

Darren Banks

The Raven

4 December 2014 — 26 April 2015

Exhibition guide

Churton Fairman (1924–1997)



Churton Fairman
Courtesy Mandy Fairman-Dick

Austin Churton Fairman was born in London in 1924, the son of actors Austin Fairman and Hilda Moore. His parents' marriage broke down and his father left to go to America to pursue a career as a matinee idol. His mother later followed with Churton, hoping to rekindle their relationship, however died after catching a fever from her young son, which also killed his nanny. Churton recovered and was eventually taken back to England and brought up by his three aunts. Churton spent a few years at the Dane Court school, well known for rehabilitating troubled children. His fellow pupil was Lucian Freud, though the two did not see eye to eye, and Churton reportedly

stabbed Freud in the hand with a pen knife! Churton then attended the Aldenham Public School in Hertfordshire, before going on to Magdalen College, Oxford, where his studies were interrupted by the Second World War.

Having been enthralled after seeing his first ballet and trying to escape an imminent call up, he joined the Ballet Rambert as they were short of male dancers, until he was eventually conscripted to serve in the Royal Ulster Rifles. Following his spell in the army he became too tall to return to dance so turned his hand to photography, illustrating Honor Frost's *How a Ballet is Made* of 1948.

In 1949 Fairman married his first wife, Aurelia Pascual y Perez, who had come to Britain as a refugee from the Spanish Civil War. They returned to her homeland, which inspired Fairman's 1952 book *Another Spain*, his account of Spain's undiscovered countryside. The couple had four children together.

On his return to London in the late 1950s Fairman worked in theatre for HM Tennent Ltd. Having known Peter Brook from their time at Oxford together he worked as a musician and under stage manager for his Shakespearian productions. Fairman then became a production manager for early ITV drama programmes, which

provided him with a stable income to bring up his young family.

In the 1960s he became a pirate radio dj on the stations *Atlanta* and *Radio King* (which became 390) where he co-presented the Breakfast Show with his second wife, Mandy Kilbey. Fairman adopted the pseudonym of Mike Raven, a shorter, snappier and less cumbersome name, much in the same way as John Peel had, somewhat ironically, changed his name from John Ravenscroft. In 1967, alongside Peel, he joined Radio One and was one of the first broadcasters on its launch day. Fairman presented *The Mike Raven Blues Show* in a two-hour slot on Sunday evenings, bringing American Deep South Blues to a British audience for the first time, and was influential in the Northern Soul movement of the 1970s. During this time, due to his interest in religion, he also became the presenter on the religious series' *Ten Commandments* and *Songs That Matter* for ITV.

Fairman always dressed in black and had an interest in the occult. This enthusiasm led him to become a horror movie actor and he starred in several films, which explored this side of his character, including *Crucible of Terror*, 1971, about an obsessed sculptor who kills young women turning them into bronze statues; the Hammer horror *Lust*

for a Vampire (apparently chosen for the part to try to attract a more teenage fan base); and Amicus Productions *I Monster*, an adaptation of the Jekyll and Hyde story also starring Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee.

Fairman boldly decided to leave his successful career in London and moved to Cornwall in the 1970s. In 1977 he, Mandy, and their two young sons moved to rural Bodmin Moor and with no previous experience he began a career as a sheep farmer. It was aged 50 that he took up sculpture, producing carvings in both wood and stone. Self taught, he produced competent and unusual depictions of religious themes for the next 20 years.

Fairman felt that his sculpture was borne from unsuccessful attempts to live up to his Catholic and Jungian beliefs and trying to come to terms with his own sexuality. The sculptures provoked much interest during his lifetime, but were sometimes deemed controversial in their depictions of men and women in biblical passages such as *Peniel* his interpretation of Jacob wrestling with the Angel.

The role of women was important in his work. *If man and woman are to play equal and complementary parts in the world then room must be found for both of them on the Cross.* This is evident in *Consummatum Est*

(in the display case in the Garman Ryan Main Hall) where the Christ figure assumes the characteristics of both sexes, as he felt only through the total integration of both male and female elements could an individual have complete fulfillment.

Fairman was influenced by leading early 20th century British sculptors Jacob Epstein and Henry Moore. In *The Deposition from the Cross* Fairman depicts the physical effort of detaching and lowering the dead body of Christ from the cross. This woodcarving from 1989 was exhibited in *Images of Christ: Religious Iconography in 20th Century British Art* at Northampton Museum and Art Gallery and St Paul's Cathedral, London in 1993 alongside work by Epstein, Moore and Graham Sutherland, known for exploring religious themes in their work.

Fairman's family wished to donate this work to The New Art Gallery Walsall Permanent Collection in recognition of his life and work, to be kept for posterity in a collection known for its sculpture and relationship with Jacob Epstein, an important sculptor of religious iconography. *The Deposition from the Cross* is on display for the first time in our Religion room during this exhibition, alongside complementary works on paper by Epstein.

Darren Banks (b.1978)

Contemporary British artist Darren Banks recently discovered he had a family connection to Churton Fairman; his mother being the cousin of Churton's widow Mandy.

Banks' artistic practice explores the relationship between film and sculpture, thus Fairman's life as both a horror actor and woodcarver intrigued him and has provided insightful material which has enabled him to revisit Fairman's practice from a contemporary perspective and create a new body of work.

At The New Art Gallery Walsall, due to the nature of our collections, it is our mission to build links between historic and contemporary art, and make both accessible to the public audience. To coincide with the donation of a sculpture by



Churton Fairman, *The Deposition from the Cross*, 1989,
Courtesy Mandy Fairman-Dick



Darren Banks, *Jump Shot*, 2013, film still
Courtesy the artist

Churton Fairman to our Permanent Collection we have therefore invited Darren Banks to create a new installation in the Garman Ryan temporary exhibition space.

The Raven draws from aspects of Fairman's own personal history, and incorporates found material and ephemera alongside original sculptures by Fairman (such as *Anima Mea/Hermaphrodite*), and works from our collections, alongside Banks' contemporary video works, which all explore the themes in Fairman's eclectic life, from dance and radio, to religion and rural life.

The Raven questions the value we place on objects, by assembling domestic and everyday materials such as a turntable, record case and posture stool, within

a formal sculptural tradition and museum environment.

Fairman's large *Sacrifice* sculpture is placed on Epstein's studio stool, creating a totemic structure which pays homage to Epstein's famed Vorticist sculpture *The Rock Drill*, and appearing as a sacrificial alter, in-keeping with Fairman's interest in the occult. Hanging alongside is the poster for the fellow Vorticist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's film biopic by Ken Russell, *Savage Messiah*, which also depicts a man wielding a drill.

Religion / Illustration and Symbolism rooms

Banks has in addition selected the works on display in the adjoining themed Garman Ryan rooms. In the Religion room Fairman's sculpture *The Deposition from the Cross* sits alongside works on paper by Jacob Epstein, a photograph of Epstein's studio by Geoffrey Ireland, a woodcut by Durer and a Rembrandt etching, amongst others. The works in this room focus on the narrative of the death of Christ, the struggle of life, and the juxtaposition of good and evil. In the Illustration and Symbolism room there are images referencing the body, alluding to *The Crucible of Terror* in which the male creator cast his subject/victim in liquid bronze. In Gaudier-Brzeska's *Standing Female Figure* the female form looks as if it is melting, and in

Banks' film *The Blob* he animates Fairman's sculptures so they too look like a fluid mass. Works in this room combine nods to industrial processes with the male manipulation of the female figure.

Main Hall

In 1990 some recordings were produced for a never-to-be-made documentary about Fairman and the tapes sat on a shelf for over 20 years. Banks has edited the found footage discovered to piece together a 10 minute documentary, which is premiered in the Main Hall. Also on display are Fairman's sculptures *Consummatum Est* and *Guardian Angel*, included in an additional sculptural installation by Banks, alongside Epstein's *Study for the Rock Drill* and a copy of the seminal first edition of the Vorticist publication *BLAST*.

Julie Brown,
Collections Curator
November 2014

The New Art Gallery Walsall
Gallery Square Walsall WS2 8LG

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thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk

Events

Saturday 21 February, 2pm
Darren Banks talks about his practice and gives a tour of the exhibition with Julie Brown, Collections Curator

Saturday 18 April, 2pm
Mandy Fairman-Dick, widow of Churton Fairman, in conversation with Collections Curator Julie Brown, to discuss her late husband's extraordinary life and work



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