

EXHIBITION

Aspiring dreams

A mood rather than a movement

MADOC CAIRNS

Pre-Raphaelites:
Drawings and Watercolours

ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, OXFORD

HER EYES are from another universe. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Day Dream* – the centrepiece of "Pre-Raphaelites: Drawings and Watercolours", a new exhibition of work from the Ashmolean Museum (to 27 November) – is, in terms of subject matter, irenic. Jane Morris, Rossetti's muse and sometime inamorata, sits in a bower of tree-branches, staring into space. She drapes an idled hand over an open book; her fingers, loosened, let a single flower fall. It's a picture of arcadian peace: harmonious, if a little haunting. But then there's the colour.

The branches, the book, Jane's characteristically billowing dress: all are frozen mid-painting, pre-pigment, inert in pencilled sepia. Colour, when it comes, is shocking. Seeping through hands and flower, blossoming on Morris's neck and face, bursting into auburn and russet when it reaches the dense curls of her hair, it's an invasion more than an embellishment; two paintings in one frame. And her eyes – brightest blue – look like they're from somewhere else entirely.

It's an apt synecdoche for the exhibition as a whole: a work-in-progress, but all the more affecting for it. Some of the works here – such



The Day Dream by Dante Gabriel Rossetti has a captivating air even as a work-in-progress

as the ill-fated Simeon Solomon's *Two Acolytes Censing: Pentecost* – seem catalogue-ready. But most of the drawings and watercolours (and pastels, chalks, body-painting, blueprints) are suggestive, gestatory things: sketches of friends, watercolours of small-time patrons, chalk-worked plans of later triumphs.

See the first drafts of William Holman Hunt's Lampkeeper-Christ masterpiece *The Light of The World*, or William Morris and Rossetti's Arthurian outlines for the Oxford Union Library. Elizabeth Siddal is, like Jane Morris, omnipresent; but Rossetti's many-aspected

etchings of her are joined to some of Siddal's own work – a rare treat. The intimate, aspirational, often unfinished character of so much on display reminds us that pre-raphaelism's coherence was largely posthumous.

The range of mediums reminds us too, how diverse pre-raphaelism was, the strength and variousness of the talents employed. An illustration of the angel Cecilia embracing an angel is almost shockingly small: fine-featured, finely-drawn. Satiric pencilwork sits alongside designs for stained-glass windows; stylised figures, mailed or robed, gaze from watercolours, glower from murals.

It's a window into the past. But it's hard to shake the feeling that the window could have been a door. Drawings and Watercolours' unintuitive categories are culprits here: "stunners" and "landscapes" might usefully sort the available material, but it won't help viewers understand it. The inclusion of some staggering Ruskin watercolours – realist to an unreal degree – raises the tone of the exhibition, but prompts an awkward transition from the romanticising salmagundi of the Pre-Raphaelites proper.

The error, perhaps, is to take the Pre-Raphaelites at their word. Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Morris, Holman Hunt et al. didn't represent a movement so much as a mood, a taste, a style. Stephen Spender was right to think the "brotherhood" inspired by poetry more than art – legible through ideals more than through technique. Gawky knights, elegant somnambulists, sulking Hellenes, pouting dryads, stunners real and imagined, the harmony and the clash ... Pre-Raphaelites went looking for an entirely new art. They found another universe.