regulation, normally enforceable only up to six weeks before an election.

The problem is, Blackpool is not a “normal” kind of place. Its Winter Gardens venue has been the historic setting for many a party political conference over the years, several of which included star appearances for the Conservatives by Margaret Thatcher. And hereby hangs the tale of The Unspeakable Freedom Device.

The show combines a film with a series of multimedia installations. The film is a neo-medieval science fiction tale concerning two women, Mary and Glenda, who make a pilgrimage to Blupool, which viewers will recognise as the town where the Grundy Art Gallery is located. In the film’s dystopian vision of the future, ordinary people have been reduced to peasants, controlled by implanted devices, manipulated by a strange blue man who watches what everyone is up to on a screen. According to him, “everything had pattern exhaustion”. According to Glenda, there has been a “colour war”. Evidently, big things have happened and something even bigger is coming.

Mary has a pushchair, containing a box that cries like a baby. She says it “was the wrong colour” and in danger of going Green. Metaphor kicks in. Glenda, her more experienced companion, is permanently suspicious of everyone they encounter, but her compassion gets them to their destination, thanks to the acquisition of a “Blue Lady”, a little doll about which Mary becomes obsessed. And the Blue Lady is of course a miniature Margaret Thatcher, a toy that works like a religious icon, uttering extracts from the Lady’s most famous speeches. Mary’s song, “Show me something clear, show me something clean...” anticipates what the two women will encounter in Blupool.

Once they get inside the Winter Gardens, each disguised in a blue wig and blue striped headscarf, Mary and Glenda become part of the Thatcherite crowd, soon to encounter the blue man’s latest grotesque invention. Resembling a floating, morphing head of the Blue Lady, it is the Device’s ultimate upgrade. But Glenda, a secret follower of Red, is planning a Showdown.

The Unspeakable Freedom Device mixes unmistakable Blackpool locations with dialogue and a storyline that by the artist’s own admission owe much to Russell Hoban’s novel *Riddley Walker* (published 1980) as well as John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (published 1678), all accentuated by lilting, folk-like music. The installations in the Grundy’s adjacent ground floor galleries include Thatcher masks, spherical objects made of political rosettes, and vibrantly clashing squares of red, green and blue. So does this artwork contain some kind of political bias? The fact that its central element, the film, is clearly an allegorical fantasy renders the question irrelevant. But it’s also much cleverer than a piece of political propaganda. That’s why it’s in an art gallery.

This year’s Conservative Party Conference takes place in Manchester. Blackpool’s Winter Gardens has not hosted a major party conference since 2007 – although later this year a more modest venue in the town will host the annual conference of the Monster Raving Loony Party. In May 2015, Blackpool’s two constituencies re-elected their previous MPs, Tory to the North and Labour in the South. With all its economic woes, social deprivation, cheap kitsch, and political heavy-handedness, Blackpool tells you just as much about England today as Blupool.

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Image courtesy Grundy Art Gallery.

The Unspeakable Freedom Device, Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool.

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