



ESPLANADE,  
ROCHDALE.  
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## A TALL ORDER! – ROCHDALE ART GALLERY IN THE 1980s 4 FEBRUARY 2023 – 7 MAY 2023

*“Our policy is to encourage new audiences for art, particularly women, black communities, young people, those with disabilities, and to encourage cultural activity for working class communities. Broadly, to change the domination of art by a white middle class male audience and producer. A tall order!”*

*(Jill Morgan, in a letter dated 16 March 1987)*

This major exhibition at Touchstones Rochdale will investigate and consider the exhibition programming at Rochdale Art Gallery during the 1980s, and its legacies. This small, civic gallery in the northwest of England, led by Jill Morgan with a small and changing team including Bev Bytheway, Sarah Edge, Lubaina Himid and Maud Sulter, created significant opportunities for previously marginalised artists and groups, presented its historic collection in new and critical ways, and forged dynamic approaches to the function and purpose of a ‘local’ art gallery.

During the 1980s, Britain was marked by major social and political events including the Falklands war, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the People’s March for Jobs, racial tensions and riots in several British cities, the Miners’ Strike, and the anti-nuclear protests at Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camps. All of these were reflected in Rochdale Art Gallery’s programming throughout the decade as it became increasingly identified with what was referred to as ‘issues-based’ art. The expansive and collaborative curatorial vision of Morgan and her colleagues at Rochdale was explicitly feminist, and created a space for previously marginalised or excluded artists to articulate their own experiences, opened-up opportunities for education and engagement with the local community, and demonstrated the potential for galleries as a tool for social change.

To date, the ground-breaking work of Morgan and her colleagues has remained largely undocumented and

uncelebrated. A Tall Order! Rochdale Art Gallery in the 1980s will utilise all four of the gallery spaces at Touchstones Rochdale, with each gallery addressing a set of themes, namely: Work and Labour; Land and the Environment; Rochdale at the Heart of Everything; Power and Representation. In addition to exhibiting works made and displayed during the 1980s by artists including Terry Atkinson, Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce Sarah Edge, Paul Graham, Susan Hiller, Lubaina Himid, and John Hyatt, the show will also include works from Touchstones Rochdale’s historic and modern collection, such as Charles Burton Barber’s The Special Pleader and works by Vanessa Bell and Jacob Epstein. Many of the pressing concerns of that turbulent decade remain important and relevant today, so the exhibition will also present recent and newly commissioned work by a younger generation of contemporary artists who are influenced by the cultural and political agendas of the 1980s.

Revisiting Rochdale’s radical programming in the 1980s is one way of regenerating the commitment and ambition that informed it. The exhibition will provide a means of reflecting on the gallery’s future, grounded in a commitment to active dialogue, community engagement and cultural change.

Supported by a grant from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, the exhibition will be curated by two independent research curators, Dr Derek Horton and Dr Alice Correia, working in collaboration with colleagues at Touchstones Rochdale.