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Jon Pratty

24 Hour Museum Editor Jon Pratty gets on the GNER express to Newcastle and sees an inspiring and topical exhibition

Baltic, the Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, follows up its blockbuster opening in summer 2002 with a risky but bold Öyvind Fahlström exhibition until November 24, 2002.

Born in Brazil to Swedish parents, Fahlström lived in Sweden from the age of ten, moved to New York in 1961, and died young in 1976 from colon cancer.

Fahlström's work, revered and collected in his lifetime by American pop artists like Jasper Johns, Raushenberg and Rosenquist, has been described as 'perhaps the last unexplored continent of the art of the 1960's - 1970's.'

This is the biggest ever Fahlström exhibition and the first major show of his work in the UK. Unique loan pieces from private collections in the US, Sweden, Spain and Germany make this a rare chance to assess the reputation of an artist not really well known in the UK.

Risky? Well, there's just the dense, intense, topical but winningly political work of Fahlström (1928 - 1976) filling the whole big Baltic space - more or less from top to bottom of this giant former flour mill. Director Sune Nordgren: "...in fact, we've almost rebuilt Baltic for this exhibition - it's almost a new Baltic!"

Bold? Yes. Fahlström's work is explicitly sexy, angry and pertinent to the dilemmas of today. Back in the 'Sixties he railed against globalism, American imperialism, the arms race, sexual politics, you name it, he got tanked up about it. "Drugs and sex and rock and roll - again in the spotlight," Nordgren told me. "It's about gender problems. All the things that have to do with us now."

"After 35 years, the work is right in the spotlight in terms of politics and the new cold war," said Sune Nordgren. Baltic could be the best place to see the show, too: "up here, in Gateshead, there is an awareness of these issues. People are very European here. They don't look to London for political leadership."

The exhibition is certainly topical. Right now, many people in Britain are sceptical of the need to begin a new war with Iraq, and there is much in the graphic work of this Swedish artist that echoes our modern concerns.

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"Öyvind and I were actively opposed to the Vietnam war," said his wife, Sharon Avery-Fahlström, who co-curated the exhibition, and lent many precious pieces of work for the show. "Rosenquist, Raushenberg etc. There was a substantial group of us who were opposed. His work makes even more sense today."

So within these Northern walls you'll find collages, mobiles, variable paintings, text pieces, and even great big long drawings done in felt pen. All of it is intense, and it takes a while to tune in to Fahlström's wavelength. You really need to read the text in the work, and to puzzle out the imagery, much of it sexual and quite shocking.

The sheer scale of the show gives a striking sense of the visual development of Fahlström's work. From 'Opera', a room-sized felt pen drawing of 1952, to 'The Little General' (1967-68), a bizarre 'variable structure,' there is a distinct sense of imagery morphing, meanings building and growing complexity.

There's a playfulness here. 'Meatball Curtain (for R. Crumb)' (1969) stands out, and so does 'World Trade Monopoly' - an epic interactive work now transformed into a computer game, an inspired move in what is an inspiring exhibition.

The exhibition was curated by Sharon Avery-Fahlström, Manuel Borja-Villel and Jean-Francois Chevrier.

"It's been fantastic for our young team at Baltic to work on these partnerships," said Sune Nordgren, of Baltic. "It's an important part of making Baltic sustainable for the future."

The exhibition contains several works of a sexual nature which some visitors may find offensive. Parental guidance is advisable.