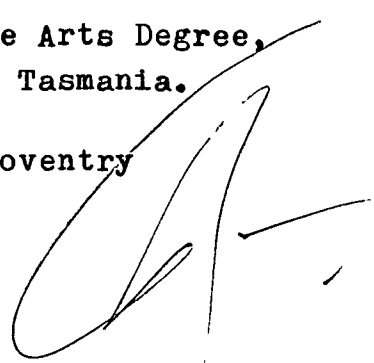


The work presented in this book  
was produced during 1981-82 within  
the Master of Fine Arts Course  
at the Tasmanian School of Art,  
University of Tasmania; and it is,  
together with the exhibition of  
paintings catalogued in this book,  
a submission for the  
Master of Fine Arts Degree,  
University of Tasmania.

Christopher Coventry  
November 1982



Book Number

10



Richard Avedon, 'Christopher Coventry, Mt.Nelson, March 1982.' Black and white photograph.



## BIOGRAPHY

- 1944 Born in Adelaide.
- 1966-69 Studied at South Australian School of Art.
- 1969-80 Painted full-time.
- 1970-73 Lived in Sydney.
- 1974 Lived in Adelaide.
- 1975-76 Lived in Sydney.
- 1977 Fellow in Visual Arts at Burgmann College,  
Australian National University, Canberra.
- 1978-80 Lived in Adelaide.
- 1980 Fellow in Creative Arts at Geelong College, Victoria.  
Awarded Direct Assistance Grant, Visual Arts Board,  
Australia Council.
- 1981-82 Lived in Hobart.  
Candidate for Master of Fine Arts Degree,  
University of Tasmania.  
Teaching at Tasmanian School of Art, University of  
Tasmania.(Art Theory, Drawing, Colour Theory.)
- 1982 Awarded Commonwealth Post-Graduate Scholarship.  
Contributing art critic for 'The Mercury'.

## ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS

- 1969 Contemporary Art Society Gallery, Adelaide.
- 1970 "Tales of Hofmann", Llewellyn Galleries, Adelaide.
- 1971 Coventry Gallery (38 Hargrave Street), Sydney.  
"Severance Pay", Llewellyn Galleries, Adelaide.
- 1973 Woollahra Galleries, Sydney.  
Atelier '72, Adelaide.
- 1974 The Craft Centre, Melbourne.  
"Redrawing", Contemporary Art Society Gallery, Adelaide.  
Hogarth Galleries, Sydney.
- 1975 Greenhill Galleries, Adelaide.
- 1976 Hogarth Galleries, Sydney.
- 1977 Burgmann College, Australian National University,  
Canberra.
- 1978 "Paintings 1975-78", Contemporary Art Society Gallery,  
Adelaide.
- 1980 Geelong College, Victoria.

### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1969-78 Contemporary Art Society exhibitions in Sydney and Adelaide.
- 1968 "Four Young Painters", Habitat Galleries, Adelaide.
- 1969 "Three Young Painters", Lombard Street Gallery, Adelaide.
- 1970 "Twelve Artists. New Directions. Recent Work." Central Street Gallery, Sydney.  
Annual Exhibition, Tasmanian Museum Art Gallery, Hobart.
- 1971 "C.A.A. Show", Llewellyn Galleries, Adelaide.
- 1976 "The Apocalypse Show", Hogarth Galleries, Sydney.  
Chandler Coventry Collection 1966-76, University of New England, Armidale.
- 1980 "Young. Coventry." Royal South Australian Society of Arts Gallery, Adelaide.  
Geelong Prize, Geelong Art Gallery, Victoria.  
"Painting in South Australia Today": Maude Vizard-Wholohan Prize, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.
- 1981 "Selections of a Century": Art Gallery of South Australia Travelling Exhibition.  
"Visions After Light": Art in South Australia 1836-1981, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.  
McCaughey Memorial Prize, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

### COLLECTIONS

Many private collections, particularly in Adelaide and Sydney.

Australian Government, Kirribilli House, Sydney.

Burgmann College, Australian National University, Canberra.

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

Australia Council, Visual Arts Board purchase.

Broken Hill City Council, New South Wales.

Geelong College, Victoria.

University of New England, Armidale.

Artbank.



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A FATHER'S INSTRUCTIONS A FATHER'S INSTRUCTIONS A FATHER'S INSTR  
THE STYLE IS THE MAN THE STYLE IS THE MAN THE STYLE IS THE MAN T

THE WORK PRESENTED IN THIS EXHIBITION WAS PRODUCED  
DURING 1981-82 WITHIN THE MASTER OF FINE ARTS COURSE  
AT THE TASMANIAN SCHOOL OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA.

## CATALOGUE

Paintings: Acrylic on Cotton Duck

### IMPROVINSKY

(Weather Report)  
UT1982 (178x152)cms

### GONE TO CHINA

UT1982 (157x113)cms

### KEEP AWAY FROM THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE

UT1982 (186x150)cms

### BOLOGNIA DOCET

UT1982 (177x152)cms

### QUESTIONS OF TECHNIQUE

(Get Back to Painting)  
UT1982 (177x152)cms

### THE USELESSNESS OF CHINESE ROCKS

(An Invitation to Pleasure)  
UT1982 (185x131)cms

### A CONVERSATION ON METHOD

UT1982 (177x152)cms

### THE FOUNDATIONS OF A STYLE

(A Father's Instructions: The Style is the Man)  
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### BETA BISCIX

(The Disappearance of Painters of Stories)  
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### THE MEASURING PLACE

(The Peking German - Meine Deutsche Lehrer)  
UT1981-82 (179x118)cms

### LOOKING FOR CHINA

(Sounds so Simple, I've Just Got to Go)  
UT1981-82 (179x118)cms

### THE PHILOSOPHY OF FURNITURE

(Beware of Edgar Poe)  
UT1981-82 (178x116)cms

## LEARNING TO PAINT LANDSCAPES

A mountain looks this way close by, another way a few miles away, and yet another way from a distance of a dozen miles. Its shape changes at every step, the more the farther one goes. It looks this way from the front, another way from the side, and yet another way from the back. Its aspect changes from every angle, as many times as the point of view. Thus one must realize that a mountain contains in itself the shape of several dozen or a hundred mountains. It looks this way in spring and summer, another way in autumn and winter, the scene changing with the seasons. It looks this way in the morning, another way at sunset, yet another way in rain or shine, the manner and appearance changing with morning and night. Thus one must realize that one mountain contains in itself the manner of several dozen or a hundred mountains.

There is an external appearance which may not be mistaken for the true reality. Take the appearance as appearance and the reality as reality. Unless this is understood, one will draw a mere likeness, but not capture the real essence. A likeness is what you get when you portray a thing's form and miss the spirit. Reality, the real essence, means when you have captured both the form and the spirit. When the spirit is left out, the form is dead. (To judge a painting by its verisimilitude shows the mental level of a child.)

To do it without seeming effort and catch the forms naturally - that is masterly. To be able to penetrate all and comprehend the nature of all things, and have all this done properly in style and form - that is wonderful. To be unpredictable, perhaps deviate from the true scene, and so perhaps distort things - that is exciting. Such painting has good control of the brush, but is weak in thought element. The clever artists can do pretty little things, pretending that they know the main principals; they try to elaborate and justify and explain to gain stature for themselves. Such people have plentiful showmanship but little substance.



IMPROVINSKY  
(Weather Report)  
UT1982 (178x152)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck

## I WANT TO GO TO CHINA AND SEE JAPAN

Just before I came to Hobart I was in Adelaide, and I was pirating from a facsimile of the Genji Scrolls in the State Library; and I was digging around bookshops looking for anything on Japanese arts. In one old-bookshop I asked if they had anything on Japanese arts; he showed me what he had, which wasn't much, and he asked me if I was interested in China. I said I wasn't interested in Chinese arts, so he showed me a book on The Theory of Chinese Art. By the time I got the book home I had half read it. It was a source book on the theory of Chinese painting, from Confucius (Sixth Century B.C.) to Shen Tsung-Ch'ien (Eighteenth Century A.D.); the writings of Chinese artists and art critics on problems and techniques, style and taste.\* It was about what they were trying to do, and why and how they did it. I knew what they were talking about; so I came to write about The Chinese Theory of Art, that is to say, the theory of painting. (I am not interested in Chinese painting.)

## ON NOT BEING INTERESTED IN CHINA

I do not look at an Eastern essence with passion. The Orient is indifferent for me, it simply provides me with a reserve of traits. The implementation of this reserve and play that it invents allow me to entertain the idea of a symbol system completely separate from ours. What can be singled out, in considering the Orient, is not the presence of other symbols, of another metaphysics or another wisdom (even though this would be desirable), but the possibility of a difference, a mutation, a revolution in the properties of symbol systems.

## LOOKING FOR CHINA

At the end of the Eighteenth Century convicts at Port Jackson thought they could escape to China, because they believed that China lay just behind the Blue Mountains. They also believed that in China the streets were paved with gold. Many convicts died attempting to cross the mountains to escape to China.

\* "The Chinese Theory of Art.  
Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art."  
By Lin Yutang. 1967. Heinemann: London.





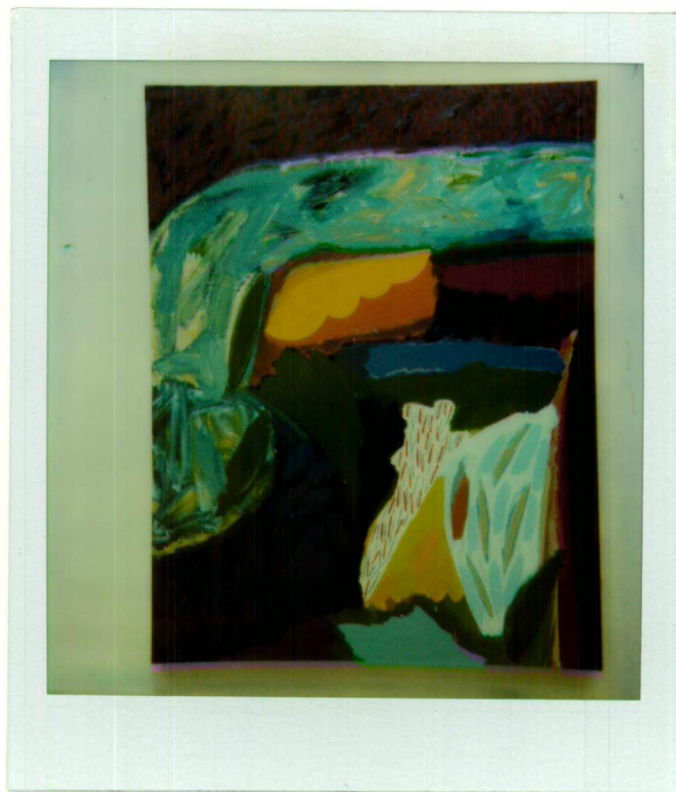
GONE TO CHINA  
UT1982 (157x113)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck

#### A FATHER'S EXAMPLE

I have occasionally seen my father leave a couple of paintings uncompleted after starting them. He would leave them alone for ten or twenty days because he didn't want to finish them. Is this not because he wanted to avoid his lazy moods? Sometimes he put on a spurt of activity, forgetting everything else, but something interrupted him, perhaps some triviality, and again he would leave it alone. Is this not perhaps because he wanted to avoid painting in a depressed mood? When he worked, he had the studio in perfect order, the light coming from the window, a clean table, good brushes and choice ink all laid out and he would wash his hands and scrub the inkstone as if he were attending a great ceremony. When his mind was completely settled, then he would begin. Is this not what he called avoiding light-mindedness? Once he completed a sketch, he would go over it again and again, adding here, correcting there, until he was satisfied, like a general planning a campaign. Is this not what he called avoiding casualness? This goes for success in all walks of life, all undertakings big or small. My father emphasized and explained this to me again and again, perhaps in the hope that I would remember it for life as the key to progress.

A materialist attends to the affairs of the world. A man enslaved by the material world lives in a state of tension. He who is tense labours over his paintings and destroys himself. He who moves among the hustle and bustle of the world handles his brush and paint with caution and restraint. Thus the environment impinges upon a man, can only do him harm and in the end make him unhappy. I meet the world as it comes, yield superficially to the hustlers, and thus achieve peace of mind. With peace of mind comes the painting.

KEEP AWAY FROM THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE



KEEP AWAY FROM THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE  
UT1982 (186x150)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck

## BOLOGNIA DOCET

I enter Italy.

It is very difficult for me to give an explanation. My temperament, my very nature, inclined as it was to contemplation, brought about such results. I cannot say more, it is very difficult for an artist to give explanations.

Bononia Docet means Bologna Teaches, it is the motto of the city and it refers to its prominent university, the oldest in Italy. They call Bologna Fat City, because the food is so good.

You can travel from Bologna all the way to Milan or, in the other direction, to Ferrara, Mantua and Padua, without encountering hills, apart from those visible in the hazy distance. The landscape is without sudden change. There is little brilliant colour to disrupt the warmish neutral hues. You have to become accustomed to looking hard and long for nuances of change that, only slowly, begin to register.

Have you really done what you planned to do?  
On leaving your house, do you not often change your route without thinking about it?  
Do you cease to be yourself on that account?  
And do you not get there anyhow?  
And even if you don't, does it matter?  
The reason is that you didn't have to go in the first place.

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

I'd like to go to Italy, but not to be tourist or a native; to have the pleasure of no responsibility. I am completely uninterested in verisimilitude. I am concerned with essences and artifices, devices, trickery, cunning, contrivance, to make-up appearances.



BOLOGNIA DOCET  
UT1982 (177x152)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck



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## QUESTIONS OF TECHNIQUE GET BACK TO PAINTING

I'm at the point now where I do realize I've pushed things enough to be able to deal with a lot of experience again just by painting quickly, just doing it, having solved what I would think of as a technical problem. Suddenly this year I've done about twenty paintings. Now I think it's about two years since I did twenty paintings in a year.

Memory will once again come into play, sifting out unnecessary details in order to retain only the most compelling images and sensations.

Henry used to say to me, "The real bit of puritanism you have left is that you think if you've spent three months on a painting it's forced to be good, and if you've spent two days on a painting, it's nothing. Often when you just spend two days on it something comes out that doesn't come out in others."

He said, "If you deal with subjects quickly, you actually get more in, because you put more into it."

But, the speed or direction, the sincerity, authenticity, originality of the action doesn't count in the end, nothing matters but the the end experience for the spectator... especially me.

The goal in painting should be freshness (raw, uncooked) after mastery (cooked). But it is difficult to be fresh (and spontaneous) after one has gained mastery. There is, however, a difference between easy familiarity (overcooked) and controlled mastery. If it is controlled mastery, it can remain fresh. It is better to be blunt (stupid) than skilful (in strokes), and it is difficult to be blunt (naive) when one has attained skill. But if a picture is original without effort, it can be blunt and yet skilful, and while being really skilful, it gives an effect of bluntness.



QUESTIONS OF TECHNIQUE  
(Get Back to Painting)  
UT1982 (177x152)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck



## THE USELESSNESS OF CHINESE ROCKS

In China the passion for ordinary rocks, as distinguished from carved stone or jade, goes back many thousands of years to at least neolithic times. In 1133 Tu Wan produced his Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest, in which he listed one hundred and fourteen different types of rocks on the basis of their geographic origin, their aesthetic, and their useful properties.

4. Stone of the Grand Lake in P'ing-Chiang-Fu. Huge specimens, up to fifty feet high, with a colour range from white through pale blue to blue black, their surfaces textured in net-like relief, are hauled out of the lake. The most desirable have tortuous, rugged contours, and abundant hollows. Small surface cavities are called 'arbalest pellet nests'; these are thought to have been made by the wind and water. Reshaped specimens are aged by replacing them in the lake. Some are quite small, and are displayed on stands.

Such rocks were used in gardens or with intricately carved wood or ivory stands on writing and display tables. The convoluted and penetrated surfaces were searched for relationships to landscape, especially mountain views, or sometimes to flora and fauna. Landscape thinking dominated the use of both large and small rocks, they were viewed like the landscape scrolls as microcosms. Garden and table rocks occupied a place between nature and art, or as a fragment of nature made somehow more 'natural' by the metamorphosis of art, either by manipulation or by the way they were seen by the viewer.

Unlike the surrealist found-object, where the found-object is usually man-made and its merit lies in its complete change of purpose and or meaning by the artist who finds it, it is transformed, whereas the rock remains part of nature. The rock is in two worlds: it is a small part of the natural landscape and as art it is an image of the vastness of nature.

The uselessness of Chinese rocks parallels the readily acknowledged uselessness of developed Chinese landscape painting. The recognition of this uselessness is a serious and positive mode of Chinese criticism from the Fourteenth Century on, as written by artists and scholars in a cult of self-depreciation.

What I call painting is just a few simple, hasty strokes of the romantic brush. It does not strive for formal likeness, but is done to please myself...What a world! As if we could blame a eunuch for not growing a beard!

(Ni Tsan 1301-74)

These few scribblings of a rough and clumsy brush can only be taken as an expression of a moment's interest painted for gratifying my host's graciousness.

(Wang Hui 1632-1717)

And one of the best titles in the history of painting:  
Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Dots. (Tao Chi 1685)

To seek out and collect table and garden rocks, to understand their subsequent differentiation from things and their relationship to the vastness of nature as well as the embodiment of nature in painting through the study and appreciation of rocks, was a part of a personal adjustment to a 'dusty world', the world of suffering as seen through Buddhist tradition. Like painting, the passion for rocks was an affirmation of useless art against the grain of the 'dusty world'.

How to find peace in a world of suffering? You ask why I am here. I don't know. I am living high in a tree and look down. Here I rest free from all troubles like a bird on its nest. People call me a dangerous man, but I answer: 'You are like devils.'

I am at two with nature.



THE USELESSNESS OF CHINESE ROCKS  
(An Invitation to Pleasure)  
UT1982 (185x131)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck



A CONVERSATION ON METHOD  
UT1982 (177x152)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck

## AN INVITATION TO PLEASURE

A Tao says: He produces without taking possession, he acts without hesitation, he completes his work rather than clinging to it; and because he does not become attached to it, his work will last.

Picasso says: Do you know that when I painted my first guitars I had never had one in my hands? With the first money they gave me I bought one, and after that I never painted another.

To be free of responsibility and to produce effects without questioning the causes, which are inaccessible, is painting as a sort of primitive state of pleasure; it stands for pleasure, it stands for journeys and places, people and sex, and every other sensation, and the other arts. It produces a delight that you can try to recapture but never explain.

The act of painting is a pleasure impulse; as it is comfort, memory, recollection, irony, another possibility of life. It is an intellectual operation, it denotes a concept; yet it is an event, an activity, an occurrence.

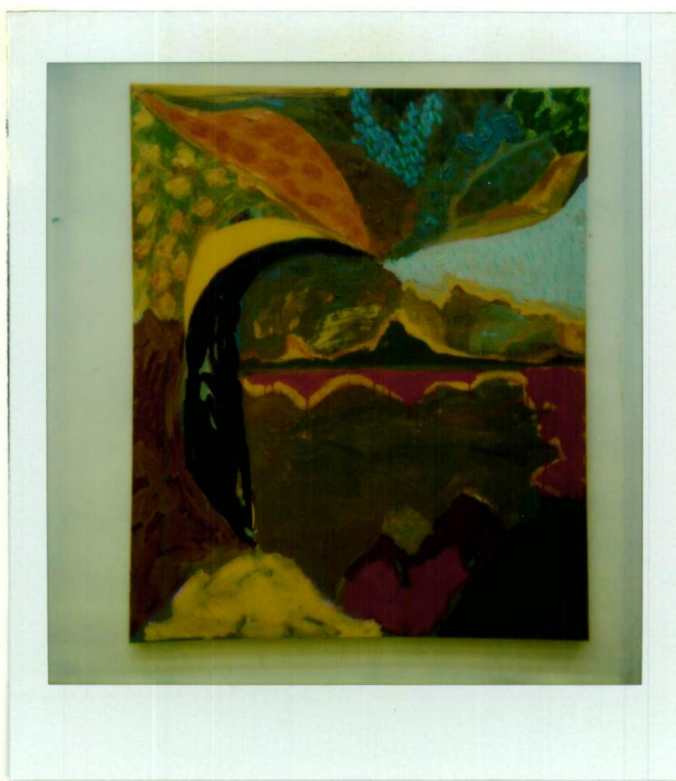
But the trouble with looking for pleasure is that serious critics look for the tough stuff: august, intellectual, passionate, radical, biting art. In the face of that serious severe view, to have a vision of pleasure, and not be trite or sentimental, the painting requires real visual strength.

Ennui is not far removed from delight; it is delight seen from the shores of pleasure. (Barthes)

Nietzsche, in *The Will to Power*, characterized modernism as the opposition between external mobility and a certain inner heaviness and fatigue.

Dekooning said, I know there's a great idea somewhere out there, but whenever I want to get into it, I get a feeling of apathy and want to lie down and sleep.

With painters of pleasure, total recall is subject to forgetfulness as they doze in the sun, living comfortably off the interest from their modernist investments. The painting is a metaphor for the conflict of moral energy and the heaviness and fatigue of sun-city ennui. In the temptation to try and express a more serious view, like a profound spirituality, that is obviously not part of our city life, we resort to nature, landscape, the pastoral dream: rural idiocy.



THE FOUNDATIONS OF A STYLE  
(A Father's Instructions: The Style is the Man)  
UT1982 (177x152)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck

## THE TECHNICAL ATMOSPHERE

Landscape painting is a sign of the sheer enjoyment of nature, associated with the poet and recluse who spurn the allurements of position and wealth, in the sentiment of joy and contentment in simple country life.

Six technical aspects of painting (landscape):

1. Creating a lifelike tone and atmosphere.
2. Building structure through brush-work.
3. Depicting the forms of things as they are.
4. Appropriate colouring.
5. Composition.
6. Transcribing and copying.

The first is the essential technique the rest follow. The key phrase, a vital tone and atmosphere, suggests a successful creation of tone and atmosphere that is moving and alive, and by all Chinese criteria this tone and atmosphere, rather than verisimilitude, is the goal of painting. To sometimes change the physical likeness to point up the individuality: to look for something in painting that goes beyond mere realistic likeness.

If one aims at catching a lifelike atmosphere, the likeness is implicit.

Likeness consists of the basic individuality, and both the basic individuality and the formal likeness come from the artist's conception of the subject and are based ultimately upon brush-work (form of lines).

This is why a good painter is usually a good calligraphist.

The great mistake of all painters is to have wanted to render the effect of the moment of nature, and not think that a simple luminous assemblage puts the mind in the same state as it is in when looking at a landscape.

At some point the painting ceases to be a human creation and becomes part of nature: it is an equally real visual phenomena in the world around us.

Then the landscape walks into the room.



BETA BISCIX  
(The Disappearance of Painters of Stories)  
UT1981-82 (178x116)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck





THIS INTERESTING PHOTOGRAPH IS OF THE LINDISFARNE GOLF CLUB COMMITTEE. IT WAS TAKEN IN 1904 WHEN THE NEW CLUB HOUSE WAS OPENED. STANDING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT ARE GOLFERS OLDHAM AND BAIRD (WITH THE CUP OF TEA). SITTING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT ARE ELLISTON, YOUNG, HAMMOND (WITH THE BOOK OF RULES) AND WILLS. LINDISFARNE IS ACROSS THE RIVER DERWENT FROM HOBART.





THE MEASURING PLACE  
(The Peking German - Meine Deutsche Lehrer)  
UT1981-82 (179x118)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck

## GONE TO CHINA

A work of art should have its own significance and impose it on the viewer even before he knows the subject. When I see a painting, I am not concerned about which scene I am looking at, for I immediately understand the feelings aroused in me: they are in the lines, in the composition, and in the colour, and the title merely confirms my impression.

I find it impossible to believe that any such landscape has ever existed anywhere but in fairyland...Is this mountain made of gold, mahogany, velvet or porcelain? The mind is wearied out in conjecture and hardly knows where to stop. The sky in which the horizon lines float is luminous and diaphanous. But neither Spain nor Italy nor the shores of the Bosphorus could have provided Turner with any model for the creation of this gorgeous atmosphere...

I believe it was John Cage who once told me, "When you start working, everybody is in your studio - the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas - all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you're lucky, even you leave."

Then there is a time in life when you just take a walk: And you walk in your own landscape.



LOOKING FOR CHINA  
(Sounds so Simple, I've Just Got to Go)  
UT1981-82 (179x118)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck

THE PHILOSOPHY OF FURNITURE  
BEWARE OF EDGAR POE

A Scottish house-painter's manual, 1836.

The laws of harmonious colouring adapted to interior decorations, and other useful purposes...very nearly the same laws by which we decide on the higher merits of a painting, suffice for decision on the adjustment of a chamber.

It is a rule in the higher branches of the art, that confusion of parts of equal strength should always be avoided. A room of this description resembles a Chinese landscape, where the foreground and distance are jumbled together. (Cezanne reckoned that Gauguin was not a painter: he only made Chinese pictures.)

The painter must also make of the wall upon which his work is hung, the room containing it, the whole house, a Harmony, a Symphony, an Arrangement, as perfect as the picture or print which became part of it.

The soul of the apartment is the carpet. From it are deduced not only the hues but the forms of all the objects incumbent.

The pleasure of flatness is the relief of not having to walk into the picture: the horror of being sucked-in, falling.

The painting has an amphibiological status: it is a hollow, an abyss, a depth, and at the same time a wall, an enclosed space, a frontal coating of pigment.



THE PHILOSOPHY OF FURNITURE  
(Beware of Edgar Poe)  
UT1981-82 (178x116)cms  
Acrylic on Cotton Duck



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A MESSAGE FROM GERMANY FROM ROBERT RYMAN

It is accepted that a painter does need a knowledge of painting of the past, in order to be able to focus correctly on the problems of painting. Yet, it is this very knowledge that can hinder the possibilities for discovery, that keeps our minds cluttered with past procedures, making our vision static and bound to the known. A painter is only limited by his degree of perception. Painting is only limited by the known.

22 JUNE Dear Nichey, A quote from THE BRITISH MUSEUM Robert Ryman: "It is accepted that a painter does need a knowledge of painting of the past in order to be able to focus correctly on the problems of painting yet, it is this very knowledge that can hinder the possibilities for discovery, that keeps our minds cluttered with past procedures, making our vision static and bound to the known."

A painter is only limited by his degree of perception. Painting is only limited by the known.

Love that on Chris for me  
Head.

See you soon Love Geoff

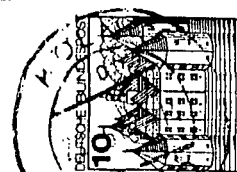
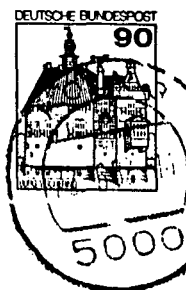
**The approaching storm**

Indian painting. Guler style. c.AD 1770.

8.9 x 6.1 in, 22.6 x 15.5 cm. (1948 10-9 0110)

Manuk and Coles Bequest.

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HOBART 7001  
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AUSTRALIA

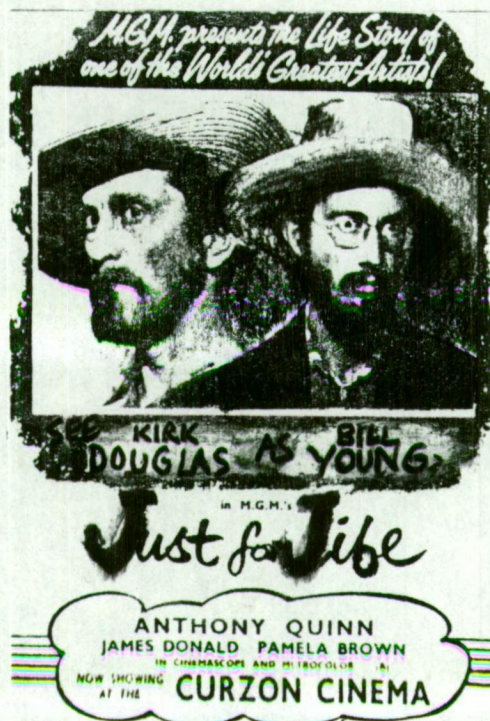
Printed by Henry Stone & Son (Printers) Ltd., Banbury, England

I have heard many persons even attack the great extent of his faculties and his high critical intelligence as a reason for a mistrust of his musical genius, and I think this is the proper occasion to refute a very common error, the principal root of which is perhaps the most miserable of human sentiments, envy. "A man who reasons so much about his art is not capable of naturally producing beautiful works," say those who would thus strip the genius of his reasonableness, and would assign to him a function purely instinctive, and in short, vegetal....I pity those poets whom only instinct guides; I believe them incomplete. In the spiritual life of initiators a crisis inevitably arises, when they desire to rationalize their art, to discover those obscure laws by virtue of which they have produced, and to draw from this study a series of precepts of which the divine end is infallibility in poetic production...it is impossible that a poet does not harbour a critic. The reader will not, therefore, be astonished that I consider the poet as the best of all critics.









JUST FOR JIBE JUST FOR JI  
BILL YOUNG BILL YOUNG BIL  
JUST FOR JIBE JUST FOR JI  
THE WORLDS GREATEST ARTIS  
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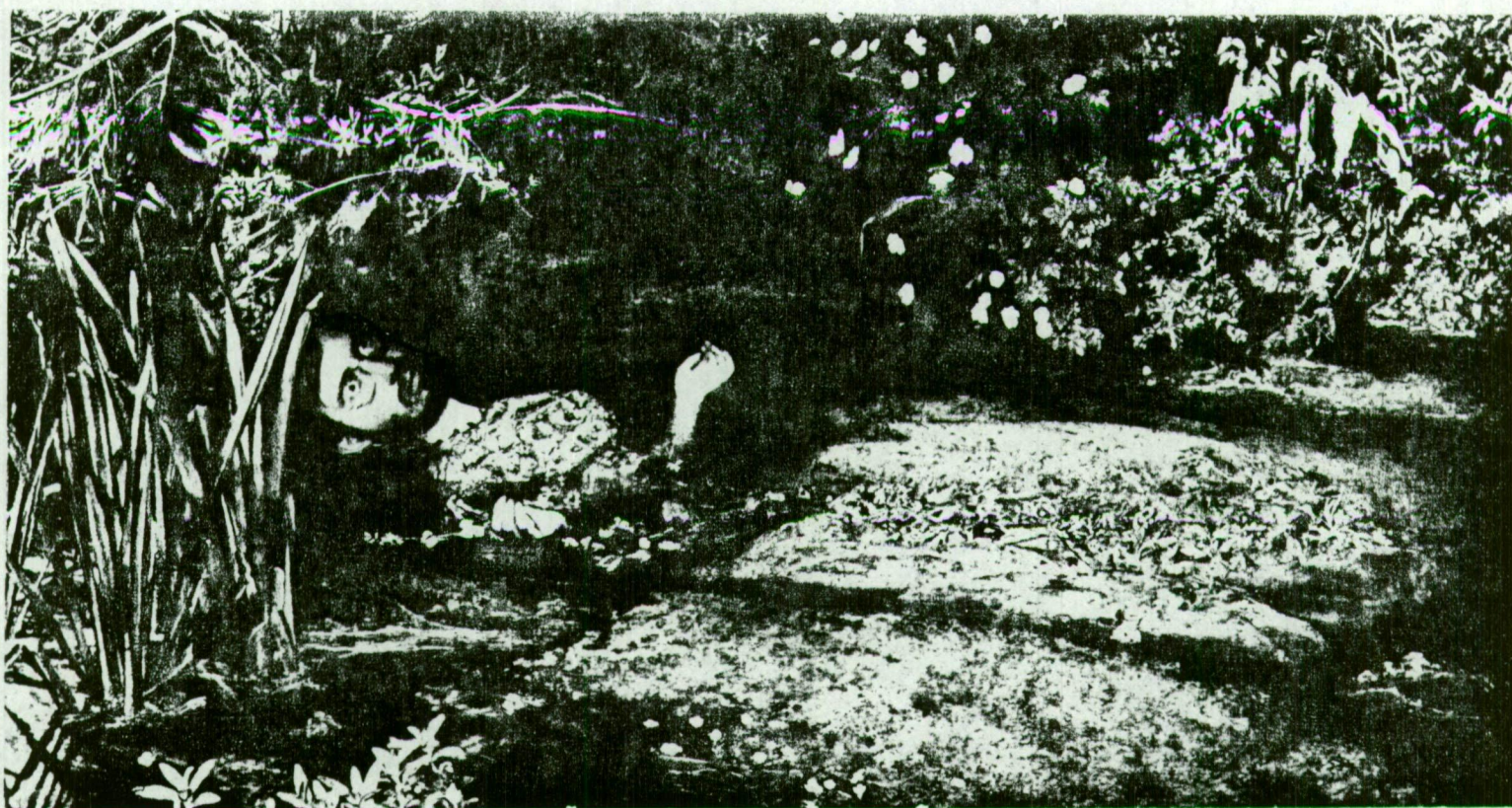


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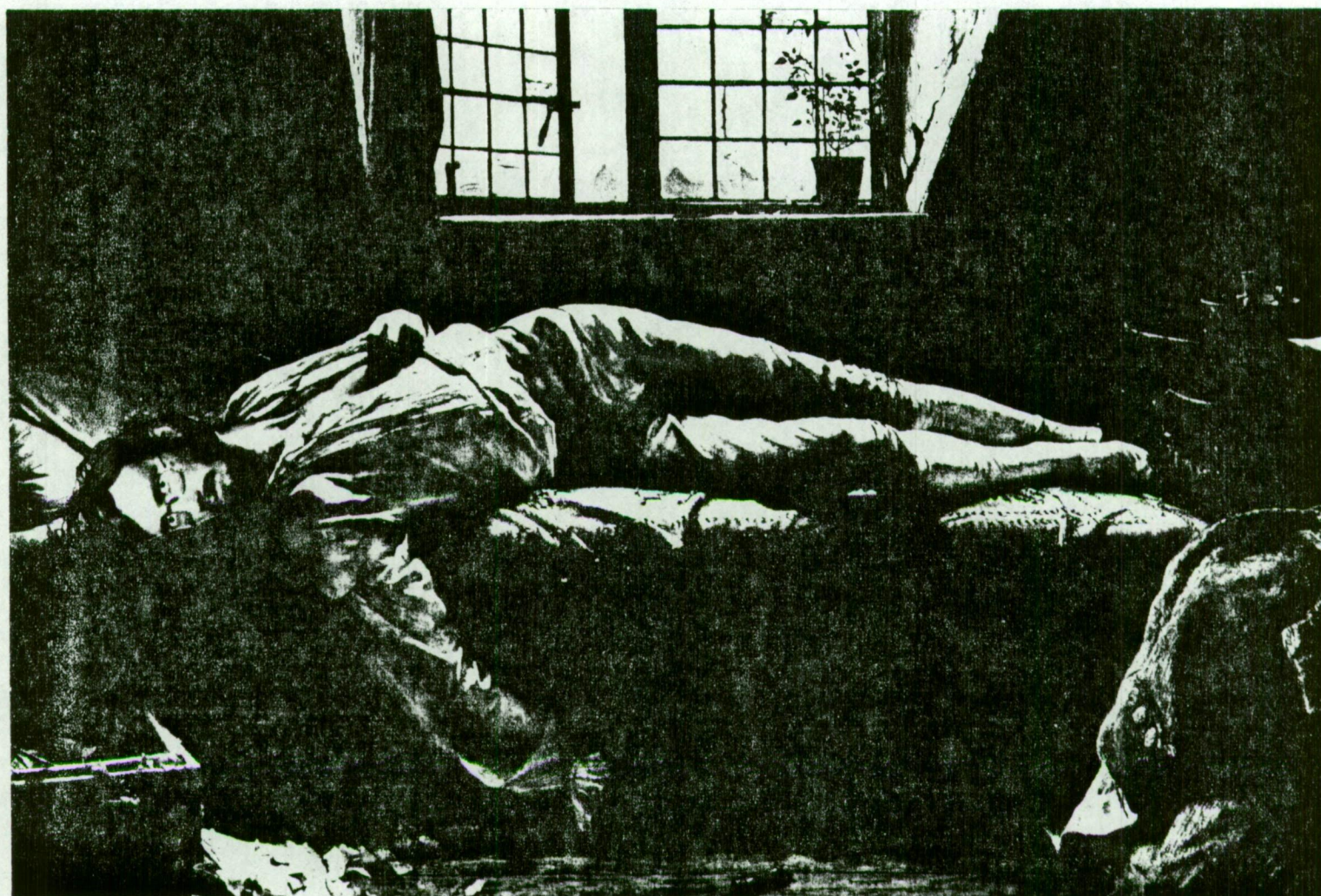
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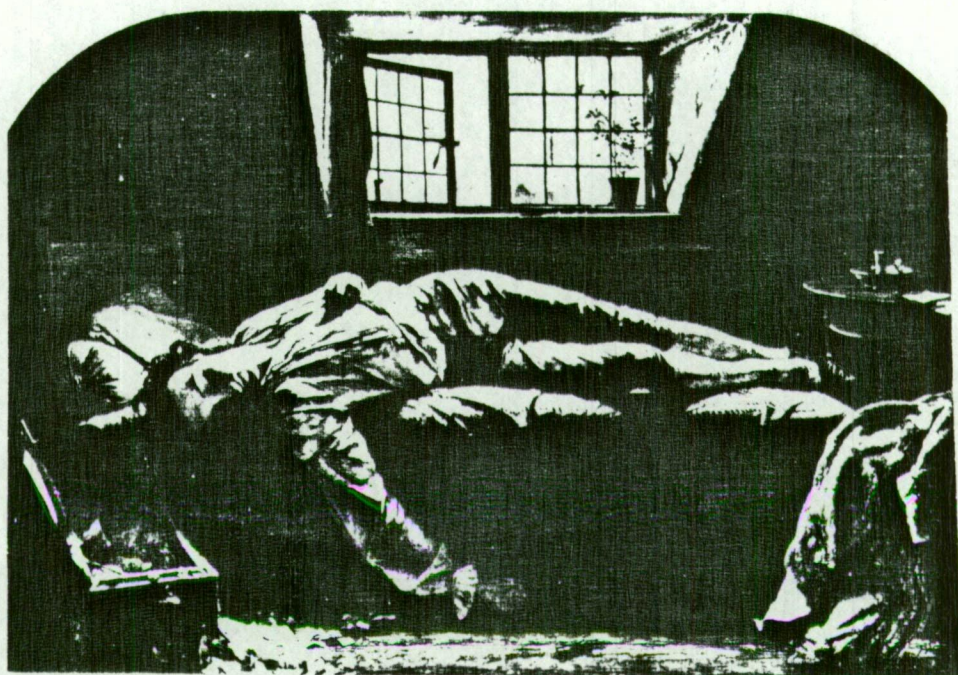
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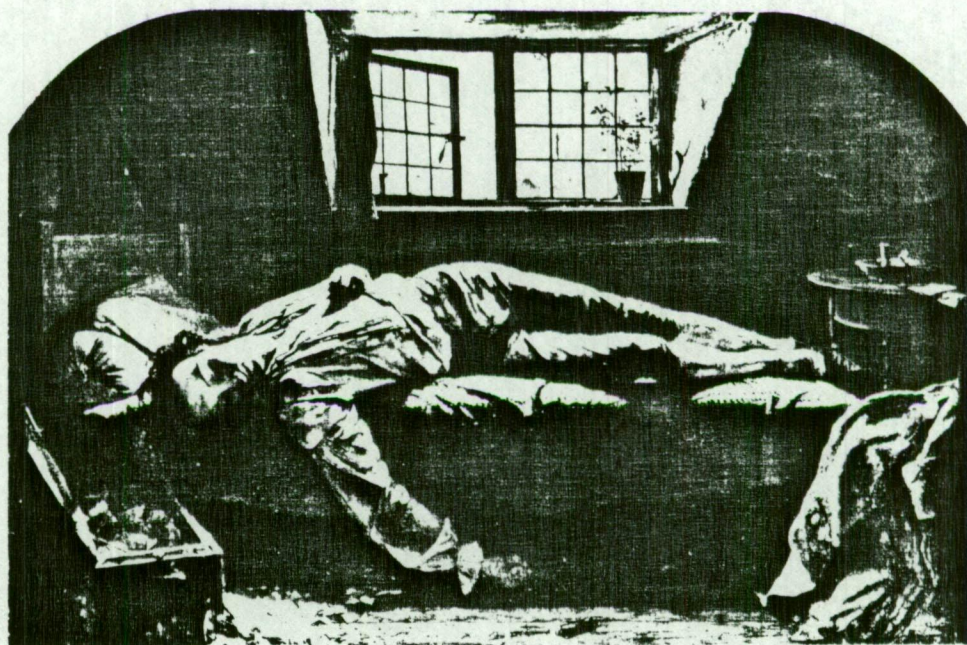
theorie, theorique, theoria: contemplation, spectacle, mental conception; theoros: spectator; thea: sight; theatre. A spectacle: 'a Theory or Sight'. A contemplated sight: 'the true Theory of death when I contemplate a skull'; 'all their theory and contemplation (which they count Science) represents nothing but waking men's dreams, and sick men's phantasies'. A scheme (of ideas): 'to execute their owne Theorie in this Church'. An explanatory scheme: 'leave such theories to those that study Meteors'. 'Philosophy...divided into two parts, namely, speculative and practical'; 'only pleasing in the Theory, but not in the Practice'; 'Theorie without Practice will serve but for little'. Speculation; theoretical and speculative. Scheme, 'a scheme of ideas which explains practice'; 'were a theory open to no objection it would cease to be theory and would become law'. Theory in active relation to practice: an interaction between things done, things observed and (systematic) explanation of these. Speculation: a projected idea, with no necessary reference to practice. Doctrine or ideology: a largely programmatic idea of how things should be. There is practice in the sense of a particular thing done (and observed) which can be immediately related to theory. There is practice in the sense of a repeated or customary action in which the theory/practice relation is often a contrast between one way of doing a thing and another, the theoretical being that which is proposed and the practical that which is now usually done. Theory as the (systematic) explanation of practice, with which it is in regular and active relation, can be prejudicial. Practice which has become conventional or habitual can be traced to (or made conscious as) a base in theory, and theory is then used derogatively just because it explains and (implicitly or explicitly) challenges some customary action. Praxis is used in specialized contexts; in relation to the physical sciences: an active interrelation between explanation and things happening or made to happen in controlled conditions. Praxis: practice, action, the practice or exercise of an art or an idea, a set of examples for practice, and accepted practice. It is never quite separate from practice, though the notion of a 'scheme for practice' obviously distinguishes it from theory/practice oppositions: the praxis is systematic exercise in an understood and organized skill. 'In theory false, and pernicious in praxis'. In Hegelian and Marxist senses praxis is practice informed by theory and also, though less emphatically, theory informed by practice, as distinct both from practice uninformed by or unconcerned with theory and from theory which remains theory and is not put to the test of practice. In effect it is a word intended to unite theory with the strongest sense of practical (but not conventional or customary) activity: practice as action. Praxis is then also used, derivatively, to describe a whole mode of activity in which, by analysis but only by analysis, theoretical and practical elements can be distinguished, but which is always a whole activity, to be judged as such. The opposition between theory and practice is then, it is said, broken down, by the interactive redefinition of each term.



For my brother Theo



ANGST IS DEAD \*



\*A note from Joseph Albers to Harold Rosenberg  
in the late sixties.



Icarus Shmicarus

If you never spend your money  
you know you'll always have some cash.  
If you stay cool and never burn  
you'll never turn to ash.  
If you lick the boots that kick you  
then you'll never feel the lash,  
and if you crawl along the ground  
at least you'll never crash.  
So why why why -  
WHAT MADE YOU THINK YOU COULD FLY?

(Adrian Mitchell, 'Out Loud', 1968)

"The modern philosopher had told me again and again that I was in the right place, and still I felt depressed even in acquiescence. But I had heard that I was in the wrong place, and my soul sang for joy, like a bird in spring."

(G.K. Chesterton)

### ANGST IS DEAD

Painting has been under the threat of death since the 1830's;\* and the threats have appeared from throughout the whole web of painting's social relationships. Painters have frequently been made to feel they should justify what they do in terms that are not to do with painting. Painting is often pressed into other intellectual activities: moral, aesthetical, or political.

By the end of the 1960's, the formalist point of painting was vanishing: nothing as art, that 'nothingness'. Minimalistic painting may have been seen as the most ambitious painting then, but the reaction to its nothingness spread throughout the spectrum of painting, and lead to a general realization that painting was limited. Many did not merely believe that their painting ideology was wrong, but it brought on a complete loss of faith in painting. Painting seemed defunct, and they went elsewhere. It was the reality of painting that was unacceptable: it did not do a lot of things it was supposed to.

Throughout the seventies this caused the greatest general crisis of heart in the history of painting. For some it was exhilarating, some just ignored it, and it plunged many into a state of high anxiety (heightened by the collapse of the art market).

The reality of painting was that it is not a particularly viable medium for those other activities. Painting has a limited set of systems compared to the ultra-conceptualist hi-tech art. Painting is a laborious medium compared to photography, or printing, or video. Painting is an anti-social activity: it is a private enterprise and it belongs to private enterprise. Painting is ineffective as propaganda compared to film and video in television; and its politics are suspect because it is alined with capitalist materialism and with marxist materialism.

It has been a feature of the modernist era that painting has in various ways accommodated a permanent state of crisis, which has contributed to the insecurity of painting; but it has now lead to the fact that painting is unable to maintain the primary role of modernism: to initiate the shocking new. The extreme limitations of painting cannot match the scientific and technological belief in progress.\*\*

\*Notes 1.

\*\*Notes 2.

Now, having lost that race, painting over the last decade has been under attack by a new puritanism, resulting in a preponderance of ethical over aesthetical considerations. There is now a glut of anxiety-ridden, hyper-aware painters sweating over a puritanical need to justify art in social terms...to make it relevant. There are those neo-victorians who would put painting into the service of morality, and those neo-marxists who would put painting into the service of politics.

With the problem that painting is not a viable medium for propaganda, and there being no longer an audience with a consensus of beliefs in moral or political certitudes, numerous criticisms, of the ilk of Suzi Gablik's morality plays,\* see painting as having failed to fulfil the demands of the political and moral puritans, and has tended to collaborate, even wallow in our decadent mass consumer society. Predictably, their prognosis is that painting is dying, and their treatment is to finish it off by giving it up.

Some painters have merely ignored the issues of the relevance of painting in our time, and stuck to the problem of mainline painting. The end-game of modernism has been the phenomenon of ambitious painting redoing its history. It may be that the academy is arguably the only place left for the traditional arts. But it also may be that the need merely to look new, modern, and experimental, no matter how tired the cliches being dealt with, is another symptom of the general anxiety in the arts, an anxiety in which experiment itself becomes a style. Certainly the history of modernism is written in terms of continuously accelerating change from one style to another. The machinery of communications and publicity is now so efficient that the styles change with such rapidity that there seems to be no longer any real styles at all. Instead there are fashions, idiosyncracies, group mannerisms, and obsessions; but all these are different from genuine style, which in the past has always been an expression of a certain fundamental coherence, an agreement about the ways random experience can be made sense of. Style is bound up with belief of one kind or another. There are as many viable styles as there are good artists.

\*Notes 3.

When style becomes confused with fashion, then a great strain is put on the artist; for nothing is given, everything begins and ends with him, and his position becomes proportionately more difficult, tentative, compromising, risky; and fashion is controlled by the middle-men of art: the critics, gallery owners, big collectors, and the ambitious cultural institutions; by all those whose relationship to the artist is like that of big industry to the inventor: a matter of production, promotion, marketing and cash.

The artist seems inextricably bound to the moneyed classes; from aristocratic wealth to the capitalistic middle-class, they have been incredibly flexible in adapting to the changes in art. The middle-class inherited art's mirror of wealth from the aristocracy; and in the shift away from the expression of materialism to anxiety and guilt, art became the mirror of paranoia and suffering over their wealth.

The artist's anxiety becomes about his impotence when faced with a permissive, absorbent, utterly immovable audience, which pays back the most impassioned abuses with cash and applause. It is not so much the artist now lacks the traditional supports of religion, politics, national cultural tradition, reason: an ideological void; but that whatever he does will be bought, sucked in, and absorbed, and forgotten. Painting is on a par with the movies, television, spectator sport, that is, entertainment.

It is the archetypal odyssey of our time: the wistful questing after dopey cons that our society responds to with the inevitable end in materialism.

What appears to be a broad cultural collapse, has formed a base of insecurity that influences personal deficiency. There seems to be no centre to the culture. We have this opulent, relatively well-educated society, yet people lose themselves, because they do not deal with their sense of emptiness. People are constantly creating real unnecessary neurotic problems for themselves, that keep them from dealing with more terrifying unsolvable problems about the universe: to create problems to escape reality by distraction.



The way to confront the emptiness is by making a series of individual moral choices, based essentially on an instinctive sense of right and wrong. We have to come to terms with the fact that the universe seems to contain only the grimmest possibilities. We have to develop structures of our own that encourage us to believe it genuinely pays to make the moral choice, just from the pragmatic point of view. We all succumb to the distractions: who does not deny the reality of death, to go on every day, but how do you come face to face with your own mortality, despite the distractions of work and life?

The determination to confront the intimations of mortality, using every imaginative resource and technical skill to bring it close, understand it, accept it, control it, is finally what distinguishes genuinely advanced art from the fashionable crowd of pseudo-avantgardes.

"There is only one liberty: to come to terms with death. After which, everything is possible."

(Camus)

"Life is impoverished, it loses in interest, when the highest stake in the game of living, life itself, may not be risked."

(Freud)

Amidst all the junk of contemporary culture, the temptations, the seductions, how do you keep from selling out? To try to pay attention to the moral side of issues as they arise, and try not to make the wrong choice. We all sell out, insidiously; it's impossible not to sell out unless you drop out: give away all your physical possessions and live like a hermit.

Poverty, the lack of money, non-materialism, a state most artists seem to endure for lengthy periods, has become a badge of creativity, that is for society an alibi of conscience: you've got to starve to be creative. But in reality the opposite is true. DeKooning reckoned that "the trouble with poverty is it takes up all your time."

In Somerset Maugham's novel, "Of Human Bondage",\* the hero as a struggling young painting student is given advice by his teacher.

"There is nothing so degrading as the constant anxiety about one's means of livelihood. I have nothing but contempt for the people who despise money. They are hypocrites or fools. Money is

like a sixth sense without which you cannot make a complete use of the other five. Without an adequate income half the possibilities of life are shut off. The only thing to be careful about is that you do not pay more than a shilling for the shilling you earn. You will hear people say that poverty is the best spur to the artist. They have never felt the iron of it in their flesh. They do not know how mean it makes you. It exposes you to endless humiliation, it cuts your wings, it eats into your soul like a cancer. It is not wealth one asks for, but just enough to preserve one's dignity, to work unhampered, to be generous, frank, and independent. I pity with all my heart the artist, whether he writes or paints, who is entirely dependent for subsistence upon his art."

The romanticist nineteenth century view of the artist, as an isolated, sensitive individual set apart from the mass of ordinary people, has been a long running popular view, often supported by the artist. The artist has been generally seen as somebody who has put his feelings ahead of his duties to others; thus alienation was the price of art.

Probably the majority of young painters have set out believing that alienation is evidence of artistic sensitivity, to become their endurance ticket to art, and a claim to membership of a spiritual elite. Often the novice identifies his desire to be an artist as a moral choice: implying his indifference to materialism, and his dedication to spiritual wholeness and creativity, which is lacking elsewhere in society; to be an artist involves a life-style devoted to doing what you like, based on a faith in feeling and self-indulgence, and the idealism of freeing the potential valuable self. But that idealism is about as free as being involved in becoming a movie star. This stance of idealism is totally irrelevant to art. Many art students do not distrust sentimentality, or emotional self-indulgence, yet sustaining an artist's career ordinarily requires the capacities to resist just those tendencies.

Art schools often fail to convince students that discipline is required for the real world, to look and take notice. The real world for the artist is the market, the press, competitiveness, snobbery, chauvinism, prejudices; a stringent proving ground for any fantasies. The art school is a form of protective custody, and tends to support, or rouse, even confirm emotional

dependencies, paranoia, and sanction distrust of criticism and analysis; all traits which are not useful equipment for professional artists. Students often have a strong to vague expectation that the expression of self can be meaningful; but the mere practice of art won't fill the gap between feeling, sensitive individuals and an inhumane, philistine society.

Self-expression grew out of nineteenth century romanticist theories of genius and art, as a reaction to ideal beauty, a long running Greek myth. But another idealistic lusting: after purity and innocence; at its height, an unquestioning belief in the creative value of naive spontaneity. But, the innocence lies ...in not knowing what you take for granted, or how you are connected; it relies on lying and denying influences that govern your work.

This might be a description of any art school in the 1970's:

"This is not a school, it is a work centre to which the students come of their own free will and where they work just as their talents and inclinations prompt them...the teacher..must adapt himself to every different pupil personality. This constant adaptation of the teacher to the personality of the student is the essential thing."

However, that was written in 1912, about Cizek's art school for children. The inability or reluctance of art schools to debate the philosophical issues of being an artist now, amounts to ethical cowardice, and greatly contributes to the poverty of the visual arts in Australia: most graduates do not know how to operate in the real world.

The basis of much misunderstanding, is that the artist's experience on the outer edge of whatever is tolerable, is somehow a substitute for creativity. In fact, the opposite is true; in order to make art out of deprivation and despair, the artist needs proportionally rich internal resources. Contrary to common belief, there is no short-cut to creative ability, not even through booze, or drugs, or psychical systems.

"The terrible amount of cerebral stuff that comes in..does this relate to human justice? ...the enormous moral business that goes on in the mind of everyone who writes anything worth writing."

(Scott Fitzgerald)

Scott Fitzgerald's doctor tried to get him to face his drinking problem, to be treated for it if necessary, but Fitzgerald balked at psychotherapy...partly from the artist's instinctive distrust of having his inner workings tampered with. He was afraid the psychiatric treatment might make him a reasoning, analytic person, instead of a feeling one, and he instanced several novelists who had been psychoanalysed and had written nothing but junk ever since. He considered alcohol part of his working equipment.

"But if there is not essential difference between an over extended, imaginative, functioning man using alcohol as a stimulus or a temporary aishment and a schitzophrene, I am naturally alarmed about my ability to collaborate in this cure at all."

(Scott Fitzgerald) \*

Robert Hughes in "Shock of the New", discussed the artist-in-angst: Van Gogh.

"Today the doctors would give him lithium and tranquillisers, and we would probably not have the paintings: had the obsessions been banished, the exorcising power of the art could well have leaked away."

All artists are wary of ideas: the most dangerous liason is the painter living with ideas; and the most deadly ideas concern the creative self. The fear of diluting the responses of sensibility and passion by argument, or the examination of artistic activity; and yet artists have always been under scrutiny: there is a fascination with social and psychological conflict in artistic activity. For the artist the conflict must always be between the artist and the art. The maintenance of being a painter, is as much about being a painter as it is about painting. It may be that the painter remains the romantic, riddled with anxiety, just because, come the crunch, he still does it in the garret, alone, and suffers doing it. Baudelaire in a New York loft. The dandified heroics of suffering the despair of a man unable to raise his life to the height of his desire, his great expectations.

Baudelaire grovelled in suffering this world, believing it would save him in the here-after, glorifying suffering as a means of redemption. But he kept his angst out of his working, by impersonally referring to the content of his work; creating by an act of reason, calculating the extent of his limited resources and talent: working to a set plan fitted into a framework of a few basic ideas. He wrote about painting:

"There is no pure chance in art, anymore than in mechanics... A picture is a machine, all of whose systems of construction are intelligible to the practised eye." \*

But in the end Baudelaire attempted to escape his despair, his anxiety, by invoking the supernatural.

"O Satan have pity on my long misery...  
You who know all, great king of underworld things,  
familiar healer of human anguishes." \*\*

He still went down, in the manner that was to be the classical flame-out of the romanticist modernists, particularly of high modernism: the New York School. It is about life defeating art, and the artist. The romantic's disease: the martyr complex: the artist becomes determined to embarrass and alienate orthodox society in some obscure way by the spectacle of his own destruction. The artist's angst turns into a form of social masochism.

"It's not what an artist does that counts, but what he is. Cezanne would have never interested me a bit if he had lived and thought like Jacques Emile Blanche, even if the apples he painted had been ten times as beautiful. What forces our interest is Cezanne's anxiety...that's Cezanne's lesson; the torments of Van Gogh...that is the actual drama of man. The rest is a sham."

(Picasso, 1935) \*\*\*

The self as the source of art, makes art most serious for artists because their lives are at issue, but that is the issue for everyone. The artist throughout history, in most cultures has been the model of the individual, and in the modernist era, as a model of the autonomous individual.

"It is for a voyage into solitude that man was created."

(E.M.Forster)

\*Note 6

\*\*Note 7

\*\*\*Note 8

Man's inability to live with himself has been the prime cause of his inability to cope with his fellows, with nature, and the cosmos; and his alibi has been to invent gods, superstitions, woman, and competition. Man has attempted to disguise his self with systems, culminating in the most sophisticated, complex, and confusing quasi-science of the analysis and treatment of the self, of mental health. Man has been guilt-ridden by his fear of his self.

"Angst is a fear of metaphysical insecurity."

(Heidegger)

Man has only confronted his self by addressing himself to god (himself), or nature(himself), or the cosmos(void), and sought security in mystifying and systematizing such metaphysical dialogues...the dream time. In the nineteenth century the total dismantling of these ancient myths began; they were no longer convincing man, and were replaced by a new set of rules for not seeing your self: freuding.

While the strong whinge of the political, and moral puritans continues, the last real debate on spirituality and painting, centred around Barnett Newman.

"The self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting."

(Newman, 1965)

For me, Rosenberg's<sup>\*</sup> rejection of Hess's<sup>\*\*</sup> epic scholarship on Newman's work, in which Hess attempted to relate the work to exalted mystical experiences (revealed in texts in Newman's library), finishes the issue of spirituality in art. The spiritual in art centres on aesthetical pseudo-ethics: sensual morals...when your spine tingles, its right!

Rosenberg thought that the issue for Newman was to 'see' what he believed: metaphysical, heroic experiences he conceived as analogous, even synonymous with the struggle of art, his own struggle with the medium. He saw that struggle as an attempt to participate in the sublime; that painting itself could provide the subject of the sublime, without the heroic landscapes or deeds.

\*Note 9

\*\*Note 10



Newman passionately associated his religion with the tradition of modernism, "from Emerson and Kierkegaard to Mondrian, that holds both inner unity and coherence in practice to depend upon reduction, concentration, and repetition". Newman associated his Jewish religion with the whole tradition of poetic symbolism, and his readings and concepts produced not an organized outlook of religious or philosophical solidarity, but a kind of "metaphysical hum that resonates in his paintings and indicates their mental character".

Newman was bound to his time and place: a New York artist in the post-1945 period trying to break away from the ties of European culture, and thus conceive the art object as a "creation out of nothing", to make a one man culture in which was combined the heroic, the pathetic, the philosophical, and the aesthetic, in a single event: practising painting: to practice the sublime, not make symbols for it. But this singular culture, removed from a universally comprehensible set of symbols, can only be understood by "indirect communication": through sympathy and belief, and 'the knowledge'. Standing before a painting by Newman, the spectator may experience the sublime, exaltation, or be charged by a flood of sensations to do with the visual fact.

There is a potency of ceremonial objects of all creeds, that is at once real and unreal; so the celebrants of a cult might know the figure of their god was a wooden carving, but in a festival they can worship the effigy as a living god.

"Some of them have hidden the figure in the shrubbery, but they search with the others, they know where it is, and know it not."

(Thomas Mann)

What you see, is what you see. What you believe you see, is what you believe you see.

It is probable that the future of painting lies in the proclamation of its limitations, and to reject the scientific and technological belief in progress, and to mitigate those more alien and depersonalizing aspects of our mass consumer society by attempting to reassert the humane dimension that it increasingly lacks. It may be that a kind of aestheticism based on the

purity of individual artists' inspiration, his sensibility, and eccentricity, is the only valid defence that artists have against the pressures they are subjected to. In the present permissive situation, a real test of originality and quality is not a question of form or mode, but of psychic exploration, not of artifact, but the artist's identity. There is no longer any clear distinction between a critical and an existential judgement. Art has become caught-up in a pursuit of sanity: a view of the world that is pragmatic, hard-minded, and empirical in attitude to experience; no longer concerned with beliefs, but with sceptical, non-idealistic survival: a worldliness.

CHRISTOPHER COVENTRY  
UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA  
SEPTEMBER 1981

"A materialist attends to the affairs of the world. A man enslaved by the material world lives in a state of tension. He who is tense labours over his paintings and destroys himself. He who moves among the hustle and bustle of the world handles his brush and ink with caution and restraint. Thus the environment impinges upon a man, can only do him harm and in the end make him unhappy. I meet the world as it comes, yield superficially to the hustlers, and thus achieve peace of mind. With peace of mind comes the painting."

(Shih-t'ao, 1660)

"We shall not only have no reason to admire people who endure suffering, face danger or struggle to be good, it is possible that we shall have little interest in pictures or books about them. The art and literature of a new culture will be about other things."

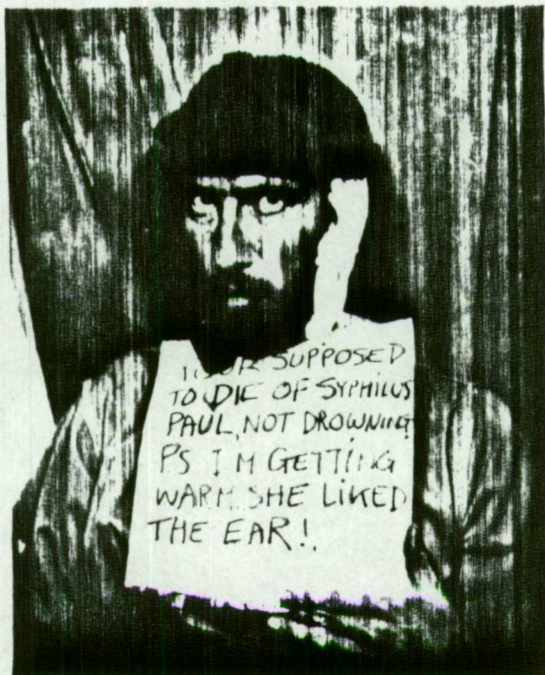
(B.F. Skinner, 'Beyond Freedom and Dignity')

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"There is no pure chance in art, anymore than in mechanics. A happy invention is the simple consequence of a sound train of reasoning whose immediate deductions one may perhaps have skipped, just as a fault in the consequence of a faulty principle. A picture is a machine, all of whose systems of construction are intelligible to the practised eye; in which everything justifies its existence, if the picture is a good one; where one tone is always planned to make the most of another; and where an occasional fault in drawing is sometimes necessary, so as to avoid sacrificing something more important."  
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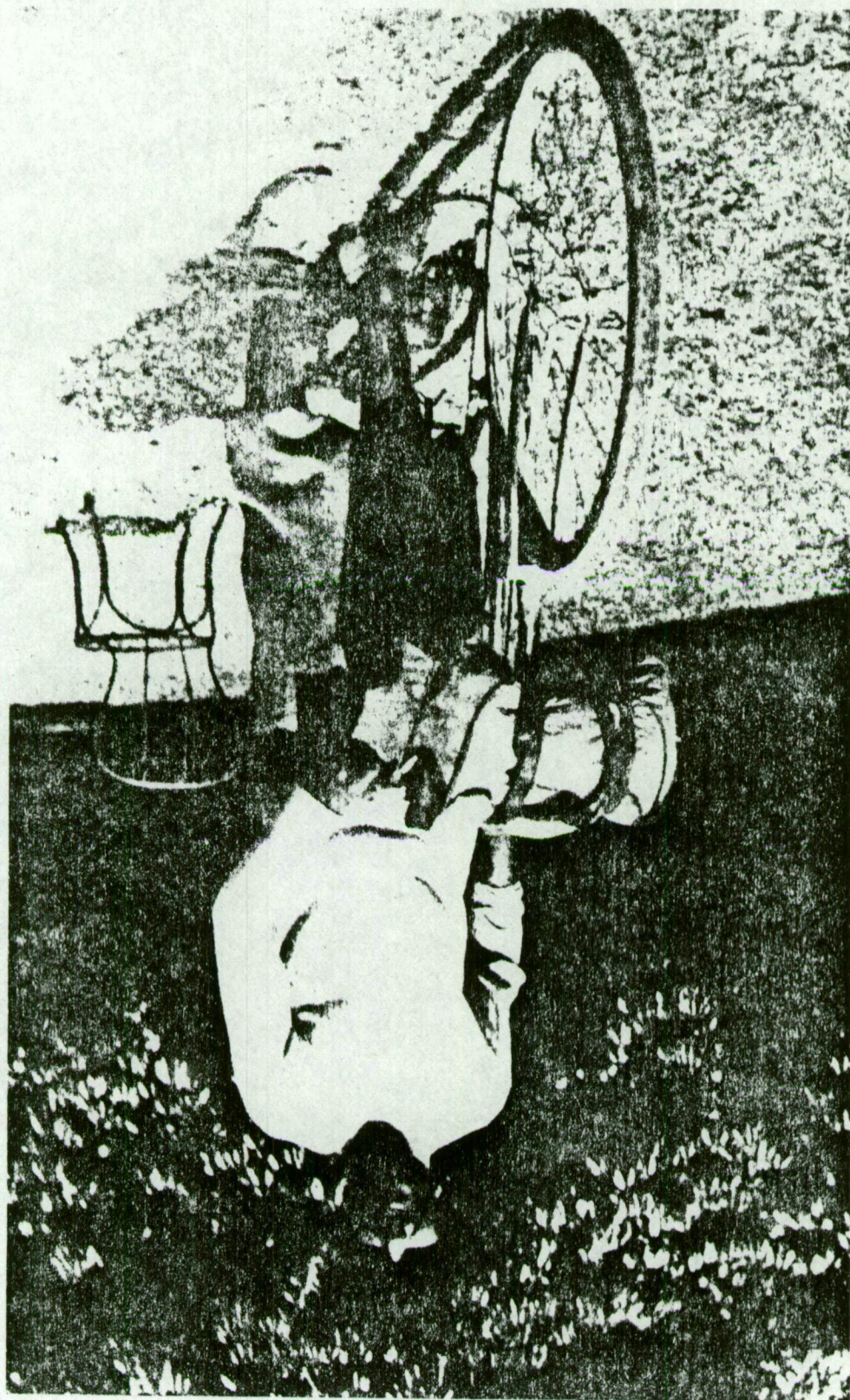
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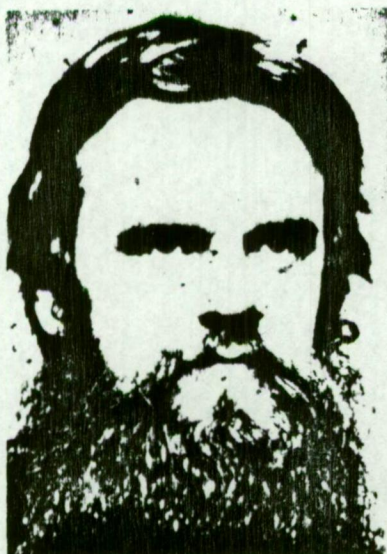






# THE ORANGE OF PIECES

(Concerning some aspects of the development of colour in painting, with particular regard to the Mode Anglaise, to Captain Booth, the Great Prohibited, and the P.R.B.)





"The failure of much psychological writing about artistic activity and the unconscious is out of the inability to comprehend, in a verbally oriented culture, the depth and the intimacy of the marriage between the artist and his medium. A painting is not a picture of something in front of your eyes - a model, say, primarily. It is an attack on the medium which then comes to 'mean' something... You must understand that, as far as I can see, an artistic medium is the only thing in human existence that has precisely the same range of sensed feeling as people themselves do. And it is only when you think of the medium as having the same potential as another human being that you begin to see the nature of the artist's involvement - as it appears to himself."

Robert Motherwell  
The Creative Use of the  
Unconscious by the Artist  
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"I have the loftiest idea, and the most passionate one, of art. Much too lofty to agree to subject it to anything. Much too passionate to want to divorce it from anything."

Albert Camus  
Notebooks 1942-1952

### THE SAYING OF COLOUR

Of all the aspects of painting, colour, despite its primacy, is the most unsatisfactorily treated in the analysis of painting. Despite the fact that colour has been a major concern of modernist painters, and regardless of the acknowledgement of that in criticism, there has been a shortage of convincing writing on colour in painting. There is a tendency to admit that colour in painting is beyond criticism: a mystery.

The general problem of examining colour in painting is aggravated by the lack of a developed language of analysis, and a method based dominantly on photography, in which colour perception is radically affected by the change of size, tone, hue, texture, and often even the absence of colour, in reproductions. In this situation theory becomes so removed from practice and reality (the paintings in the flesh), that it becomes meaninglessly disguised: homeless colour.

It seems that the whole colour problem is to be mystified by ignorance, as if it were like the discussion of embarrassing, tasteless but vital body processes. Indeed, colour in painting could be seen as the equivalent of the organic functions and changes in living things: circulating among themselves, regulating the energies that are available in the pictorial make-up, expanding or pulsating sensuously beyond their borders.

Innumerable treatises exist which purport to show how different colour interactions are perceived, and which explain various optical laws. These constitute the study of chromatic behaviour, a branch of psychology. This study shows the complexity of such behaviour, but it simplifies the topic radically by assuming that subject and object, stimulus and receptor, however variegated, are constants in any given test, influenced by determinable rules. Any resemblance between colour in painting, and colour illustrated or alluded to in an experiment, is completely coincidental.

The psychologist's colour is meaningless, homeless colour as far as the painter is concerned: it is not circuited into an imaginative matrix where it is associated and charged with unique processing, texturing, and density. But looking at the colour in a painting, it may appear just as unreal, because it is an allusive tissue whose connection with certain emotional and sensual latencies has much to do with a willingness of the imagination as it does with an image on the retina.

It is a phenomenological fact that no one senses colours exactly the same, that they exist in that physiological realm in which it is almost impossible to compare and judge, but only allude to our sensations. Hence, the spiritual tag: colour being referred to as the soul or life of a painting.

Colour memory is particularly inaccurate because it is unfixed, diffused, and distracted, and it tends to subside and dissolve as rapidly after stimulus as the memory of things touched, tasted, heard, or smelled. It is memorable without being recollectable; colour, despite its almost electrical engendering of the mental image of a painting, has a very low retention threshold.

The predicament is compounded all the more because often the colour is seen or sensed as a profusion of hues, all at work on each other. Colours induce, cancel, and inflect each other to the extent that memory itself is pushed into a turmoil of evaporating impressions, and ghostly intimations.

Colour has developed in modernist painting through cross-breeding and re-packaging chromatic possibilities, and with that has come a greater density of associations loaded and layered into the experience of colour. It is one of the great pleasures of colour that while it vibrates through the eye's memory that it sometimes reverberates through all the other sensory faculties as well. Colour comes to life in the realization of its smell, sound, taste, and touch: the phenomenon of the chemical and physiological sensitivities triggered by a painting. While much use is made of the appeal of the apparition of colour has on our sexual make-up, the eroticism of colour is rarely evoked in painting.

These other sensory attributes of colour, whether they refer to qualities of hues immersed in particular vehicles, or chromatic interrelations, may, in any one instance, be just as important as the actual identity of the hue. Hues can be loud, quiet, sonorous, dissonant, tinkly, or melodic, rhythmic, and shrill. They can be milky, syrupy, chalky, gritty; they can be acid, or alkaline, tart, bland, or sweet. They can be fragrant, earthy, pulpy, dank. They can be gaseous, woolly, oily, or powdery.

The authenticity of such responses lies in the involvement of the viewer as much as it does on the intent of the painter. There is a wide range of attitudes to making and reading colour, from 'what you see is what you see' to those who would attribute to it properties that are extra-sensory.

For colour to be authentic it has to fit the content of the painting; there have been a lot of silly paintings made covered by the alibi of arbitrary colour. There is an intelligence to the best colour: it has a meaning, a home; that is every hue has an identity. It makes a great deal of difference to say of a yellow that it is lemon or citron, because you are recognizing its tone, and temperature, and texture; so we say green is lime, or olive, or emerald.

Colour can further inform us what the painting is about: it is as legitimate to ascribe to colours certain actions, as it is to render their sensory attitude: we observe that colours may spread, irradiate, hedge, cut, blur, sting, or bleed.

The problems of analysing paintings is often crucially centred on colour, that is, colour most often denies or defies analysis. Often in paintings it is empirically impossible to distinguish the tones of the hues, or measure the illusion of space.

It is that formal dissection of the painting that belongs to the analytical conventions that often estrange us from the real experience of the painting. Even without being tricked by those conventions, or the complexity of colour, our visual perception will be confounded by the lighting the painting is presented in, the wall it is on, the frame it is in: its environment. Then where we stand, and how we focus will create or delete texture. Texture complicates surfaces by providing micro-objects, micro-surfaces that prevent the eye from translating individual hues.

We are restricted by words, though not necessarily of conceptual thought, in dealing with the aesthetic experience of colour. The experience of colour is difficult to convey in language, our only means of reference to it is a recollection of the sensation it offers, and that comes down to the simple operation of naming and recalling.

When talking about colour it is apparent that the description of the optically visible alone is not effective in summoning up the presence of the painting in memory. Colour forces us to learn the difference between the visible and the visual.

One of the prime attributes of ambitious painting is that it has continually changed taste, and not merely fashion-change, but change in the sense of expanding taste, which has led to the present pluralist taste; this is not just a phase, but the result of our educated sight.

Taste has developed to the extent that we can get away with injecting extreme prettiness into colour, or within the framework of highly abstract art, colour can be profoundly representational, and distinctly invoke the real things and surfaces around it.

The change in attitude to the materiality of painting, of colour, through technology and methodology, that began in eighteenth and nineteenth century English painting, continued to develop throughout modernism; and the development of colour might be analysed merely in terms of the development of methods and materials, pigments and mediums. The ambitious painter has always been faced with a conflict of ends and means. In seeking to extend the possibilities of painting, the painter has been continually fettered with reference to substantial realities by the natural momentum of the medium. Much of the winning of color for ambitious painting was done with other technology: watercolour, pastel, printing, and collage.

The development of colour in painting has always been rigged to chemistry: the development of pigments and their vehicles. The modernist colourists, from Turner to the French Symbolists, to the New York School, were greatly effected by the invention of new materials and methods: new colour. The new colour was allied to a Baudelairean taste for the artificial, the anti-natural, that became a feature of the development of colourist painting from invention of watercolour in England and the development of colour in printing and pastel technique in France during the late nineteenth century, to the New York School in the middle of the twentieth century when it was largely through the use of paints like acrylics, fluorescent and metallic colours, house-painter's enamels, and car duco; paints that look less organic than artist's oils, their artificial, dyed, synthetic quality intrudes into pictorial chromatics. These colours further authorized a taste for the artificial:



what was considered corny or overly sweet, tinselly or lurid, commercial, exquisite, funky or ultra-glamorous colourations. the feature of such artificial colour in painting, is that it gives the paintings far greater autonomy, it tends to direct our attention to just the painting; such colour appears ironic, concrete, displaced, and makes a sceptical turmoil of talk about colour in painting.\*

\* See appendix.

### Hear the Voice of the Critic

There are too many colours.  
The Union Jack's all right, selective,  
Two basic colours and one negative,  
Reasonable, avoids confusion.  
(Of course I respect the red, white and blue)

But there are too many colours.  
The rainbow, well it's gaudy, but I am  
Bound to admit, a useful diagram  
When treated as an optical illusion.  
(Now I'm not saying anything against rainbows)

But there are too many colours.  
Take the sea. Unclassifiable.  
The sky - the worst offender of all,  
Tasteless as Shakespeare, especially at sunset.  
(I wish my body were all one colour).

There are too many colours.  
I collect flat white plates.  
You ought too see my flat white plates.  
In my flat white flat I have a perfect set,  
(It takes up seven rooms).

There are too many colours.

Adrian Mitchell

"We cannot make good painters without some aid from poesy."

Turner

### THE MODE ANGLAISE

British artists between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries invented watercolour painting.

For hundreds of years watercolour had been used in the form of opaque pigments: mixed with white to give 'body' (gouache or body-colour). From the Renaissance to Rembrandt, artists used 'washes' in their drawings to enable them to efficiently render light and shade on line drawing.

Wash drawing led to the idea of using transparent washes of different colours, which is the modern technique of watercolour painting. It is in the painting of light that the technique of watercolour is supreme. The white of the paper reflects light through the washes of colour applied to it.

"In the transparent drawings the whiteness of the paper plays an important part in producing the general luminous effect. The washes of pure colour with which it is covered merely temper or colour its lightness; they never destroy it. But the gouache or distemper, though still strictly speaking watercolour, is essentially an opaque medium. It is simply ordinary watercolour material mixed with gum and water and with a certain quantity of white pigment to give it 'body' or opacity. So that in a distemper drawing the surface of the paper counts for nothing; all that is seen is the 'mat' or dead surface of the paint." \*

The technique of watercolour was developed to paint landscapes: to paint distances, land, water, and the sky.

Alexander Cozens, the first watercolour theorist, wrote in 1785: "Forms in nature are not defined by lines but by the play of light and shade."

The watercolourists moved towards abstraction in their simplification of the appearances of light and shade, by a simple system that was something like overlapping sheets of coloured glass. In painting old castles in panoramic landscapes, the view is simplified through a web of light: the emphasis of the solidity of hill, rock, castle, depend on the rendering of light and shade, and defined by the transparent medium, the solid forms

\*A.J.Finberg, "The English Watercolourists", London, 1906.

are not fundamentally differentiated from distant plains, far mountains, or sky. The solids become homogeneous with space, all being translated into washes of light.

The development of watercolour went along with Romanticism, to express the spiritual, in vain opposition to the materialism of the growing mercantile society.

The difference between watercolour and oil paint, is that oil paint often emphasizes the contrast in texture and form, of the materiality of each substance: watercolour unifies in the name of light, while oils often differentiate in the name of substance. Oil paint is used because it can depict as no other medium can, the tangible substance of things. Oils make the painted object 'real'. Oil painting was concerned with solid objects existing one behind another in space. It emphasized solidity, density, permanence, order in space, and gravity.

The transparency of watercolour suggests instability, impermanence, transcendence: the "veiled infinite". The extreme suggestive power of the medium gave colour an atmospheric evocativeness, that sometimes amounts to a kind of fragrance.

It is landscape painting that got around the rules of materialism, and with watercolour, saved painting from materialism (as surely as photography did) and greatly extended painting as a metaphysical medium.

Turner introduced into oil painting many of the attributes and concerns of watercolour. His oil paintings are among the most immaterial ever painted.

The eighteenth century English watercolourists developed a variety of techniques, and Turner utilized all the tricks of the trade.

Alexander Cozens' book "A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape", published in 1785, primarily explains his method of 'blot-drawing', for which he was dubbed the 'Blotmaster General'. (The humour doesn't change much: a hundred and fifty years later Jackson Pollock was 'Jack the Dripper'.)

"An artificial blot is a production of chance, with a small degree of design; for in making it, the attention of the performer must be employed on the whole, or the general form of the composition, and upon this only; whilst the subordinate parts are left to the casual motion of the hand and brush." (Not far from the surrealists' automatic writing, but very close to Helen Frankenthaler's mode of work.)

"A true blot is an assemblage of dark shapes or masses made with ink upon a piece of paper, and likewise of light ones produced by the paper being left blank. All the shapes are rude and unmeaning, as they are formed by the swiftest hand. But at the same time there appears a general disposition of these masses, producing one comprehensive form, which may be conceived and purposely intended before the blot is begun. This general form will exhibit some kind of subject, and this is all that should be done designedly."

Cozens quotes the source of his concept, Leonardo Da Vinci: "If you look upon an old wall covered by dirt, or the odd appearance of some streaked stones, you may discover several things like landscapes, battles, clouds, uncommon attitudes, humorous faces, draperies, etc. Out of this confused mass of objects, the mind will be furnished with an abundance of designs and subjects perfectly new."

When Turner said, "I never lose an accident", Ruskin was bound to cover-up: "It is this not losing it, this taking things out of the hands of Fortune, and putting them into those of force and foresight which attest the master. Chance may sometimes help, and sometimes provoke a success; but must never rule, and rarely allure."

Anyway, the Blotmaster's method and Leonardo's idea to use the stuff of chance, was a tendency that persisted in painting, to reach its ultimate fulfilment in the New York School. (Or maybe it was in China a thousand years before.)

Smith's System of watercolour, used by John Glover, involved tempering the positive colours with the neutral grey formed by mixing all three primary colours together;

this was harmonizing the colour by creating analogous hues. (De Kooning creates his colour harmony by blending his hues to make them analogous.) The grey could be varied by the mixture for warm or cool colour. The grey was also used as a ground or negative areas like sky. (The Fauves, particularly Derain, used complimentary greys as a ground.)

White ground for oils was not in common general use until about 1840, in England. (White ground is so often used without question today, when it would be more useful to key the ground to the orchestration and temperature of the colour scheme.)

Turner used single and multi-hue grounds to establish from the beginning the orchestration, tonality, and temperature of the colour, in his oils and watercolours.

There are numerous anecdotes relating observations of Turner's methods. His bedroom had "cords spread across the room as that of a washer-woman, and papers tinted pink and blue and yellow hanging on them to dry."

Turner was observed working on several watercolours at the same time. "He stretched the paper on boards and after plunging them into water, he dropped colours onto the paper while it was wet, making marblings and gradations throughout the work. His completing process was marvellously rapid, for he indicated his masses and incidents, took out half-lights, scraped out high-lights, and dragged, hatched and stippled until the design was finished. This swiftness, grounded on the scale practice in early life, enabled Turner to preserve the purity and luminosity of his work, and to paint at a prodigiously rapid rate."

Turner did not learn it all from art though, nature led him to his final style.

To a person who questioned his use of touches of pure primaries throughout his work, he snapped, "Well, don't you see that yourself in Nature? Because if you don't Heaven help you!"

Turner seemed obsessed not so much by the forms of nature, as by the power of nature, its immeasurable energy. His watercolours give the impression that the painting itself was mysteriously the product of those forces, as though a storm had washed and blown the marks of water and sky across the paper. In Turner the immateriality of watercolour seems to be used in the most



dramatic and violent way: it becomes the sign of the power of destruction, of the indifference of energy to form. (John Cage remarked in a lecture some hundred and fifty years later, that the object of art was not to imitate nature, but to imitate nature in the manner of its operation.)

Turner was involved with the Picturesque movement, in the mid-1790's. The movement's theorist, Uvedale Price, explained their aesthetic:

"There are many colours which, having nothing of the freshness and delicacy of beauty, are generally found in objects and scenes highly picturesque, and admirably accord with them. Among these are to be reckoned the autumnal hues in all their varieties, the weather-stains, and many of the mosses, lichens, and incrustations on bark, and on wood, or stones, old walls, and buildings of every kind; the various gradations in the tints of broken ground, and of the decayed parts in hollow trees."

Picturesque aesthetics were a strain of the tendency to abstraction; in 1801 Uvedale Price foresaw the great dilemma:

"I can imagine...a man of the future, who may be born without the sense of feeling, being able to see nothing but light variously modified, and that such a way of considering Nature would be just. For then the eye would see nothing but what in point of harmony was beautiful. But that pure abstract enjoyment of vision, our inveterate habits will not let us partake of."

The Picturesque aesthetic was to remain an aspect of the limits of abstraction in English painting. It is the opposite strain of abstraction to the tendency to the artificial, that is the direction of the development of colour and abstraction exemplified by the French schools. The Picturesque aesthetic bound English painting in essence to landscape. Hence the jibe of the critic in the 1950's, that English Abstract Expressionism was the transformation of the New York School into a weather report.\*

\* Lawrence Alloway

While no painter is more English than Turner in his bond with literature and the landscape, he is still the precursor of the imaginative landscape, the artificial, his fairy landscape.

The French critic Gustave Planche in the 1830's, commented:  
 "I find it impossible to believe that any such landscape has ever existed anywhere but in fairyland... Is this mountain made of gold, mahogany, velvet or porcelain? The mind is wearied out in conjecture and hardly knows where to stop. The sky in which the horizon lines float is luminous and diaphanous. But neither Spain nor Italy nor the shores of the Bosphorus could have provided Turner with any model for the creation of this gorgeous atmosphere..."

"Toto, I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas...  
 we're over the rainbow."

Dorothy.

### CAPTAIN BOOTH AND THE YELLOW DWARF

During Turner's lifetime, 1775 to 1851, the study of colour in painting was to be the first material symptom of the total revolution of western painting.

Until the end of the eighteenth century painters had little concern for colour theory, because there wasn't any. Leonardo Da Vinci's remarks on colour dominated painters' attitudes, and had the effect of diverting attention from colour problems until the eighteenth century, because he emphasized the use of tone rather than hue to create the effect of light, and attacked the use of bright and barely modulated pigments, like in pre-Renaissance painting. The number and nature of basic colours were red, blue, green, and yellow, which were related naturally to the four basic elements, fire, air, water, and earth.

In the eighteenth century Rubens took-over from Leonardo as the great colour-theorist for painters; but his famous "Treatise on Light and Colour" is now lost.

The complementary six colour circle became standard equipment for painters around 1800. Both Turner and Delacroix used it. Painters knew from practical experience that the basic colours were red, yellow, and blue, but it took a long time for them to accept that the science of their colour was the chemistry of pigments, not the physics of nature; and they were stuck with the facts of practicality: that chemists would have to develop and manufacture pigments of greater purity and number; and that it would never be the same colour as nature's, it would always be the illusionists' colour; they had to fake it like the alchemists.

The most significant scientific discoveries for painters' tricks concerned physiological optics, which were about our perception of colour. This first led to the recognition that paintings were objects in nature, subject to natural laws of lighting and colour, and to be related consciously to their surroundings. This view was learnt from the interior decorators, and landscape designers, by Turner and his contemporaries, at the end of the eighteenth century.

Theorists like Newton tried to confuse the game; he reckoned there were seven colours, like there were seven notes in the musical scale, and the seven supposed colours of the rainbow; so he evoked the authority of the truth of nature.

The fact was that Turner and his colleagues, like most painters have been, were pragmatists, and always knew they were illusionists, and worked by the laws of paint. But this was the age of scientism, and hungover still by alchemy, it was riddled by the will to secrecy; and the painters cashed-in on their 'secrets', by publishing and lecturing on the mysteries of their technology and methodology.

Turner's virtuoso practice as a colourist in his maturity was so startling that he was considered to be mad, or a genius, or to have a secret method or chemistry, new pigments, or defective eye-sight. Although he lectured at the Royal Academy on colour-theory, he worked from no fixed theory. He was in fact suspicious of colour-theories, as his notes on Goethe's "Theory of Colours" show. Ruskin reported that Holman Hunt often talked with Turner, and never heard him "utter a single rule of colour, though he had frequently heard him talk of 'trying' to do a thing".

Turner said of the rumours about his mysterious technique, "The only secret I have got is damned hard work."

It is certain that he used, in oils and watercolours, all the new pigments that became available, which not many other painters then dared to use. His favourite colour was yellow; it is naturally the most intense, and it has the highest key, therefore it has the greatest potential for making light. Yellow has always had the widest variety of pigments, and Turner had all the twelve existing yellow pigments, including four that were developed in his lifetime. (Albers, who didn't mix his colours, had over ninety manufactured yellows.)

Yellow was the hallmark of Turner's art as a colourist\*. The jaundiced look of the paintings was obvious to all his contemporaries, one of whom joked that Turner seemed "to have sworn fidelity to the Yellow Dwarf, if he has not identified himself with that important necromancer".

\*Although, in his lectures on colour to the Royal Academy, he wrote: "Red possesses the utmost power of attracting vision, it being the first ray of light." In alchemy red is the primary colour and the source of all the other colours.

Much of the information about Turner is obscured by his reputation as an eccentric. Throughout his career Turner was extremely ambitious in an undisguisedly competitive manner. He was a hard-headed empiricist, who saw to it that he succeeded in a highly competitive society. He wanted to be recognized as the greatest artist of all time, and he was never treated as less than a great painter throughout Europe. He was a European; he spent much of his life travelling the continent, in search of ideas: studying the work of past masters, meeting the great painters of the time (Delacroix and David), and looking for subject-matter: light and landscape, from the Alps to Venice.

Turner was highly successful throughout his career. He was born a street-wise cockney, a child prodigy: by the time he was nine years old he was earning a living by colouring engravings, and at fourteen he entered the Royal Academy schools.

Turner came to exemplify the nineteenth century Englishman, of science, engineering, and business, those professionals who were soon to become the architypal heroes of the United States and progress.

This competitiveness was popularly seen by his contemporaries, to be accompanied by a marked tendency towards misanthropy and miserliness; he was considered to be excessively secretive about his working methods, and a recluse, a solitary eccentric. Turner was generally thought of as a virtuoso painter of natural effects until late in his career when Ruskin began to champion him. Ruskin's writing first gave emphasis to the conceptual aspect of Turner's mind and method, and to the element of teaching in his career.

Turner was a lateral intellectual. His reading was wide, but informal, and often his misreading aided his work. His colour was decisively effected by his study of contemporary science. He saw to it that he had a thorough knowledge of the technology and methodology of his time, and all that was known of the past. He studied and lectured on the current theories of chemistry and physics relating to painting, and particularly colour. However, his attitude as a painter was pragmatic, and almost artisanal. What drew him to particular ideas was what he called their 'practicability': their capacity to yield a painting.



Turner's lifelong study of engraving reminded him that tonal relationships were of fundamental importance to the painter. Late in his career the invention of photography greatly interested him (enough to put his money into it)\*, because it reduced nature to black and white, to pure tone.

Turner chose to use the full range of the tonal scale in red, yellow, and blue, because for him tones and hues came to have not an absolute, but a relative value in terms of their pictorial function.

The great colourists of the past constructed their paintings on a tonal architectonic extending to the extremities of the tonal range. The chromatic power that they were able to generate through the orchestration of hues, and which seems an essential attribute of the master colourist, was in fact as much the result of the mastery of the problems in tone dispersal, the placing and contrasting in tone juxtaposition. This is true even of the close toned painting of Monet's high impressionism. The killing of tone by adjusting hues to tonal equality, that is, atonal colour, was perpetrated in the pursuit of chromatic purity. Not only did colourism become synonymous with atonal painting, but with a rejection of the volumetric, and with a manic control of texture.

The difference between Turner and the colourists later in France, the Impressionists\*, was that he was concerned with the three primaries because he believed that they were of the essence of natural structure, and he reduced these colours to functions of light and dark, because light and its negation was more fundamental even than colour itself.

In Turner's painting the syntax of colour was directed to symbolic and literary ends, through the landscape, that admitted a variety of psychological responses.

\*See bibliography no.s 1.&2. Ref: Mayall.

\*\*See appendix.

The catalyst for big changes in the look of paintings during Turner's life was presentationalism, through the influence of interior decorators and landscape designers. Setting up the painting became of great importance, and brought about changes in England where much more attention was paid to gallery lighting and interior design and decoration, and to framing; all to enhance the view of the paintings. This came to influence the look of the paintings, towards a greater clarity, reaching its ultimate in the P.R.B. paintings.

Turner was an innovator in his emphasis on the presentation of his paintings. He built his own gallery, designed with great care given to the lighting (influenced by Leonardo); and he saw to it that the Royal Academy exhibitions were set up in a more conducive environment for seeing the paintings. In the end he turned the Royal Academy into a theatre, so that on Varnishing Days painters performed, competed to out-paint each other. Turner, like Delacroix, had a Paganini complex, he was the virtuoso performer who could out-paint any member of the Academy.

### THE GREAT PROHIBITED

John Ruskin was the hero and villain concerning the legacy of Turner. He physically saved much of Turner's work from destruction (though he did actually destroy some); and in his writing, by explaining Turner's work, albeit wrongly, to a new England, he revitalized Turner's fame as the greatest painter.

Suspiciously, his five volumes in praise of Turner, "Modern Painters", by 'A Graduate of Oxford', was particularly praised by the literary world: Wordsworth, Tennyson, Charlotte Bronte, and Dickens. Oscar Wilde revealed in the 1880's the attraction: "Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not?" What mattered was Ruskin's "mighty and majestic prose... so fervid and so fiery-coloured in its noble eloquence."

Ruskin wrote thirty-odd volumes instructing the English how to think about art, man, and socialism. In an age when colour photography and its reproduction in books was unavailable as an aid for criticism, there was a real reason for his word-painting. But then he invented the painted-word: he told painters how to paint.

Ruskin was an evangelizing preacher, who taught the morality of seeing, and he used Turner as his lesson. The whole tenor of Ruskin's arguments ran counter to Turner's convictions and practice. Turner wrote about "the undergraduate of Oxford" as being "wild in enthusiasm" in his admiration of him, but it gave him "no ray of pleasure", because Ruskin "could not understand his meaning".... "they all marvell and no one understands". Ruskin was left in no doubt about Turner's attitude to him. "He always discouraged me scornfully." It is probable that why Turner tolerated Ruskin's silly enthusiasm was simply that it sold a lot of his paintings. Ruskin played the connoisseur like all radical critics. He was a newness salesman. His concern was with his own views, not with Turner's aims, nor for that matter his paintings. Ruskin grossly misrepresented Turner.

Spurred by the acclaim and wide acceptance of the first volumes of "Modern Painters" Ruskin had no qualms about invoking Turner to support any of his causes. He was asked to support the new painting of the P.R.B., and he wrote in support of them as the heirs apparent to Turner, before he even looked at their paintings. The naturalism of the P.R.B. paintings is very different from the symbolic scientism at the centre of Turner's work.

It seems amazingly obvious, despite Ruskin's advocacy of the P.R.B., and his association of them with Turner's work, that the P.R.B. approach to colour in landscape, with its objectivity, its cult of plein-air, and its refusal to allegorize or paraphrase, was profoundly different from Turner's.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded by three young painting students from the Royal Academy in 1848, Rossetti, Holman Hunt, and Millais, and it was meant to be a secret society of painters. They were a proto-avantgarde, and modernist, in seeking newness, in their anti-establishment art, and in their sense of importance. The first volume of Ruskin's "Modern Painters" inspired many of the aims and attitudes of the P.R.B. He was vehemently anti-classical, against the post-Renaissance tradition of European painting; what he called "the clear and tasteless poison of the art of Raphael".

In 1850 when the public woke-up to what the P.R.B. stood for, there was an almost unanimous castigation of the return to "all the objectional peculiarities of the infancy of art". (A reaction that has been a continual feature of the responses to the phases of modernist painting, up to 'dumb art' now.)

There was a socio-economic factor in the P.R.B.'s strategy (one of Ruskin's strengths). The economic view of the art world had broadened (largely due to Ruskin), the growing mercantile class particularly in the industrial north, were buying paintings, and their taste was new. The new urban patrons were looking for newness. They were interested in living artists because they wanted genuineness, authenticity; and they were nationalist chauvinists, they did not want old Dutch or Italian paintings, and they certainly did not want new French paintings.

Ruskin lusted after genius; having 'discovered' one, Turner, he thought he had found another in Millais, "the child", a great virtuoso painter, who seemed to be a perfect vehicle for his ideas. Ruskin's ideas of realism, naturism, even morality, were acceptable to the P.R.B., until he started preaching at them about what to paint and how to paint; and he was backed by a gang of literati: Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Dickens; which was too much for the youth of the P.R.B., especially Millais. Ruskin gave up the reluctant Millais for Rossetti, but it should have been Holman Hunt: he was the most complete painter, and he interpreted Ruskin's rules best, to paint "stern facts": moral modern realism. Rossetti had his own ideas, and would do nothing

but what interested him, and in "halfpenny colours". But perhaps he was the closest to Turner, with his symbolic colour and hatched, caked handling.

Even though Ruskin spoke in praise of the Italian Primitives in "Modern Painters", he did not like the group's choice of name. He wanted them to be thoroughly modern in technique, "without reference to conventional or established rules". He wanted them to paint "stern facts"; and urged them "to paint nature as it is around them, with the help of modern science". But the P.R.B. were far less science oriented than Turner. They rejected or ignored colour theory for just looking and copying exactly what they saw in nature.

Under Ruskin's influence the P.R.B. reacted strongly against conventional painting, and set out to be more inventive, realistic, and more concerned with human emotion. Their modernistic notion of newness meant the paintings should look new, clean, and fresh. They achieved this look of newness through their technique of putting down colour.



### THE P.R.B. COOKERY

Colour is the P.R.B. connection with the watercolourists and Turner: the use of the transparency of pigments to allow the white ground to kick-up the colour by letting the light reflect off the white through the colour, thus the stain-glassed window effect.

The P.R.B. used a white ground to gain brilliant colours, following the development of the practice from watercolour painting by Turner and his generation, who had gradually lightened and heightened the colour of their oils by painting the colours thinly (how thinly depended on the pigment's transparency) over a white ground, giving the impression of luminosity and immateriality. Luminosity was the aim of the technique as far as the P.R.B. were concerned; they were trying to emulate the brilliant colour in stain-glassed windows, but it was for a modern look, a look of materiality, so they required a more substantial technique, in which they could clearly show object-matter, volume. They wanted to eliminate the thin, stained look.

A wet white ground technique was devised by Holman Hunt and Millais in about 1850. They probably got the idea from the methodology of fresco painting, which was in vogue then.

"While Millais and I had been conferring about systems of painting, we dwelt much upon the value of a plan we had both independently adopted of painting over a ground of wet white, which gave special delicacy of colouration and tone. Millais in earlier works had relied upon the system to produce the effect of sunlight on flesh and brilliantly lit drapery. The head of the boy in "The Woodman's Daughter" may be taken as an example of what my friend had done before. I, quite independently, had relied on this novel system, extending it from small to larger parts of my work. The heads of Valentine and of Proteus, the hands of these figures, and the brighter costumes in the same painting had been executed in this way. In earlier pictures this method had been adopted by me to a less extent. In the country we had used it, so far, mainly for blossoms of flowers, for which it was singularly valuable." \*

The technique of wet white ground required an entirely fresh start, beginning with laying the ground for work each day. Ruskin reported that while Millais was painting his portrait he only completed an area the size of a five shilling piece in a day, so that would have been the area of ground prepared for the day.

"The process may be described thus. Select a prepared ground originally for its brightness, and renovate it if necessary, with fresh white when it first comes into the studio, white to be mixed with very little amber or copal varnish. Let this last coat become of a thoroughly stone-like hardness." (That is, you begin with a properly sized, white primed canvas.) "Upon this surface, complete with exactness the outline of the part in hand." (This configuration was drawn in pencil.) "On the morning for the painting, with fresh white (from which all the superfluous oil has been extracted by means of absorbent paper, and to which again a small drop of varnish has been added). "The ground itself was flake white that had all the excess oil sucked out of it by being laid on blotting-paper over night.) "Spread a further coat very evenly with a palette knife over the part for the day's work, of such consistency that the drawing should faintly show through. In some cases the thickened white may be applied to the forms needing brilliancy with a brush, by the aid of rectified spirits." (The ground was a film of white pigment painted on and then worked off with a dry brush, then tapped with the brush to even the ground. The line drawing could be seen through the ground, and the colour painting was done over it while it was still wet, very slowly, meticulously, with tiny brushes.) "Over this wet ground, the colour (transparent and semi-transparent) should be laid with light sable brushes, and the touches must be made so tenderly that the ground below shall not be worked up, yet so far inticed to blend with the superimposed tints as to correct the qualities of thinness and staininess, which over a dry ground transparent colours used would inevitably exhibit. Painting of this kind cannot be retouched except with an entire loss of luminosity. Milais proposed that we should keep this as a precious secret to ourselves." \*

Even when Holman Hunt and Millais were not using this technique, their method was to work on a single area at a time, finishing it in detail while other parts of the canvas were still bare. Their method precluded the traditional organization of the picture, for while they intensely concentrated upon the local colour, it was at the expense of consideration of the picture as a whole. The strict observance of nature forced a new kind of pictorial organization based on relationships of colour and a consistency of handling over the entire surface, replacing the traditional relationship of light and dark (tone), and the subordination of parts in an illusion of three-dimensional space.

Authentic P.R.B. painting had to have this colour brilliance and minuteness of observation; and it was these two Pre-Raphaelite principals that upset the art world: they objected to the evenness of working all over the canvas, so that the picture became highly complex: the minor parts of the picture are as fully detailed as the major subject; and the evenness of light that denied the convention of darkening the edges, and lighting the centre of the picture; that there should be a "principal light", from organizing the colours so as to proceed to the central light from the darker tones around it.

While the P.R.B. painting still receives a response to its startling colour and detail, equally surprising is the queer photo-montage effect caused by their process of picture making. This as much as the colour has retained their look of modernity.

The queerness of the figures in the landscape in pictures by Holman Hunt and Millais, is due to their practice of painting the landscape on site, and then adding the figures in the studio (sometimes as much as a year later). In "Ophelia" Millais painted the background and foreground in the open air, leaving a white gap in the middle for the figure in the water. He painted the figure in the water in the studio, from a model lying in a bath of coloured water. This presented problems about getting the inside, studio lighting of the model to match the outside, natural lighting of the landscape; and the problems of

fitting the figure into the blank space left for it, which they could not muck around with because of their non-corrective technique. In most of the major P.R.B. figure-landscape paintings by Millais and Holman Hunt the figure looks like it was pasted onto the landscape. With a technique that allowed for so little adjustment there could be no assemblage process, so it is like a photo-montage: they look like faked photographs; and that gives the picture a metaphysical bent, which is part of their modernity.

Ruskin's ideas were more radical socially. His view of art was something like marxist. He sought art for everyman, to make him learn to see; not to be seduced or conned by art, but to use it. He taught that all is, or potentially is, artistic.

"We shall obtain no satisfactory result unless we set ourselves to teaching the operative, however employed...be he farmer's labourer, or manufacturer's; be he mechanic, artificer, shopman, sailor or ploughman...teaching, I say, one and the same thing to all; namely sight." \*

Teaching at the Workingmen's College in London was a P.R.B. educational experiment (actually set up by the Christian Socialists). Ruskin taught there with Holman Hunt and Rossetti, and in isolation, ignoring the college and vice versa, he was free to pursue his radical art education. He based it on the discussion of colour, although it was supposed to be a drawing class, because it is colour, of all the elements in art, that is the most immediate reality of visual perception; it is the first idea of seeing, and yet it is the least susceptible to criticism and evaluation.

Ruskin's teaching at the college, encouraged the use of the kind of device for seeing used by painters since the Renaissance, a simple version of the sight vane: to look at the section of landscape to be painted through a small hole bored in the centre of a piece of white cardboard; bit by bit, mixing colour immediately to make a precise match, this colour was dabbed on to the card, and always exactly reproduced in the actual painting. This obviated the temptation to compromise the real colours of nature into an overall scheme that would rob each individual hue of its true integrity.

The artist, reckoned Ruskin, sees the colours of nature as they really are, and that kind of perception relies "on the recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye...of a sort of childish perception...as a blind man would see if suddenly gifted with sight". The artist reduces himself to "infantine sight" to see the real colours of nature, he does not accommodate them to an overall system of hues and tones to contrive his painting. He "perceives at once in sunlighted grass the precise relation between the two colours that form its shade and light. To him it does not seem shade and light, but bluish green barred with gold."

\*Speech opening the Cambridge School of Art

The kind of painting exemplified by Holman Hunt's "Our English Coasts", painted in 1852, was to Ruskin a major innovation in the history of colour in painting. "It showed us for the first time in the history of art, the absolutely faithful balance of colour and shade by which sunshine might be transported into a key in which the harmonies possible with material pigments should yet produce the same impressions on the mind which were caused by the light itself."

Ruskin is rightly considered the greatest English art theoretician, just because he got it wrong so consistently, and for his unfailing ability to confuse any issue. For example, his catch 1852 on colour:

"Take care also never to be mislead into any idea that colour can help or display form; colour always disguises form, and is meant to do so... Colour adorns form, but does not interpret it."

"If he cannot colour, he is no painter, though he may do everything elsewhere. But it is, in fact impossible, if he can colour, but that he should be able to do more; for a faithful study of colour will always give power over form, though the most intense study of form will give no power over colour."

Ruskin began the age of the art theoretician, which I trust is the curse of Turner on English Painting for bugging up his legacy: from the death of Turner English painting declined, plagued by art theoreticians from Ruskin to Fry and Bell, to Read and Clark, to Alloway and Berger..and Fuller...is making a film about Ruskin.



## APPENDIX

### CONTRADICTIONS AND ERRORS

"What the Impressionists did was to admit on the palette only pure colours. What they failed to do and what remained to be done after them was to have utter respect, in every circumstance, for the purity of pure colours." \*

Signac denounced Monet and Co. for the "fantasy" and "polychrome mess" in their work.

Monet before 1870 reckoned he was more realistic and analytical than Turner, who he said was "unlikable because of the exuberant romanticism of his imagination."

The Impressionists had been fascinated by Turner, but when their work was likened to his, they shyed away.

"In 1871, during the course of a long stay in London, Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro discovered Turner. They marvelled at the assured and magic quality of his colours, they studied his work, analysed his technique. At first they were struck by his snow and ice effects, amazed at the way he succeeded in conveying the sensation of snow's whiteness, which they themselves had failed to do with their large patches of silver white spread on flat with broad brushstrokes. They saw that these wonderful effects had been achieved not with white alone, but with a host of multicoloured strokes, dabbed in one against the other, and producing the desired effect when seen from a distance." \*

However, Signac's colour theory teacher, Rood, contradicts him, in his "Modern Chromatics", he sites Turner as a painter specifically excepted from the practice of 'optical mixture', and his work is recommended for study as an example of monochromatic gradation for chiaroscuro effects that had been especially expounded by Ruskin. However, Turner was criticized in his day for the practice of 'optical mixture', by Hazlitt in 1815, who criticized Turner for his "daubs" and warned that the public had seen the "quackery of painting trees blue and yellow to produce the effect of green at a distance."

\* Signac 1899 in his pamphlet on Neo-Impressionism.

The literature of colour in painting is often confusing, through translations, particularly of French; for example, almost every European translation of French texts on painting or colour uses the term 'tone' for the term 'hue', so that when they speak of the 'division of tones', which is usually for a chiaroscuro effect, a gradation of light and dark, when it should be the 'division of hues', which is about the optical mixture of colour.

Of all the aspects of technique in colour in painting, the division of hues is probably the most important; it involves how hues are juxtaposed and how they then interact (which just about sums up the mechanics of colour in painting). The division of hues was sometimes used by the Venetians, Titian, Constable, Turner, and Delacroix. Baudelaire describes the concept: "It is a good thing that the brushstrokes are not materially blended; they naturally blend at a desired distance by the sympathetic law which has associated them. Thus colour obtains greater energy and freshness." By combining two hues on the palette, which is a chemical mixture, the resulting hue tends to be a grey or tertiary colour. (The best colourists have always used tertiaries to kick-up juxtaposed purer hues in contrast.) By placing the two hues separately on the canvas, for an optical mixture, the eye simultaneously sees the two hues and mixes them to a purer-mixed single hue. (Work being done at present on colour in painting at Flinders University denies the purity of optically mixed hues, suggesting that the result of the optical mix is the same as a chemical mix: grey or tertiary colour.) \*

The result, as the best colourists know, by experience, of any sort of colour mix, in fact, the degree to which any colour interaction works, depends on the status of the hues: their tone, intensity, temperature, quantity, and placement.

\*See bibliography no.11

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CHRISTOPHER COVENTRY  
UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA  
MAY 1982





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## Reviews and reviewers

**PUBLIC** exhibition invites public comment.

For those of us engaged in working creatively, no matter what area we operate from, our primary concern must surely be our commitment to ideas. Consequently, we are dedicated also to the quality of ideas. There is certainly no big deal here, for we are all capable of discerning the quality of our own propositions. Or so I would have imagined.

But the almost hysterical response to a recent painting review suggests that perhaps some international authority such as the World Boxing Federation may

lend the visual arts their simplified division system. Performers stay clearly within their division, so that a lightweight knows it and is prepared to be viewed as that.

Thus the expectations of all performers are clarified well in advance and we are spared the nonsense of individuals being personally affronted by whatever commentary ensues.

Visual artists do not risk the occupational hazard of becoming "punch-drunk," but there is certainly its equivalent in a misplaced sense of self. That misplacement comes when a lightweight imagines him-

self as a middleweight, or even, God help us, a light heavyweight.

For such a soul to be reminded publicly of what is clearly the true nature of his efforts must indeed be devastating, even though the entire situation has been set up already by the performer.

If the domino theory still holds, then a great deal tends to collapse, and to be put out of gear — one of the first being the performer's sense of good judgment. This leads to an inappropriate level of response, a reply too intense and too prolonged, degenerating to an attack on

the credibility of the reviewer. There may even be the conscious deforming of the truth of ideas to pursue a point.

May I suggest that an individual conscious of the true nature of his sense of self would either ignore or rebut reasonably, instead of emotionally, such commentary?

Ideas are the subject of commentary, ideas and their form. Not individuals. With this in mind it is surely not beyond the wit of reviewers to comment strongly on THAT aspect, and not to imagine that each word they announce may or may not embarrass

the artist. Was it President Truman who said "if you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen"?

Very soon the quality of the reviewers themselves becomes apparent as they show themselves to operate from a base of information or not. Hopefully, that would be the first requirement of a reviewer.

The second would be, in so far as the fine arts are concerned, that the reviewer be blessed with a sensitivity which would permit some interior dialogue between himself and the subject of the review. This second quality is the one most frequently missing, or

the one which disappears as the reviewer is numbed by successive cultural shocks. Let us acknowledge that there is not that much four-star work about to bring joy to the bleak lives reviewers lead.

The danger for reviewers is to assume an attitude of slack benevolence, and detecting a lack of alertness in their audience, to drop their sights.

I noted a recent review of furniture which coasted along quite non-committally till the last few paragraphs, where the reviewer hinted obliquely that he really didn't like anything he had seen. Why

could he not have addressed himself to that proposition? Casualties could only have been light, surely.

The occupational hazard of the reviewer is surely that of risking loss of friends or acquaintances, and that must be weighed against one's allegiance to the ultimacy of ideas. Whereas I would encourage peripheral vision at all times, my sense of things tells me that this is one time I switch to tunnel vision. After all, one views and reviews voluntarily, as do those who exhibit.

**Peter Taylor**

Peter Taylor is a sculptor living and working in Huonville.

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# The Mercury

Tasmania's Newspaper



Dedicated to those who have been timed for looking at a painting, for never more than a minute: to all the minute waltzers; and to those who never made the ball at all.

### THE DA GAMA BALL

About fifteen years ago, the pilgrimage of Australian painters to London, that had occurred throughout the generations of Australian Art, ceased; they had gone to London as students, apprentices, and as competitors in the Big Time. The Modernist Painting of Europe, and later America, came to Australia Anglicized. One of the most important aspects of this phenomenon was a puritan attitude to professionalism, which still persists, despite the London filter being defunct.

The first painter to switch from London was Syd Ball; he went to New York in 1963. Then, as now, America symbolized the wicked world of professionalism. For the Anglicized, the painter has always been seen as an endearing eccentric: a moral idol, above the taint of doing anything for money. For his venturesomeness Ball has suffered throughout his career from a hangover of this prejudice, and its heir, the socialists' hatred of American capitalism and its Coca-Cola cultural imperialism.

A sure sign of this uncouth, money-grabbing Art, was seen in an unbridled pursuit of newness: the competitiveness of Modernism. Any artist who seemed to be seen to jump on the bandwagon was branded 'copy-cat'. But it was okay to play modernist if you disguised it with a veneer of regionalism, which most often meant you hid it in the Bush: the rural idiocy of Australian Painting. So we got Cubism in the Bush, Abstract Expressionism in the Bush, the whole of Modernist Painting went Bush.

Australian painters had had little success in the London scene, until the end of the Fifties, when Sidney Nolan actually affected the History of English Painting. But London was never the Art Centre of the world, and New York certainly was in the early Sixties. Syd Ball went there to learn from scratch. He became a New Yorker. He was not an expatriate in the sense of the Bazzas in London at Kangaroo Valley. Ball integrated into the New York scene, and through his teacher at the Art Students' League, Theodoros Stamos, he became friends with many of the major painters of the New York School, particularly Mark Rothko. Rothko was probably Ball's master: his prime example of what a painter should be and do.

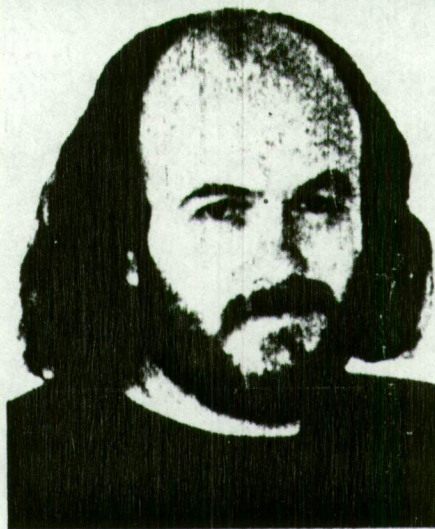


# Sydney Ball

## 8 Absaroka Light

Acrylic & Enamel Paint on Cotton Duck  
74.3 cm x 488 cm

- 1933 Born in Adelaide.  
Studied South Australian School  
of Art.
- 1963 To New York, studied Art  
Students' League of New York  
and Pratt Graphic Centre,  
Travelled Canada, Peru and  
Japan.
- 1964 Awarded U.S.A. "Ford  
Foundation" Scholarship for  
painting, New York.
- 1965 Awarded "Mirror-Waratah"  
Invitation Art Prize, Sydney.
- 1966 Returned to Australia.  
Teacher, South Australian School  
of Art.
- 1967 Awarded Special Prize, Perth  
Festival (Invitation).
- 1968 Awarded "Corio" Prize, Geelong,  
Georges Invitation Art Prize,  
Benalla Invitation Purchase  
Award.
- 1969 New York, painting full time.  
Travelled London and Paris.
- 1971 Awarded U.S.A. Graphic Art  
Design Award, New York,  
Latrobe Valley, Invitation  
Purchase Award.  
One-man shows at the Westerly  
Gallery, New York; Museum of  
Modern Art, Melbourne; South  
Yarra and Strine Galleries,  
Melbourne; Watters and Bonython  
Galleries, Sydney; Bonython  
Gallery, Adelaide; and John Gild  
Gallery, Perth.  
Participated in exhibitions in New  
York, Connecticut, Los Angeles,  
San Francisco, Tokyo, London  
and Australia.
- COLLECTIONS:  
National Galleries in Australia and  
U.S.A. and in private collections,  
including the Mertz and Carnegie  
Collections in the U.S.A.





Ball participated in the first Hard-edge Minimalist exhibition in New York, "The New Edge", with Carl Andre and company. These paintings were later shown in Australia, the 'Cantos', and became the basis of his reputation here. If he had stuck to that phase of his style like the stylists of previous generations, who based their careers on continuity of style, he would have been a richer and more popular painter. But he persisted in the pursuit of painting, to push it: 'ambitious painting'.

The myth of Ball's pursuit was that he leap-frogged through the high fashion trends of painting during the Sixties and Seventies; always coming up with the right trend at the right time. But few people saw the steps between the major phases of his style: the 'Cantos', the 'Persians', the 'Modulars', and the Painterly Abstractionist phase, begun in 1972 in Sydney, where he settled after New York. It is from this period the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery bought a major work early last year: "Da Gama", painted in 1977, it was one of the last of the series.

Syd Ball totally immersed himself in the New York School from 1963 to 1972, but while the Painterly Abstractionist paintings he began in Sydney during 1972, and continued until 1977, belong to that school, and owe much to the work of Helen Frankenthaler, both in feeling and technology, they became the quintessential Sydney paintings: huge abstractions of colour-light, fit for the feeling of the big sun city on the sea. No one has yet matched that touch for the place. Roberts and Streeton went to Sydney more than eighty years before and caught impressions of the water-sun light; and there is a tunnel between them and Ball.

While the detractors of Ball's work are legion, he has been championed by the leading critics in this country, in particular, Patrick McCaughey. Nancy Borlase, in 'The Bulletin', wrote about his work in 1973:

"His paintings of the late Sixties, which conformed to the deductive principals of colour and shape were distinguished by a vigorous originality. The intense emotional vibrations of his clearly defined colour movements, with their flowing, baroque rhythms, differentiated him from the impassiveness of his more classically oriented contemporaries; and it can also be argued, with every justification, that his new paintings, with their underlying emotionalism, their sense of urgency, their verve and beauty, are an opening out and flowering of the possibilities inherent in his former, more circumscribed, works."







Ball was often disparagingly compared to 'Jack The Dripper' Pollock, during the 'Blue Poles' purchase days. Bernard Boles wrote in the 'Nation Review', in 1974, that Ball's work was "merely an unproductive colonisation of Abstract Expressionism as first explored by Pollock." Both artists have been filmed at work, and it is interesting to compare how they worked. It can be seen that Pollock did indeed drip his paint onto the canvas. He performed a dance around and on the canvas, trailing the paint from a tin or stick or brush, getting the movement from his shoulder; working up a linear rhythm that was orchestrated all-over the canvas, as if he were a conductor waving the music out of his baton. Ball would stand over his huge canvas, laid flat on the floor like Pollock's, and with his hand invisibly trace out the rhythms he was about to put on the canvas. He would then pour-splash masses of colour, evident still in the painting, then manipulate the masses into position and shape with a squeegee; the masses of colour form shadows of geometric shapes, which are placed with regard to the perimeters of the canvas. This type of composition is rooted to Synthetic Cubism, which has nothing to do with Pollock.

The connection between the work of Ball and Pollock is Helen Frankenthaler. She developed her style from Pollock's technology, but her ideas of composition were a synthesis of the work of Hofmann and Gorky. Frankenthaler's experimentation influenced Ball and many other lyrical colourist painters of the Sixties and Seventies. Although, the true source for them all was probably Hans Hofmann, the pedagogical master of the New York School.

In paintings like "Da Gama", Ball exploited all the tricks of that trade: painting on raw canvas, rather than the traditional primed base, so that the paint could stain into the fabric of the canvas, and to use the natural texture and colour of the canvas; the thrown gestures of paint; a tactility of surface by variation in pigment, from watery acrylics to heavy enamel paint, overlayed and underlayed; using all-over patterning, of speckled and flecked colour; a dramatic opening up of space; overlapping and see-through shapes.

The colour scheme of "Da Gama" is constructed, orchestrated around a blue core, which is contrasted with a range of high key hues from the opposite side of the spectrum, but never quite orange (blue's direct opposite contrast). Ball's colour schemes have always tended to incorporate tertiary colours (mixes of secondary colours: orange, green, purple). It is this ability to

range over all the colour possibilities that makes Ball such an interesting colourist. Instead of an obvious blue-orange scheme, "Da Gama"'s blues are played with hues that are related to orange: pink, peach, ochre; not merely for subtlety's sake, but to interplay with the colour of the areas of raw canvas, to spread the colour: to give it a more all-over unity: an openness. This spatial openness is heightened by a further blending of the hues: passages of colour are made up of hues of equal tonal value.

Throughout Ball's career there emerges in his best work, like this one, the spectre of Rothko, in his use of scale, and his tendency to serious colour.

Rothko wrote, "A large picture is an immediate transaction; it takes you into it." These are environmental size paintings you can walk into, be enveloped. No other Australian painting allows this kind of intimacy. Such paintings should never be institutionalized, they need a room of their own, where they can be experienced in solitude, and in containment to allow their unique space to work.

These paintings are full of hedonistic sensuous decorative colour, but often they simultaneously hint at things other than pleasure, they become ironic stage sets for drama. It is the use of ripe colours, richly interacting, that can conjure a deeply emotional atmosphere that might elicit a response serious enough for Rothko.

The subject matter of "Da Gama" comes from its scale, its figuration, and colour: the contrast of heavy creamy pink enamel with the oceanic blues, and the all-over variegated old fruitish colour, peach, plum, ochres, ranging deep to light, dull and crusty to smooth and glossy; the two major sweeps, waves of heavy toned colour, matched with their high keyed partners, contrast with an underlying loaded light atmosphere; it feels exotic, decadent, exciting, yet steeped in a heaviness and fatigue of tropical ennui.

The title "Da Gama" is a verbal comment on the painting, and a concluding poetic metaphor. A painting often demands a name, and in seeking the appropriate name, it often comes from experiencing the painting. T.S.Eliot's description of a lyric poet not knowing what he has to say until he has said it; and in



the effort to say it, he is not concerned with making others understand, but to understand it himself; describes Syd Ball's situation: the title comes from his understanding of the painting.

"Da Gama" has power and punch, beauty and lyricism, like a gigantic blow-up of a Turner "colour beginning". As Da Vinci said to Turner, "This is the stuff dreams are made of."

October, 1981.

'The Mercury'

5th February, 1982.

The University of Tasmania Fine Arts Committee  
invites you and your friends to the opening of

# New Art

Works By

**Marion Hardman**

**Gudrun Klix**

**Lutz Presser**

**Peter Taylor**

The Exhibition is to be opened by leading Australian  
Art Dealer, Mr. Ray Hughes of Queensland, at 5.30 p.m.  
on Tuesday, 9th March, 1982 at the Fine Arts Gallery,  
University Centre. The Exhibition will run until the  
31st March, 1982.

## "NEW ART"

Now showing at the University of Tasmania, in an exhibition called "New Art", are four artists who work in Hobart, but whose works are far better known elsewhere. They and their works are thoroughly introduced in the catalogue by Jonathan Holmes.

Gudrun Klix's works are tricksey metaphysical tableaux of ceramics disguised as rocks.

Marion Hardman's colour photographs are the most successful works, because they are coherent without being banal; but they remain just good photographs: there is no element of risk to be seen.

Lutz Presser and Peter Taylor are the two Tasmanian artists most committed to 'ambitious art' (the term most used now for avant-garde art); that means, in part, that they embrace the current fashions in art. You will find versions of their modes of work in all the art centres of the world, for ambitious art is always international; and these artists are travellers.

The style of these venturesome artists is romantic neo-expressionism; and they both suffer from its idealism: crudity equals seriousness and authenticity. They both seek to play the games of the romantic: about myth, nostalgia, and horror.

Peter Taylor's wood sculpture is dense with meaning, and the echo remains of archaic or tribal art; but he romantically forces modernism on it by disguising it with arbitrary paint. Taylor artily vandalizes his own work by obscuring the wood and the form with a camouflage of splashes and dashes of various colours, to authenticize his high art stance. This is no mere craftsman-carver. But the dumbness of this stance, is that it is futile, because the work is inextricably bound to the universal tradition of the carved wooden figure, and it is pointless to play the game of 'art or craft', for whatever the intent of the maker, more than any other man-made object the carved wooden figure has the capacity to be loaded with magic and myth; time and place become irrelevant, because creeping out of the wood comes our imagination of millennia; whether it is painted, wrapped, or bare, it has the power



of an idol, a chair, or a stick. Aesthetically or philosophically, it is here that sculpture persists like no other art to speak to us beyond art.

Taylor's work is about myths that have always existed throughout the world: the landscape man, the Green Man, from Amaleth to John Bunyon.

Lutz Presser's work represents more strongly the cultural fad of neo-expressionism, but here it has the silliness of a punk rock band playing christian revival at a bush Baptist meeting.

The work is a hybrid of Frank Stella's 1970's high modernist painting in its structure. Like Taylor's work its formal authenticity is suspect, because it visually suicides in meaningless, homeless painting. But not only is Presser's colour and paint pretentiously off, so are his materials. Religious reliefs in cut-out foam rubber chucked with paint, without the charm of kitsch, because they fail even to be decorative. There is no coherence, it is a pretentious mess trying to be profound guts and excreta; which is, in fact, the subject matter of the work, and its real content.

Presser's work is primarily intended to express the mess of martyrdom, in an age, a century, when such stuff is absolutely meaningless, not just the religious beliefs, but that art should utilize such common place horrors. There are no myths or martyrs, because they are legion even now; that we continue to rip, and tear, and burn ourselves has something to do with the voyeurism of making and looking at images of it; and to trivialize it in punk is not my taste in romance, or rock and roll.

It is another feature of ambitious art that it illicit a response: it is not the sort of work you walk past in any town.

'The Mercury'  
19th March, 1982.

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Sixteen canvases, ranging in size from one tiny work 22 by 15 cm to another as large as 145 by 190 cm, have been selected by the artist in this, his first full-scale exhibition since 1978. Then David Nash showed at the University of Tasmania, causing considerable comment. Despite his youthfulness, Nash's work is surprisingly sophisticated. In 1975, while still at the Tasmanian School of Art, his work was selected as a prize purchase from the Blue Gum Festival, while in recent years he has exhibited in the Black Prize exhibition in Sydney. Thus, Nash already has works in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, University and Arts Advisory Board collections.

This current show demonstrates why Nash deserves such recognition. While basically abstract, with some geometrical elements, Nash's paintings are highly suggestive of atmospheric effects and landscapes. They also have the true paradoxical qualities found in most good paintings.

These works are colorful, yet subtle, strong, yet delicate, abstract, yet full of realistic possibilities. The artist has aimed at "a free lyricism" within each of the varied canvases and this he has achieved by a skilful and balanced manipulation of color, tone, texture and technique. This is no mean achievement.

Among these outstanding paintings are "Ascension," a vertical work 192 by 105 cm, portraying finely painted streamers floating through what could be a cloudy sky above an alabaster mountain. The tonal effects are subtle, while suggesting the landscape, yet the abstract qualities add mystery and prevent overstatement.

## Reply from Peter Taylor

COMMENDATIONS to Chris Coventry for initiating debate on the present exhibition — generally response to the visual arts in Tasmania is proportional to proximity to the South Pole, and about as warm. For all intents and purposes feedback is non-existent, and from the viewpoint of a participant, communication is usually a one-way affair, always outward, nothing coming back.

But now things are different, with the advent in Tasmania of travellers from the mainland who are prepared to debate issues. Hopefully the habit will prove infectious. Purely in the interests of furthering this debate, and on a "once only" basis, I am prepared to relax my primary rule of never offering explanations about my work.

Chris Coventry, in a generally acerbic view of life, rebukes me on several counts — first on the grounds that my work lacks formal authenticity. Correct. I can do without that kind of certification, that kind of authentication. At a certain period of creative development that security blanket isn't needed any more. It's a good thing to have behind one, well behind. After all, formalism is only the accumulated conventional wisdom, or more simply, the rules of the game. Most vigorous gamespeople are prepared to push the rules into unexpected configurations which infuriate the purists. (Hence the International League of Under-Arm Bowlers).

"Southern Landscape," meanwhile, a smaller canvas, incorporates stripes and patches of brown, red, ochre and white swim within a predominantly dark intense blue. While this painting reads as almost completely abstract, the colors and textures remain evocative of our landscape. Another large painting, on two panels, overall 185 by 142 cm, explores tonal, color and textural variations within an overall composition based upon division of the canvas into 20 squares. Four of the squares, classically placed upon the frame's "golden section," are divided diagonally into dark and light triangles, providing strong, yet subtle contrast with the remaining squares in blues and beiges. Here Nash's paradoxical abilities are well articulated. This work has movement, is forceful, yet calm and quiet. It is a painting which suggests myriad possibilities.

Other successful works are "Ariel," a large work which suggests a figurative element, perhaps a face or a blurred bird's wing, floating in luminous space above a section of the globe; "Haiku," a small abstract painting whose colors and tones are drawn from those found in a Japanese garden; and "Midden," another large horizontal work.

The 18 paintings in this exhibition represent two years of methodical and thoughtful work. They are worthy of careful consideration by the viewer and certainly of inclusion in public collections. They are perhaps best summed up in David Nash's own words: "I use landscape colors, but it's landscape with a new view."

— PAUL WILLIAM WHITE.

Formalism to me is the base from which begins the long reconnaissance. I guess with that image invoked, I'd better refer to the base troops, with their need for heavy doses of discipline. Tactically, the more one distances oneself from formalism, the more the flanks are exposed, communications become difficult, and vulnerability greater. The advantages are mobility, innovation and a more instinctive response. All this pre-supposes an offensive attitude in marked contrast to the defensiveness of the formalist.

A second rebuke is offered in that I deliberately obscure wood and form. Once again my critic is correct on all points. I must say in reply that I am not at all impressed by wood (as I hope Mr Coventry is not impressed by canvas). I merely use it. Regarding form, that also I try to use competently and don't feel the need to display it as a virtuous ingredient.

It is puzzling to me why the totally irrelevant issue of "art and craft" has been raised in this context.

Observers may be surprised by one of the implications of this debate — that it is possible, despite all available information, for a serious artist to be as ultra-conservative as Chris Coventry's response illustrates. One small point in conclusion, I would claim to be far more my own person than my critic allows in his opening paragraph.

—PETER TAYLOR

## New technique on display

TWO years ago Launceston artist Richard Klekociuk set out in a new direction when he decided to use rich, strong oil pastels for his distinctive landscapes.

Klekociuk, who is currently exhibiting at the Colonial Gallery, Evandale, has developed a new technique, a lot by trial and error, and with the building up of his colors now feels that "my pastels bounce back at you."

Patrons to the Gallery may experience this sensation when they view the 26 landscapes which Klekociuk has hung for his first major exhibition outside joint showings with the Tasmanian Independent Artists Group.

Another Launceston artist, Peter Frank, is exhibiting with him. He has hung 25 paintings which will appeal to those who like traditional works. His Tasmanian landscapes reflect the qualities of the early Australian Heidelberg School.

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emphasis on the crafted furniture by Alan Livermore in the centre of the gallery than on the photographs ranged round the walls. They almost look like an afterthought: the problem is possibly exacerbated by the smallness of the work.

The exhibition does not offend the viewer nor does it do much to inspire one. There is a sense of preciousness and déjà-vu, qualities common to much of the art world.

The show is disjointed in its hanging of the work: a few prints by one artist

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### THE VEILED FINITE

Roger Murphy has an exhibition of "watercolour paintings" on now at Coughton Galleries in Macquarie Street. The results of his work do not add up to watercolour painting; it is more like pen and wash drawing: the poor parent of watercolour painting.

British artists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries invented watercolour painting. For hundreds of years watercolour had been used in the form of opaque pigments: mixed with white to give 'body'. From the Renaissance to Rembrandt artists used 'washes' in their drawings to enable them to efficiently render light and shade on line drawing. Wash drawing led to the idea of using transparent washes of different colours, which is the modern technique of watercolour painting. It is in the painting of light that the technique of watercolour is supreme. The white of the paper reflects light through the washes of colour applied to it.

The technique of watercolour was developed to paint landscapes: to paint distances, land, water, and the sky: "the veiled infinite".

Murphy's work amounts to stylish illustrations of the landscape, as in the reproduction here. He uses a colour scheme based on the immediate local colour; there is no attempt to investigate the subtleties of colour in the landscape. His attempts at simulating light in the landscape rely on tonal contrasts: the high contrast of the bare white paper against the washes and line drawing. The most successful example is the most extreme contrast: "The Lagoon, Roaring Beach, Dover", (No.30). The white of the paper recreates the brilliant light of the sand; and it works so well because the scale is right.

The weakness of Murphy's work is not just his lack of watercolour technique, but that many of the works are merely hasty slick sketches. However, it is in the sketches that an element of the true feeling of the landscape comes through; where the technique mimics nature: the areas worked by scraping and scratching, the line-dashes, the stains and blots, seem to imitate the action of nature: the wind moving clouds and water, reeds and grasses.

'The Mercury'

19th March, 1982.



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CATALOGUE



"BEN LOMOND AND WINTRY MOUNTAINS  
FROM FAR AWAY PLACES"

AN EXHIBITION OF RECENT PAINTINGS BY

**VITA ENDELMANIS**

TO BE OPENED BY GARY CLEVELAND  
DIRECTOR - DESIGN CENTRE OF TASMANIA  
on FRIDAY, 16th APRIL, 1982 at 8 p.m.

Presented by

*The Masterpiece Fine Art Gallery*

63 Sandy Bay Road, Hobart, Tasmania.

\$1.00



### VITA ENDELMANIS

The Masterpiece Fine Art Gallery is an Old World salon style gallery, that exhibits in its museum of art and artifacts, the remnants of the emigrant school of painters that was so important to Australian painting in the 1950's; from the doyen of the group, Desiderius **Orban**, to some of the most famous, and successful, exponents of that middle European style of expressionism, Cassab, Kubbos, Kmit, and Zusters. This is a style of expressionism that has little of the angst-ridden punch of the German version; it is the opposite: it is about the warmth of homeyness, and the beauty of Nature, in the tradition of Folk and Craft: making nice things for the home.

Expressionism was out of taste in those twenty years that 'cool' was the hallmark of the right taste of Australian painting. Ambitious painting avoided falling for the Dionysian trap, by rejecting instinct and emotion, the ecstasy of feeling and sensation, and sort the rule of intellect. Now, in the 1980's, the taste for expressionism is back in vogue all over the world.

Vita Endelmanis is an artist living in Tasmania who works in this mode of middle European expressionism, and in her current exhibition at the Masterpiece Gallery, her theme is typical: Nature as decoration. Endelmanis translates mountains and snow into heat treated acrylic collage on terylene twill.

The works are extremely bland, as decorative abstractions of Nature, and unmoving as expressionist poems to the snowfields. Snow has much more going for it than pure white: by the laws of reflected colour, snow white contains all the colours of the spectrum; it is a natural kaleidoscope. This is well-trodden ground by painters from Turner to Monet, who succeeded in conveying the sensation of snow's whiteness, not by spreading sheets of silver white, but with a host of multicoloured strokes; like the Monet snowscape exhibited in Hobart during 1980, from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection.

'The Mercury'  
7th May, 1982.



# THE MEANINGS OF MODERN ART

JOHN  
RUSSELL



THAMES  
AND  
HUDSON



"THE MEANINGS OF MODERN ART"

JOHN RUSSELL.

THAMES AND HUDSON. 1981.

(430 pages. Paperback: \$32.95)

THE WRITING OF ART

John Russell's book "The Meanings of Modern Art" attempts to slot modern art into a general history - that is, a history of modern western culture, with particular regard to painting, but it is according to the authorized U.S.A. view. This book was commissioned by the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (M.O.M.A.). It is a popular view of modern art, designed for the American public, in the mode of Robert Hughes' "Shock of the New". It is good journalism: entertainingly readable information. It is the factual fiction of the "How the West was Won" kind; which was, no doubt, the writer's brief.

John Russell sees the history of art as the history of everything; and this belief alienates him from the vast majority of the artists he writes about, and distorts their works of art by connecting them to ideas about everything.

Nowhere is the temptation to write a romance instead of an historical study so compelling as in modern art. Russell speculates about the concerns of the artist and his world, and about the true meanings of his activities and his product. This kind of writing diverts attention from looking at the painting, or sculpture. Matisse reckoned he knew only a couple of people who could look at a painting for more than a minute.

Art-writers, whether critic, theorist, or historian, frequently feel they have to justify what the artist does in terms that are not artistic, by harnessing art to other intellectual activities, to give it merit, seriousness, and authenticity. Thus most artists have been convinced that it is certain that art-writers will never get the point. Picasso said in 1923, "Mathematics, trigonometry, chemistry, psychoanalysis, music and whatnot have been applied to Cubism to give it an easier interpretation. All this has been pure literature, not to say nonsense, which brought bad results, blinding people with theories."

The conflict between the artist and the art-writer has been a feature of modern art since the writer superseded the artist

in the mid-nineteenth century, when John Ruskin invented J.M.W. Turner, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

John Russell, and his colleagues, like Peter Fuller, who recently lectured in Hobart, invoke the name of John Ruskin, "The greatest of English writers on art", as the patron saint of their beliefs and ambitions, and in doing so give away their game: to idealize art in the name of education. Their strategy, to preach their ideas of the world through art, is pure Ruskin. Ruskin taught the morality of seeing, and he used Turner as his lesson, knowing that the whole tenor of his arguments was in opposition to Turner's convictions and practice. Turner told Ruskin he thought his writing was ridiculous. But Ruskin convinced the public, because he was supported by the great literati of his time: Wordsworth, Tennyson, Bronte, and Dickens; and they were the public media...the word. "Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter?" wrote Oscar Wilde, because what mattered was Ruskin's "mighty and majestic prose...so fervid and so fiery-coloured in its noble eloquence".

The silliest notion of Ruskin-Russell's is the belief that a transference of learning occurs through looking at art: profound lessons about everything come oozing out of the paint. Perhaps the public have come to expect that is what should happen in great art; and if it doesn't, it isn't.

If the public is bewildered by modern art it is largely because of those who have attributed to it extra-art ideas, and in doing so have led the public away from looking at the works of art. If modern art can be tied down to a single idea, a common goal, it is that art should be autonomous: free from the responsibilities and constraints of society, whether ethical (religious or political), or aesthetical (making beautiful things).

The problem with writing about art in the manner of "The Meanings of Modern Art" is that it mostly concentrates on the artist and society, and the works of art are shown merely as conceptual products of their interaction, when in fact the great works of art are inexplicably the result of magic: imagination, and chance, and skill; and they exist in an independent world that for the viewer to enter requires something of the same stuff needed to make the art.

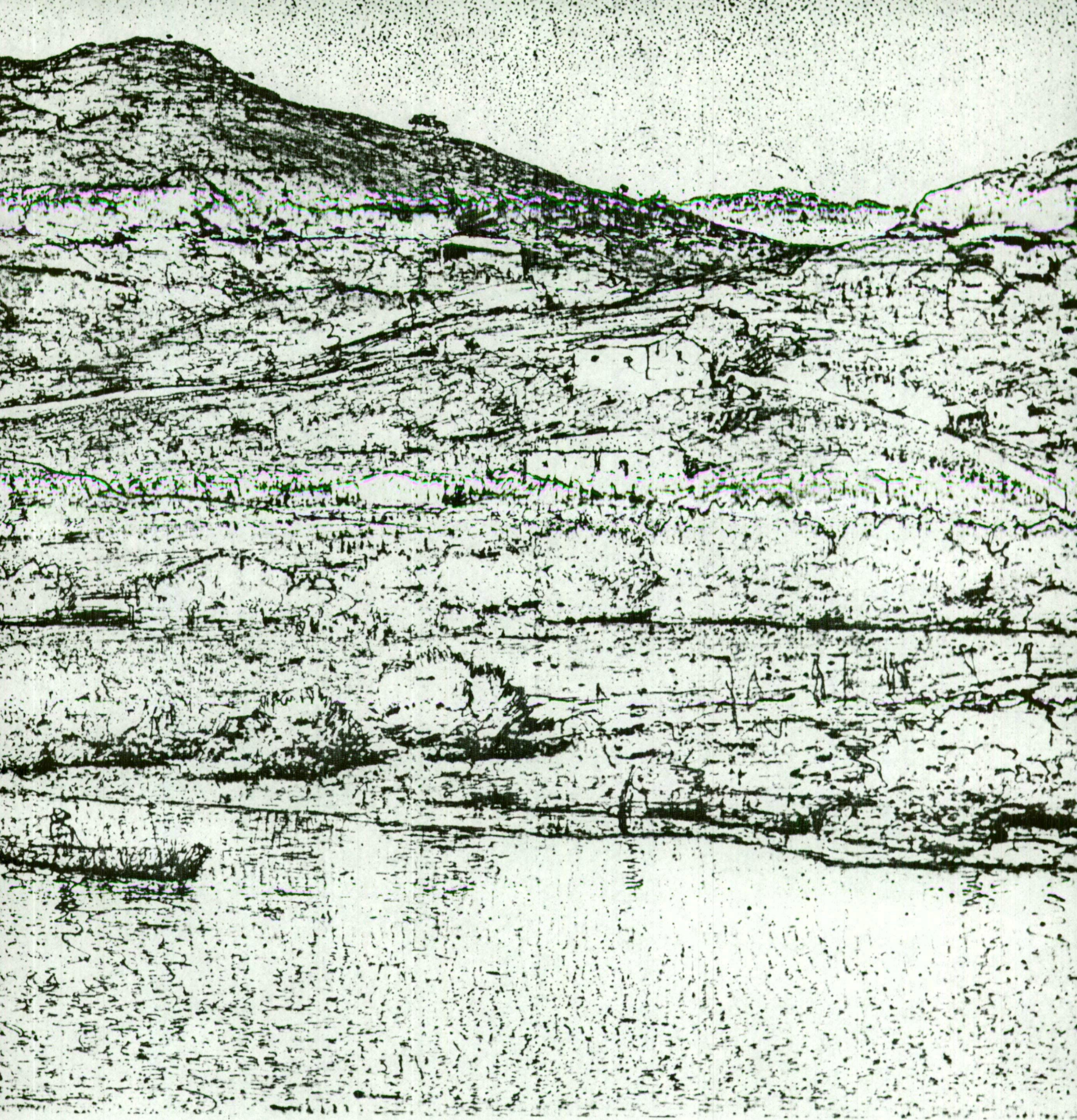
If the Australian public, in particular, have a chauvinistic and philistine view of modern art, it is because we have had to get it from books. We see the masterpieces of modern art only in reproduction, or in brief tourist glances, or seeing minor works of the modern masters in small public collections: we have not lived with modern art, any art; and Australian art is a product of that general retardation.

Stuck only with reproductions of modern art, much of the true meanings are lost to the viewer: the real physical presence of an art-work. A reproduction is merely an aid to the description of an art-work. A photograph radically changes the most important ingredients of an art-work: the size, tone, hue, texture, and volume. A great part of the art-writer's job should be to say what may be seen, so he must differentiate between the reproduction and the art-work itself. When the art is disguised in reproduction a comparison of various works shown in a book like Russell's often gives the impression that some are related in colour, texture, and size, when in fact they have little in common.

In the face of the propaganda of art-writers, and the lack of proof of modern art in the flesh, how are we going to get the meanings right? It will only happen when Australians, like James Mollison, act against popular opinion and buy the real thing for us to see. Then we will learn to see and understand and critically read picture books like this. Only the masterpieces teach us about the masterpieces, and they are the meanings of modern art.

'The Mercury'  
12th June, 1982.





en and ink and wash 30.5 x 43.8 cm Private collection

# D REES



LLOYD REES  
LATE DRAWINGS AND LITHOGRAPHS  
TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY  
3 JUNE TO 3 JULY 1982

THE DRAWING LESSON

You can still make it to an exhibition of drawings at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery that any professional artist in Australia would walk a long way to see; not just to look, but to learn about drawing. Lloyd Rees has been the drawing master for Australian painting for more than fifty years, and this show is a drawing lesson. At anytime in his classes you will find young Syd Ball and infant Brett Whiteley sitting in the front row, attentive; they watch this artist because he can draw and he is still the best drawer in the class.

With great virtuoso drawing it is not just the winning ways of dazzlingly slick pieces, the daring dash that often fools us into believing this is virtuoso genius; on the contrary, the hallmark of drawing genius is the worked, laboured, considered pieces, that in the hands of lesser artists collapse into leaden nothingness in the heavy effort to resolve the work. Lloyd Rees' drawing has the full virtuoso range, from slick firm lines and bold light and dark contrasts, that so suits lithography, to the delicate dots and dashes and fine lines of sketches. It is a range that allows the artist to capture the dramatic, deep tonal contrasts of the mysterious atmosphere of rocks and the openness of light in sparse landscapes. Rees whips his laborious drawings to transcend the limits of drawing, turning them into something akin to painting: he creates an illusion of atmosphere, it is no longer merely the sensory power of line and marks, of light and dark, the drawing is a sensual illusion that moves the imagination beyond the image on the retina, to connect it to emotions and senses that are difficult to explain, hence the spiritual tag.

There has been increasing talk about the spiritual qualities of Lloyd Rees' work, which is probably as much to do with his venerable age as it is a way to explain the quality of his work. A real response to a work of art relies as much on the

willingness and the imagination of the viewer, as it does on the intent and skill of the artist: the artist requires the complicity of the viewer to conjure up the spiritual. It is difficult to judge the authenticity of the spiritual buzz when art writers intervene with ravings about the extra-sensory properties of the art. A most extreme case is Lou Klepac's tribute to Lloyd Rees in the catalogue of this exhibition; it serves to intimidate the viewer not enlighten him.

The real interest in Lloyd Rees' age concerns not only the fact that he has continued to work and that he produces work of such quality, but that his work continues to change and develop. The late drawings, prints, and paintings represent a new high in a body of work that seemed perfectly complete. It is an almost unknown phenomenon in Australian painting for a painter to bloom in old age; yet it may be seen throughout the history of art that some of the really dazzling moments are the result of the work of old masters who came again. It could be argued that the greatest modernist paintings were produced by octogenarian masters: Matisse and Monet. There has always been a lot of speculation about these late comings. Perhaps the late radical changes were due to senility, causing a return to 'infantine sight', or just failing sight, or even madness. It may be that some old artists were spurred by their realization of inevitable death. It might have been cashing-in the accumulated experience of a long lifetime. Turner was asked the secret of his apparent magical genius, when it was commonly rumoured that his late work was the result of senility, madness, faulty eyesight, and bewitchment; he answered, "The only secret I have got is damned hard work!" What we do know for certain about Lloyd Rees is that he draws, and he draws, and he draws.

'The Mercury'  
25th June, 1982.



# Shark Attack



July '82



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PAUL ZIKA  
PAINTINGS & PRINTS



## THE PLAIN SHAPES OF ZIKA

They're really about sculpture said the painter.  
They're really about architecture said the sculptor.  
They're really about decoration said the architect.  
They're really about nothing said Taylor.

Paul Zika had an exhibition of hardedge paintings in Australia in 1982. Dick Watkins said in the sixties that hardedge painting may not be good but it was neat and put everybody off making it; except Paul Zika, then Melbourne painters always were eccentric.

Hardedge-painting-in-Australia was always in an authenticity crisis, and it suicided in 1968.

Hardedge-painting-in-Australia was invented by Dick Watkins in Sydney, or by Syd Ball in New York, in 1965. Paul Zika discovered hardedge-painting-in-Australia in 1967, after he saw The Two Decades of American Painting at the old National Gallery of Victoria. Australia discovered hardedge-painting-in-Australia at The Field Exhibition which opened the new National Gallery of Victoria in 1968. Hardedge-painting-in-Australia committed suicide in The Field, and its patron Clement Greenberg was the kiss of death. "That particular show must have influenced more practising artists in Oz than anything of its kind", because every artist in it, except Col Jordan, gave up that mode, or gave up art; and nobody, except Paul Zika, took up that mode after that show.

A Freudian analysis of why Zika persists in this eccentric manner, concluded that Paul has a Kraft Komplex, which was caused by his relationship with his father: during his childhood he was subjected to a strict middle-European craft-aesthetic discipline by his father, with the result he suffered from chronic neatness, which severely retarded his creativity quotient; thus he has been unable to adapt to the creative pressure of the faddish and promiscuous Art World.

The perversity of the Art World is such that while it might piss itself laughing at the current work of Zika, as it is presented here, through the magic of presentationalism the work could be transformed into the most voguish high art. Its new authenticity could be achieved by turning all the eight paintings into vertical designs and joining them together to make a single work; then by further simplifying the colour



scheme, to, say an all-over pink; 'the concept' could be documented in a text describing the mysteries of systems drawing, for which the 'paintings' then become a partially-three-dimensional model. The prints would be illustrations of the idea of the drawing system.

If, however, this ploy should fail, the artist could easily convert the work into a neo-expressionist thing by arbitrarily scribbling all over it with a lot of variously coloured oil-sticks, and changing the documentation to stories about legendary V.F.L. heroes.

'Shark Attack'

July 1982.





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