

Ken Elias

Newport Museum and Art Gallery

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Ken Elias lives in Glynneath, on the edge of the former mining area known in Wales as The Valleys. He grew up here too, and his attachment to the place, which is neither completely suburban nor quite rural, but somewhere between the two, is a central theme of his painting. A particular building, the (recently demolished) local cinema, roots his work firmly in this area. The cinema was the site of many of his formative childhood experiences and it is on those and others, such as a much loved puppet theatre, vaguely tragic photographs and mementoes seen in his grandmother's house and the unpleasant memory of being teased by a rogueish uncle that he focusses for the subject of his recent pictures, about 30 of which are on show here. In a painter who was less sensitive or aware of what he was doing, these subjects might easily become maudlin. But if Ken Elias's physical travels have been limited, his mental ones have far horizons and their meaning affects us all. They are about love and loss; about finding one's feet in society and surviving, about the dislocation between what we'd like to believe and what is actually true.

He paints objects with great precision and places them asymmetrically across his picture surfaces with an emphasis on very formal, geometrical divisions of space – flat areas of wall-paper against a deep recess that could be a window, a projection slot or a screen; dark red curtains falling vertically and horizontal ledges. Keeping such a tight rein on his means of expression means provides an aseptic framework for the horrors that may lurk there. Some people may find his work cold. But they are beautiful, abstract compositions in their own right, judiciously illuminated by rich and luscious colours, is a bonus, one that

makes all the difference between the pain of confronting the fact that nothing lasts and that we are all going to die, and the repeatable, peaceful pleasure of looking.

This show gives us another insight into Ken Elias's finely tuned make-up by allowing us the chance to see some of his subtle Pop Art collages from the 1960s and 1970s. While he still uses collage, Ken Elias has gone a long way by using the traditional means and these handsome, subversive paintings leave one more exhilarated than depressed.