ART AND OCCUPATION

PJ Crook

Deadline 1995

An imaginary newspaper office is swarming with people desperate to complete their allotted tasks [1]. A young woman (apparently not the artist) [2] with blonde hair and a white blouse stares vacantly out of the centre of the scene alarmed by but seemingly detached from the turmoil all around her. She reaches out to touch the typist in the red dress to her right as if trying to regain some contact with reality. A girl to her left in a red and black striped dress has spotted her distress and looks anxiously on. Immediately behind the blonde, an older man in a brown suit throws his arms up in horror, exasperation or despair. A photographer, suitcase packed, rushes out on an assignment, while in front, a team of men pack round a ticker-tape machine gathering the latest news story: two men on the right are furiously making notes from the passing tape; a man in a striped suit with his back to us, telephone to his right ear, reads the tape running through his fingers and a bald-headed colleague in a striped shirt, red tie and obligatory macho braces points for corroboration to some detail in a document he holds in front of him. To the left of the picture, three women are literally ‘comparing notes’ and behind them a man perches on the desk of the typist in the red dress, telephone to his left ear, scribbling on his pad. Behind him is the only smoker in the room. Everywhere, people are rushing, papers or telephones in hand, listening, dictating, writing, typing or working on computers—too busy to eat or drink, their urgency emphasized by the absence of time. There are no clocks. Only the blonde (the one real person?) wears a watch.

This painting was ‘inspired by the overcrowding in the workplace and the speed at which everything has to be achieved’ [3] and reflects on the impact of new technology in the workplace, the increasing pressure on employees, longer working hours and ever decreasing deadlines. There is a poignant loneliness to these office workers who are ‘packed tightly like sardines in a tin’ [4], absorbed into their work, identities lost in the crowd—a symptom of the age in which they live. ‘Today’s endless words and statistics superseded by those of tomorrow.’ [5] Nevertheless, the artist clearly has a sense of humour and enjoys playing with our perceptions and expectations [6]—the bright colours and theatrical staging helping

\[\text{Deadline (acrylic on canvas on wood) by Crook, P.J. (b.1945) © Morohashi Museum of Modern Art, Koriyama-Shi, Japan/The Bridgeman Art Library.}\]
to lift any sense of sadness. The mystical nature of the artist’s ‘quirky realism’ has been compared to the work of surrealists like Balthus and Magritte [4]. Deadline took 3 months to complete and was worked directly onto the canvas without any preparatory drawings [7]. The artist thinks herself into the role of each of the players in the piece and slowly builds up the composition ‘like a sculptor working in clay’ [8] never knowing quite how the finished work will look.

Pamela Crook or PJ as she likes to be known was born in 1945 at Cheltenham, England. Her early schooling was somewhat erratic but in 1960, she entered Gloucestershire College of Art, Cheltenham, concentrating on textiles and printmaking. She subsequently worked as a freelance textile designer and only started painting seriously in the late 1970s. Since then, her work has been widely exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in London and Paris. She has also exhibited at London’s Royal Academy of Arts, National Portrait Gallery and Imperial War Museum. She has work in 23 permanent collections around the world including Switzerland, Israel and USA [4] and has an eclectic group of private collectors among them Billy Connolly, Jackie Collins and Billy Joel [9].

Stress in the workplace continues to attract attention. According to the UK Labour Force Survey, an estimated 442 000 individuals in Britain believed that they were experiencing work-related stress at a level that was making them ill [10]. The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work website revealed 299 items on ‘stress’ [11], while its US counterpart had only three. Is this a question of semantics, the situation on the ground or the differing approach of regulators? [12,13] In a recent review of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence’s guidance on promoting mental health well-being in the workplace [14], the Society of Occupational Medicine questioned whether finite organizational resources were focused on the best interventions [15]. UK’s small business leaders were even more critical [16].

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References
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3. Crook PJ. e-mail received 20 December 2008.
8. Crook PJ. e-mail received 02 January 09.