

This guide is intended as an introduction to the exhibition. Please ask a Steward if you have any questions.

There is more information about Michael Stevenson's work in the Reading Room on the Second Floor. Open every day 12.00 - 6.00pm.

A book by Michael Stevenson about this project is available in Arnolfini Bookshop price £9.00. Its title, CELEBRATION AT PERSEPOLIS, and its design are based on the 1970s book displayed in Gallery 2.

ART/FUN, an activity pack for the exhibition is available from Arnolfini Bookshop price £1.

Introduction to the exhibition

Michael Stevenson

Persepolis 2530

Galleries 2, 3, 4

accompanied by

**Andy Warhol , Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (Shah of Iran)
Gallery 5**

2 February - 30 March 2008

Michael Stevenson's artwork uses objects, some pre-existing, some made by the artist, which relate to an historical moment. For this exhibition he has brought together an existing film and book and re-made an architectural structure, all of which relate to a grand party hosted by the Shah of Iran in 1971. He has also selected a portrait which can be seen in Gallery 5.

Intended as a nationalistic gesture, the party, described as one of the most lavish of the last century, can also be seen as leading towards revolution. Stevenson is fascinated with this party. In this new work he explores its significance as well as the way in

which past events such as this can be represented.

On entering the first part of **PERSEPOLIS 2530**, visitors immediately enter a large, skeletal structure that is almost as large as the room; it just fits. It is made, apparently, of rusted steel and draped with tattered fragments of canvas and a broken air conditioning duct. From a few viewpoints it is possible to step back and see parts of the structure (from the landing outside and the adjacent galleries), but it is only when inside the structure that it can be seen in its entirety. Such a structure must have some function, but what might this be?

On closer inspection it is apparent that the structure is like a stage set, made mostly from painted cardboard tubing. The recreation is meticulous.

The replica is based on one of the ruined tent frames originally built as accommodation for guests invited to the Shah's party. There were 54 tents, forming a Tent City and as can be seen from the frame, they were large, with several rooms. Each had luxurious interiors designed by the French firm Jansen.

The party was held to commemorate the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great and was held on the site of the ancient ceremonial city of Persepolis. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, had been planning the party for many years and it was attended by heads of state and others from across the world.

The intention of the celebration was to demonstrate Iran's long and magnificent history and to showcase its advancements during the Shah's rule. The Shah also wished to make a link between his rule and the rulers of Iran over thousands of years. (In fact his father had only come to be Shah following a British-backed coup in 1921 and the Shah had no further legitimate family claim to the throne.)

Stevenson re-presents the structure as it can be seen today in the desert: dilapidated, overgrown and vandalised. As in the case of the ancient city it was

built alongside, the construction has become an archaeological site. Even in this gallery space investigating the structure is like looking round a ruined building or ancient standing stone. With curiosity but no specialist knowledge, viewers are left to explore and try to work out for themselves details such as how it might have looked, where the entrance was and which VIP might have stayed here. Like archaeologists investigating a new site, we have to imagine all this based on looking at the object.

Stevenson's structure can also be thought of as a folly; a purpose-built ruin, made for display and for contemplation.

In addition to the structure itself, Stevenson has scattered a small amount of sand and a few false eyelashes across the floor, as well as an almost entirely hidden animal carcass. Each of these can be seen to enhance the drama of the setting as well as emphasising the symbolism of the work.

Through to the right, in **Gallery 4**, is Stevenson's remade section of a support used to hold up part of the decorative cloth in the party's Banqueting Hall. This was a massive marquee, also designed by Jansen, and the supports were made in the form of lances. This decorative decision can be seen as a reminder as to the real motive for the Shah in organising this party.

Although a celebration of history, culture and modern life in Iran, the main parade took the form of a military display. The

Shah had amassed an incredible military force with Iran's oil money and this was a chance to show it off. Like his use of eyelashes and sand, Stevenson has selected to reproduce this support as much for its symbolism as its aesthetic qualities.

In the other adjacent space (**Gallery 2**) are two documents from nearer the time of the party, a book, **CELEBRATION AT PERSEPOLIS** and a 30 minute extract from the film **FLAMES OF PERSIA** (Director: Shahrokh Golestan, 1971). They are the final elements within the installation and have been selected by Stevenson to provide background information on the tents, banquet, parade, guests and attitudes of those organising and attending the event. Neither of these documents are critical of any aspect of the party, they are celebrations. As Orson Welles states in his narration in the film, "This was no party of the year, it was the celebration of 25 centuries!"

In addition to this installation, Michael Stevenson has selected a portrait, the rarely-seen **MOHAMMAD REZA SHAH PAHLAVI (SHAH OF IRAN)** by **ANDY WARHOL**. It can be seen in **Gallery 5** on the Second Floor.

Made around 1978, it was commissioned by the Shahbanou, the Shah's wife, along with portraits of herself and the Shah's twin sister. As for all of Warhol's screen print portraits, it is produced from a photograph. For the Shahbanou and the Shah's sister the photographs were taken by Warhol. For this portrait of

the Shah, Warhol was instructed to use an official photograph supplied by the Iranian Embassy.

The work is produced in a limited edition, the exact number being unknown, and not all versions use the same colours. This work is unusual for Warhol in being black and white. Drained of colour, it has a faded presence like the tent structure downstairs.

Although separate from **PERSEPOLIS 2530**, this portrait accompanies the installation. It shows the man who was responsible for the celebration. It was made a few years after the party, at a time when such grand displays of power, wealth and support for the West would contribute to a revolution and his downfall.

Warhol was not at the party in 1971, although by the time this portrait was made he had become a familiar face in the Iranian court, in effect the court artist, at a time when the Shah was being criticised for many aspects of his rule and political actions. For Stevenson, the portrait is an example of the close relationship between the buying and selling of art and political power.

Throughout this exhibition, Michael Stevenson presents carefully chosen, painstakingly made objects and structures. For the artist, each element has a role within the complex story he is exploring. Each can also be examined and considered separately from this information. As Stevenson says, it is like 'Archaeology without the labels'.