

Come to Light

Chloë Ashby (chloe.ashby@me.com)

Ask any artist for a list of the ingredients that go into making great art and they will almost certainly mention light. Lucky, then, that no matter who you are and where you're working, it's free and accessible - if not all day every day, then at particular moments in time. Moments that, according to the shifting seasons throughout the year, stretch and shrink back like elastic, tiptoeing woozily over the surface of water come evening, filtering through trees as morning breaks. In life and in art, light can be hazy or glaring, contemplative and spiritual, a source of high drama and theatrics.

The opening of *Reflection on Light* marks the spring equinox, twelve hours of sunlight that herald the official tipping of winter, cold and dank, into fresh and blooming spring. Included are a dozen women artists for whom light is key. For some, it brings with it a sense of calm and stillness. For others, it's a moody maker of mystery, blurring an image's edges and rendering its contents tantalisingly indistinct. Whether working in charcoal, paint, with a camera or a printing press, all regard light as both material and revelation.

They're not alone. Throughout art history, light has served artists as tool, medium and subject. During the Renaissance, Van Eyck's mastery of oil paint enabled him to conjure a luminous sense of realism and depth, while Botticelli's heavenly gold accents elevated his scenes from the everyday. In the 17th century, following the lead of Caravaggio, artists practised a technique called chiaroscuro, darkening their shadows to a velvety black and illuminating their figures with radiant shafts and blades. Fast-forward to Impressionism and light became, in Monet's words, 'the principal person in the picture'; Manet, Morisot et al paid attention to the atmosphere it conjured above all else.

And now? Each of the twelve women featured in this group show reflects on light in different ways. Like that clutch of plucky artists with a radical approach to picture-making in 19th-century Paris, the photographer Susan Derges is intent on capturing its changeability, the way it moves and morphs from dawn until dusk. For Liz West, whose practice encompasses sculpture, architecture, painting and design, colour

and light are inextricably entwined. The painter Emma Alcock would say the same for light and dark, an intimacy that plays out on her meditative canvases in the form of shadows, silhouettes and the gently glowing splinters in between. Nina Murdoch's blazing paintings reveal light's ability to make the ordinary extraordinary.

For centuries women artists were confined to the shadows; this exhibition puts them in the spotlight - centre stage. And together their works tell stories that are at once shimmering and murky. There are single light sources as well as many: the intensity of the moon; the sun's far-reaching and spindly rays. Also, artificial light, which is no less dazzling - unless, of course, that's the point. Whether fiercely bright or dusty and dwindling, what you'll discover is something delightfully simple, strange, inspiring.