

RA

BASIL BEATTIE

Emma Hill, Beyond These Portals, Royal Academy of Arts Magazine, Spring 2016, p.41

Academy Artists**Beyond these portals***As MIMA celebrates painter Basil Beattie RA, EMMA HILL explores the visual and metaphorical thresholds in his art**Broken Promises, 2015, by Basil Beattie RA*

Basil Beattie RA comes from a generation of British artists that was profoundly affected by American Abstract Expressionism as seen in the late 1950s through exhibitions at the Whitechapel and Tate. Beattie has never forgotten what he sensed then, on viewing Rothko's work: that the paintings' physicality gave visibility to something that was not visible, and powerfully alluded to human emotion and thought. Beattie's approach

remains faithful to this visual imperative, and attached to the monumental scale and range of gesture associated with what was then the new vanguard. But he long ago moved on from formal abstraction, towards the resonant, metaphor-laden images for which he is known today.

This spring, a retrospective at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) reveals how consistently Beattie has incorporated

thoughts about how we read and relate to things in the world in his examination of painting's processes and materials. The show is not arranged chronologically, instead opening with a tower of black-and-white drawings he made for his 1991 installation *Drawing on the Interior* at Eagle Gallery, London, where I am the director. The gallery's walls were papered with almost 400 individual pictograms – of steps, ladders, arches and tunnels.

Beattie's recurrent motifs are these basic components of lived space that carry suggestions of thresholds, ascent and transition. This visual repertoire provides him with the means to address the metaphorical force of words: titles often reflect the interplay between images on the canvas and the states of mind to which they might refer, such as *Five Steps to Nowhere* (2002).

Paintings from the late 1980s – in which formalist grids are disrupted by calligraphic marks, densities of paint and erosions – are hung together at MIMA with significant works that followed from the 1990s until now. Among the finest of these are examples from the elegiac series 'Janus' that from a distance read as landscape horizons, recessional spaces and train tracks, and *Ladder* (2015) whose thickly laden, totemic form inhabits the canvas as physical presence, indicative of its human subject.

Beattie's paintings manipulate semiotic suggestion and are weighted by imagery that alludes to the human condition, but he is aware that if their ideas are overstated the works will lack a necessary spontaneity to reach what he describes as the 'pitch of poignancy' for which he looks. A recent work, *Broken Promises* (2015, left) is pared down to the essentials: a poised stack held in precarious equilibrium, about to topple. As with all Beattie's motifs, it speaks eloquently of a secular sense of human endeavour, and threatens to collapse – comically and tragically – under the weight of its associations.

When Now Becomes Then: 3 Decades

MIMA, Middlesbrough, 01642 931232,
www.visitmima.com, until 5 June