



Ray Atkins *Ken and Diane playing cards* 1969 93 x 122cm

RAY ATKINS UNSEEN

20 - 24 October 2026 | West Gallery, Mall Galleries | 10:00 - 17:00 | Free Admission

Ray Atkins Unseen brings together paintings from the formative decades of one of post-war Britain's most distinctive yet under-recognised painters. Spanning Atkins' early years in London and his move to Reading in 1968, the exhibition traces his evolution from figures and dense interiors to vivid paintings of rapidly changing landscapes.

The exhibition opens with paintings from Atkins' foundational years at Bromley School of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art in London, including several works omitted from the 1974 Whitechapel exhibition curated by Frank Auerbach. Life drawing at Bromley established direct observation as the foundation of his practice. At the Slade, where he studied from 1961 to 1964 and worked in Auerbach's life-painting studio, Atkins spent extended periods observing his subjects and building up forms through layers of paint. His approach also reflects the legacy of David Bomberg, whose teaching emphasised structure, energy, and the physicality of paint. The works show Atkins developing a style that brought together direct observation and abstraction.

London in the 1960s provided Atkins with a subject. Working in an iron shed in North Finchley and later living in Islington and Balham, he drew on the spaces and people around him, painting family, friends, and chance encounters. His 1967 self-portrait uses intense yellows, fiery reds, and cool blues to structure the image of the artist at work, while paintings of domestic spaces and figures capture moments of movement and stillness through densely layered paint.

The second half of the exhibition follows his move to Reading in 1968. The scale and character of his painting changed in response to a rapidly transforming landscape. Colour became more prominent, brushwork more fluid, and compositions increasingly open. A disused chalk quarry at Playhatch became an important subject, beginning a long preoccupation with quarries and pits that continued after his move to Cornwall. Elsewhere, railway embankments, building sites, scrapyards, and new shopping centres became the foci of large-scale paintings recording Reading's transformation. In *Building the New Shopping Centre, Night* (1972), demolition and construction are animated by bright colour and artificial light.

Atkins also painted quieter landscapes. In *Wet Garden in May* (1972), he explored the freshness of a garden in spring, while his 'Four Seasons' project involved painting the same garden throughout the year. These paintings sit apart from the construction sites and expanding town centre, setting the natural world against the rapid transformation of the built environment. Many of the Reading paintings were subsequently shown in *Ray Atkins: The Reading Years* at Reading Museum in 2017, where their documentary significance was recognised alongside their painterly ambition.

The title *Ray Atkins Unseen* refers to the paintings omitted from the 1974 Whitechapel exhibition. Bringing these works back into view alongside paintings from the same formative period allows Atkins' development to be traced across London and Reading, from the densely worked interiors and figures of the 1960s to the expansive landscapes of a changing city. Throughout, direct observation remained at the heart of his practice. Atkins found subjects in the places around him and transformed them through paint.

For further press information please contact: studio@rayatkinsartist.com