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By Way of These Eyes, The American Museum in Britain, Bath

By Jackie Wullschlager

The robust spirit of 20th-century US optimism is one of the characteristics dominating Christopher Hyland's collection



'Listening to the Earth' (1999) by Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison

Textile designer and collector Christopher Hyland believes that “every brilliant photograph has a geometry every bit as complex as the geometry which created the floor of the Parthenon”. Visual structure, clarity, the use of chiaroscuro, a sense of mystery or the uncanny – from Edward Weston's image of an opalescent shell to Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison's giant trumpet “Listening to the Earth” – and the robust spirit of 20th-century American optimism are the characteristics dominating his collection.

It spans a century, beginning with Edward Steichen and Paul Strand, and continuing to contemporaries such as Bill Armstrong, commissioned for this show to produce a triptych portrait of the Queen in his abstracted, out-of-focus, disorientating style. A study of minor league baseball – its bleachers, dug-outs, little-known teams – by David Deal, born 1970, is at once a journey to the core of American leisure and, in the hope of making better lives expressed in the eyes of the players, something universal and poignant.

Hyland has a particular interest in classicism, as shown by his own neo-classical, digitally manipulated series featuring a tattooed, gladiator-like figure “Transformation”, and by images such as Marcus Leatherdale's juxtaposition of a Roman bust with a Warhol portrait in “Andy Warhol, 'Hidden Identities'” and Brian Oglesbee's “Water Series”, where an idealised model is distorted by being photographed in a tank of bubbling water.

It's seen most of all, though, in Robert Mapplethorpe's “Icarus”, the stunner of the collection. Eschewing colour, Mapplethorpe brought a slick glamour, evocative of the 1920s, to his black and white photographs of nude men, their flesh textured like polished marble, harking back to depictions of Greek gods. In “Icarus”, the supple contours and grace of the Canova sleeping figure contrast with the harsh modern right-angle glare of the window above. This image of transcendence and transience, light and dark, was the one Mapplethorpe placed over his bed

when he was dying.

'By Way of These Eyes: The Hyland Collection of American Photography' runs to October 28, www.americanmuseum.org

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