

Assignment 5

I really admire the work of William Hogarth, I think much of it has a strong narrative and he can portray mercilessly what he perceives to be wrongs or injustices. I was looking through his work and wondering if any of it would provide inspiration for this assignment.

It was at the time of the general election and coverage filled the media. I knew that Hogarth had portrayed the 1754 election which was 'characterised by unprecedented levels of bribery and corruption' ⁱ and I wondered if I could do a modern version of the paintings.

Looking at them I was not sure that what was being depicted was particularly relevant to today or was in a style that I could develop.



I then came across an etching, made from a sketch by Hogarth, called 'The Politician'.

According to Trusler ⁱⁱ it was published in 1775 but the original sketch probably dates from around 1730.

At first sight it looks a very simple image of a man reading by candlelight, but closer study reveals that he is so engrossed in what he is reading that he does not realise the candle he is holding is setting fire to his hat.

As with many of Hogarth's works there was text accompanying the etching. This read

"A politician should (as I have read)
Be furnish'd in the first place with a head."

I liked the way that the image, title and text all contributed to the overall meaning conveyed by the

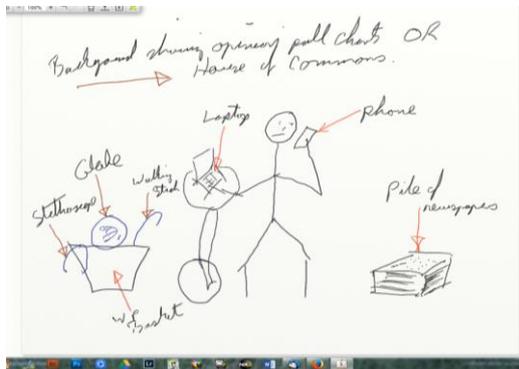
sketch. According to Trusler ⁱⁱⁱ the politician is so preoccupied with reading about affairs in Europe that he does not notice what is happening closer to home.

This prompted me to consider how William Hogarth might portray a politician in 2015. One of the main comments that seemed to be made about the 2015 election campaign was how removed politicians were from the general public. All political performances seemed to be set pieces, designed to look good in the media, but where ordinary people were excluded in case they should ask an awkward question. The campaign was dominated by political promises and claims that these were often broken.

I thought about how I could produce an image that conveyed the story of a politician insulated from the people he serves, concerned about the media portrayal of his campaign, making promises that he perhaps believed would be kept. It would also convey how those promises were often broken.

One of the quotes that has stayed with me from the beginning of this course is from Paul Seawright who talked of producing images that released their meaning slowly. So I wanted a photograph that met this criterion, which would make people think about what they were viewing and try to analyse it.

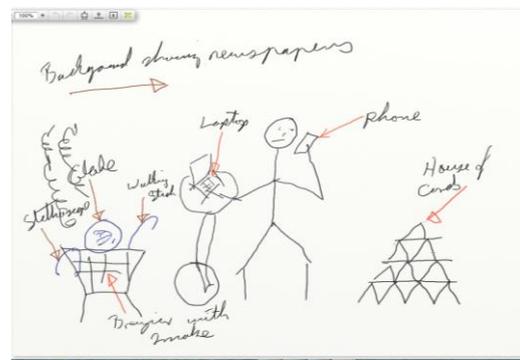
I sketched out on my tablet the type of image I wanted to create.



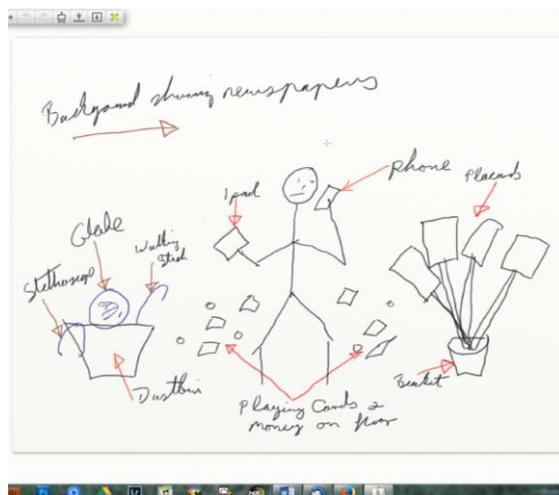
Initially I thought about posing the politician against a plain backdrop so that I could add a background of the House of Commons or possibly a television screen showing the opinion polls.

I even took photographs of these ready to use if I chose to. I had used this type of plain background when I completed Assignment 3 the self-portrait and thought I might be able to produce the composite image. But I wasn't sure that it would convey the message of a politician insulated from the public.

I then had the idea of covering the backdrop with newspaper cuttings which covered the election. There were many articles in the papers about the election so I was able to construct the backdrop, giving the appearance of 'floor to ceiling media coverage'. I had the idea of a House of Cards – from the TV series but also playing cards being symbolic of duplicity.



I needed to be careful to keep the newspapers level across the background, so I used string tied between the supports to provide a horizontal line.



Thinking of how to convey the idea of promises and how they are broken I had a couple of ideas. I produced three placards of the type you see waved behind politicians on the TV, but used statements that later turned out to be false. These were from the (then) three main political parties as my message was that this applied to all politicians. Initially I intended to set them in a bucket with other props in a dustbin. Instead of the House of cards I would scatter playing cards on the floor.

In practice the playing cards did not show up very well on an already 'busy' surface. I therefore decided to set the posters inside a dustbin and chose a red bin to make it stand out more.

On the other side I placed a fire basket which contained symbols of promises and services that would be 'going up in smoke'. The books symbolised education, the globe stood for the environment, the broken walking stick for social care and the stethoscope for the health service.

My experience of producing this type of set piece for the self-portrait assignment proved really useful and I experimented with the best lighting set up to produce the final image.

Thinking of the title I wanted to acknowledge the inspiration provided by Hogarth so I decided on 'The Politician 2015 (after William Hogarth)'. The original etching also contained lines from a poem called 'The Art of Politicks' by James Bramston^{iv}.

I had seen from my previous assignment (work by Karen Knorr) how effective the combination of text, title and image can be. I wanted to include relevant text to go with my image and needed to find something relevant. I looked at some contemporary poetry and also read Bramston's Art of Politicks.

I decided on

"Wrap up your Poison well, nor fear to say
What was a Lye last Night is Truth to Day;"

I thought that this added a powerful element to the message I was trying to convey. It comes from the same Bramston poem as the lines that Hogarth used. I thought that this was quite apt as not only would it provide a link with the original sketch but it would also show how views of politicians have not changed greatly in over 250 years!

ⁱ http://www.soane.org/collections_legacy/the_soane_hogarths/an_election

ⁱⁱ <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hogarth/william/trusler/chapter14.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hogarth/william/trusler/chapter14.html>

^{iv} <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/40895/40895-h/40895-h.htm>