

DECLAN CLARKE

### Group Portrait with Explosives

12 November – 20 December 2014

*"It amounts almost to a manifesto: looking at something real and finding a way of expressing it".*<sup>1</sup>

In a recent interview the filmmaker Mike Leigh<sup>2</sup>, compared his experiences of studying drama at RADA and attending 'life' classes at Camberwell School of Art during the 1960s. One, he suggests, was predicated on the systematic, isolated learning and the staged, public *performance* of extant material, while, and in vivid contrast, the latter pitted twenty or so people working together in a room, one being a naked model, another a teacher, but both in different ways compelling a mixed group of ordinary people to explore inner resources and find personal methods of expressing an ineluctably evident, visceral reality.

Declan Clarke's new work, *Group Portrait with Explosives*, does exactly this; it confronts and exposes the learning of life lessons; looking directly into (the lens of) real issues, to which it proposes original, personal and ingenious solutions. As the title, *Group Portrait...* might suggest, Clarke was originally trained as a painter, firstly at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, and then at Chelsea – alongside oft-times collaborator Paul McDevitt – but has subsequently been considered mainly as a cultural gatherer of research-based projects and only latterly, properly, as a quietly respected expert – an 'artist's artist' – of alternative film making. In *Group Portrait with Explosives*, Clarke clusters all his learning and experience, combining research techniques, sophisticated narrative and filmic skills accrued over a decade of practice – often delving into complex and culturally abstruse material – and invisibly welds it to real histories, with universal relevance but initiated from the core of his personal life and family narratives.

The result is a superbly crafted and compelling forty-two minute film, a making and viewing experience that exists because it has to. There is, of course, no formula for this, the making of a successful artistic expression of something 'real', from which the *must* see art work results. Rather, these rare and precious things seem to have made themselves, or to have been beamed, complete, into place with little evidence of struggle or effort. Don't be fooled. If there were any sort of hypothetical recipe, it might include the capacity to surprise, to entertain and engage, while handling complex socio-politic narratives, inextricable connected to the earthed humanity from which they inevitably arise, all tied up with the strings of objective grace, humour and a lightness of touch that can only be generated from self-(effacing) knowledge. The almost absurdist conflation of Declan Clarke's understated work forms concentric links, connecting the former country of Czechoslovakia with the rural South Armagh, it's notorious IRA Brigade, the early history of Czechoslovakian tractor production with structuralist and brutalist architecture, to the invention of Semtex, it's manufacture and related smuggling, IRA bomb production, 'peacekeeping' and Clarke's early fascination with militaria and his personal cache of wooden weaponry, and so back to tractors...

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<sup>1</sup> [www.theguardian.com/film/2014/oct/05/mike-leigh-mr-turner-enigmatic-character](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/oct/05/mike-leigh-mr-turner-enigmatic-character)

Kate Kellaway on Mike Leigh. The quote comments on Leigh's remarks: "I remember standing in a life-drawing class towards the end of the year, in the summer of 1964, in what had been a Peckham infant school now used as an annexe. It was a room with about 20 kids in it. There was a great working atmosphere, it was intense, there was a commitment, something going on... I remember looking around the room and thinking: we never experience this at drama school, for one second, because here everyone is looking at something real and finding a way of expressing it. And that meshed with thoughts I had on the go about the possibility of what actors could do, and film-making and making theatre in an organic way."

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*