

John Stark Alcove Paintings

The soul never thinks without a picture. Aristotle

IN THE WINTER OF 1923, in Dornach, Switzerland the theosophist and founder of anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner, gave a series of nine lectures entitled *The Nature of Bees*. His visionary thesis anticipated the decline of the bee and its ramifications thereof. Steiner argued that this would be caused by industrialisation and, central to his thinking, was the assertion that this catastrophe will have been precipitated by humankind's abandonment of what Steiner called, 'the threefold social organism' or social threefolding as it's known. This refers to three prime areas of human endeavour: the economic, the legal and the cultural. He also suggested that all manner of human actions will have environmental, social and moral repercussions. Steiner's message is quite stark – wake up, think differently, or what will happen to the bees will ultimately happen to us. Eighty years later Colony Collapse Disorder has become reality.

Remember yourself always and everywhere. George Gurdjieff

During the 1950s Joseph Beuys, who, for most of his adult life had been an adherent of Steiner, embraced Steiner's theory of the 'the threefold social organism'. This was an insight grasped whilst Steiner was studying bees and certain aspects of the thinking were adopted by the Fluxus Group, of which Beuys was an influential member. Fluxus promoted an art that was socially engaged, opposing bourgeois values and institutions. It believed that art could be a driving force for social advancement and wider democracy – in short, they believed that everyone was an artist and that ultimately all life was art. Radical stuff at the time. This was a period when feminism and Marxism were regarded as compatible with esotericism – a time of rampant intellectual curiosity when artists would begin to grapple with ethical and social issues wholesale. In 1973 Beuys joined the Anthroposophical Society.

Steiner's influence on Beuys can't be overstated, nor that of theosophy in art generally. Theosophy was influential in the development of early modernism and espoused/promoted an evolutionary vision – the advancement and expansion of human consciousness. Malevich, Mondrian and Kandinsky were all members of the Theosophical Society; all were innovators and proponents of non referential (or as some have it – non objective) painting, before the outbreak of war in 1914. Just as theosophy had been instrumental in the development of modernism. It would also be a factor in it's demise.

John Stark is one of a growing number of painters who have embraced the legacy of conceptualism and the thinking that characterised conceptual art. It has made their work more responsive, agile and intelligent. It has expanded their practice and the discourse of painting more widely. Stark's is an erudite and volatile synthesis that draws on a wide range of art, high and low – from Beuys to Warhammer, the tabletop game of fantasy battles; from Francis Picabia to rapper Chester P; from fantasy album cover artist Roger Dean to the



Telling the Bees

16th century mannerist, Jacopo Ligozzi. A mix of high and low, mainstream and underground. This is post conceptual painting.

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void but out of chaos. **Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley**

Bees – or rather their absence – have been a recurrent theme of Stark's paintings and the painting, *This Too Shall Pass* is no exception. It's a painting of what appears to be a rather perplexed and clean-shaven beekeeper who's either looking in or out of a window and like so much about this and other paintings in the series, it's ambiguous – and wilfully so.

These paintings are impeccably constructed and the surface has the kind of finish one associates with an 'old master'. There's no rhetorical or bravura brushwork – they're exquisite. References, connections and allusions abound in these seemingly anachronistic paintings laden with references and are often refreshingly incongruous – the anachronisms are studied.

Stark's beekeeper holds a solitary blue delphinium between his thumb and first finger in a manner characteristic of a renaissance or symbolist painting. His beekeeping days are numbered. The bees are long gone. An apparently medieval subject witnessing a 21st century catastrophe. Like so many other paintings in this enchanting series, what we're presented with is painting that is stoically reserved yet thoroughly dystopian. It's a painfully precise study in redundancy – as if one small blossom would lure the bees back. Fat chance. Much of the content of these superficially archaic looking paintings is so cogent, so contemporary – so poignant.

The painting's title is the answer to a Persian king's request for a scholar to write a single sentence that would make the king happy when he was sad and sad when he was happy – but why? A conundrum that frustrates the conventions of the vanitas perhaps? For a man who paints 'about' bees, Stark manages to depict very few of them. But the few that do make an appearance seem to be weary survivors.

I guess one person can make a difference. But most of the time, they probably shouldn't. **Marge Simpson**

One of Stark's paintings in which bees make an appearance is *Chessboard Landscape*. Seven bees are returning to the hive, but this is no ordinary hive – the entrance is located in the dead centre of the alcove, above a chessboard motif that refers to 15th century Peruvian textiles. The bees are a central part of the social fabric, indeed they are the social fabric, what Steiner termed the 'social organism'. This is the hive as societal metaphor – a place where sisterhood thrives and symmetry signifies order. This painting, like others in this series, appropriate the vanitas and the memento mori. It's probably worth defining here the difference between these icon-based forms of genre painting. Vanitas generally alludes to moral weaknesses of the living, such as greed, vanity – the seven deadly sins. Memento mori is essentially a meditation on mortality, death and transience.

Stark is patently an appropriationist but there's much more to his work than that – he's constantly misappropriating, re-purposing and re-inventing and



Materno

his use of Latin aphorisms and a German gothic typeface is central to the sense of cultural alienation.

Elements of Stark's iconography are informed by his exposure to popular gothic fantasy as a teenager – he was an avid Warhammer fan. Warhammer is a strategic fantasy role-play game that employs painted figures of fairly stereotypical medieval types along with ogres, elves, orcs, dragons and the occasional griffin. A Warhammer enthusiast like Stark would gain as much pleasure from painting the figures as playing the game and once proficient, the modeller would practice 'dry brushing' – a method of painting borrowed from old-school World War Two 1:72 Airfix military modelmaking.

Stark is one of those people who understands that there's something wonderful about precision, as there is about modelmaking – the idea of making the world over again is quite something. There's also an acknowledgement of Roger Dean's fantasy art which was a defining feature of albums by prog rock protagonists like Yes, Steve Howe and Asia.

Stark is utterly painstaking both conceptually and practically and this is evident in the way that the surface of his paintings are executed: mirror-smooth and utterly unobtrusive brushwork. Old school.

They are much to be pitied who have not been given a taste for nature early in life.

Jane Austen

Probably the most ambitious painting in the series is *Materno*. Ostensibly a classic madonna or mother and child study, but something is amiss. The usual warmth associated with such a subject is absent, replaced by a deathly pale – the mother appears anaemic; the child torpid. The entire painting is executed in a militaristic palette. This is no accident as the source of this painting is a black and white photograph found in a Nazi propaganda manual of 1938 extolling the virtues of Arian motherhood and endorsing the subjugation of women. This is reflected in the rather incongruous Panzer matt green of the stonework.

Stark's women have previously been depicted as variously subjugated: as witches, washerwomen and slaves. *Materno* is intended to expand this predicament. For Stark, *Materno* is probably the most poignant of the alcove paintings as his mother committed suicide when he was only six years-old and, recently, one of Stark's closest friends collapsed and died suddenly. She was six months pregnant.

Throughout the Alcove series, Stark is constantly addressing social, ethical and environmental issues. Here, he questions the increasingly problematic issue of Dominionism – the Christian equivalent of Sharia law – the old testament belief that Christians have the god-given right to ownership and control of the natural world and everything in it or on it. It was used as a justification for colonialism, the subjugation of women and slavery.

Whatever you are... are it good? **Ed 'Big Daddy' Roth**

Tooth of an Ogre is the most enigmatic and paradoxical of the Alcove paintings. In a manner that is exquisitely economic, it presents the spectator



Tooth of an Ogre

with several complex and epistemological problems. What size is this object? The uncalibrated ruler depicted at the base of the painting only compounds our confusion. What kind of animal has a tooth like this – with three projections? There are no clues in the painting to the owner's identity – the title compounds our confusion as ogres exist only in fantasy literature. Besides, no legitimate museum acknowledges the existence of ogres. How can we possibly know anything about this tooth (if that's what it is). The fact that the tooth is rendered with such precision cements the deceit. How could anything depicted in such detail possibly be fictitious? The only possible reading is one of fiction, an elegant lie, a conundrum that offers only doubt and confusion. Despite appearances, *Tooth of an Ogre* (rather like painting in general) doesn't offer a fixed understanding.

I don't know why we're here, but I'm pretty sure it's not to enjoy ourselves.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Alpha & Omega is a heady mix of Platonism, Christian mysticism and Scandinavian dark ambient, album cover design. *Alpha & Omega* appropriates the hands from Quentin Massys' *Ecce Homo*. Massys was a 15th/16th century Flemish painter responsible for *A Grottesque Old Woman* in London's National Gallery. There are also echoes of the disembodied hands that feature in Giotto's fresco, *The Mocking of Christ*.

Alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the classic Greek alphabet but are invariably used in a Christian context to refer to God, the father and Christ, the son – as Christ is alleged to have said, 'I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end'. The disembodied hands bear emphatic stigmata, which are penetrated by red snakes in thoroughly baroque fashion.

Stark was also thinking about an essay by Derrida that he had recently read – *Handwerk* where Derrida argues that work done with the hand is a form of thinking. Derrida also asserts that working with our hands, rather like speech, distinguishes us from animals. Derrida says a lot of things.

If you want to have clean ideas, change them as often as your shirt.

Francis Picabia

In the 1972 horror film, *Rosemary's Baby*, Rosemary Woodhouse is reading a copy of J R Hanslett's fictional book, *All of Them Witches*. The book is probably visible for no more than two or three seconds but this, like many of Stark's cultural references, is made in an elegant and erudite manner. He will often utilise a 'second order' reference to guide the spectator to another that's more mainstream or ubiquitous. This is about cultural connectivity rather than Satanism – it's applied esotericism.

The caption apparently carved beneath the alcove – Hell a Cometh Swift – is an anagram of *All of Them Witches* and in the painting, Stark uses a variety of references for his depictions of women, the starting point of which was *The Hermaphrodite*, executed in the style known as Romanism by Jan Gossaert. Gossaert was a 16th century, French speaking, Flemish painter and was one of the first northern european painters to visit renaissance Rome, return and



All of Them Witches

subsequently make work influenced by what he saw whilst in Italy.

As daft as it may seem, the key to the reading of this painting is the two-quid inflatable panel beach ball. This anachronism, simultaneously incongruous and yet somehow appropriate, is witness to the synthetic and almost 'laminated' nature of the painting – positioned precariously between the absurd and the eternal. The four figures are gleaned from disparate sources and epochs with the central figure holding the beach ball aloft whilst wearing solely what appears to be a yarmulke – this may seem absurd – it's all the more remarkable when you know that she, Hermaphrodite, is also depicted seemingly wearing a yarmulke in Gossaert's 16th century original. The figure in the bottom left of the painting is a direct appropriation of one of Francis Picabia's 1940s 'pin-up' paintings.

Your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries.

Monty Python & The Holy Grail

The alcove in *Telling The Bees* functions in a similar manner to that in *All of Them Witches* – as a window. A window looking out over what appears to be a northern European landscape, sometime in the middle ages. It's one of those cold, distant, blue monochromatic landscapes favoured by painters of the period. Another convention favoured by painters at this time was the ubiquitous coastal watch tower – if 15th century paintings are to be trusted, the threat of invasion, particularly in the north east of Britain, was fairly constant.

Bee-related references abound; in the foreground the beekeeper is preparing the smoker but (as before) bees are conspicuously absent. In the middle distance there are three hives differentiated by basic heraldic devices, below the alcove is a relief carving of a bee resembling some kind of corporate logo. Perhaps someone forgot to 'tell the bees'? 'Telling the bees' is the tradition of beekeepers sharing significant news – that of births, bereavements and marriages, with their bees. It was thought that to withhold such news would bring the beekeeper ill fortune and damage the health of the hive.

Returning to the painting, there's the matter of the beekeeper's wristwatch. What are we to make of this blatant anachronism? Has the past been misappropriated? Again? Shouldn't it undermine our sense of continuity? The questions are absurd – painting is intrinsically deceitful, mischievous and contradictory. Stark understands that and revels in it.

This is exquisite fiction. The fact that it's perplexing isn't a problem – quite the opposite in fact – it's enthralling. And it's what makes it art.

Trembling, I listened; the summer sun

Had the chill of snow

For I knew she was telling the bees of one

Gone on the journey we must all go! **Home Ballads** by John Greenleaf Whittier

Why alcoves? It started when Stark discovered Hans Memling's painting, *The Chalice of St John The Evangelist* in the National Gallery, Washington DC seven years ago. This was the original 'poisoned chalice'. Stark was immediately

struck by the painting's economy and mimetic power – transubstantiation. He sensed the significance of paint's potential to not only render but become form and that if it were handled with conscious intent, had the potential to render meaning – painting as transformation.

For Stark, the alcove can also function as shrine, aperture, resting place or site of reflection. This modest architectural feature has allowed Stark to approach painting as both transformation and synthesis. They're sites that can simultaneously bely a diversity of elements and allusions – sites that can intrinsically be intimate.

In 2011 he painted his first Alcove painting, *The Outsider*. It was a fairly restrained affair; a single worker bee returning to the hive that was located in the alcove, the entrance of which was composed of 12 holes symmetrically arranged – evidence of human intervention. Control.

The Alcove painting from 2017 entitled *Immundus* (meaning unclean or filthy) depicts what might be a woman washing sheets. What's wonderfully anachronistic about this painting is the 'whiter than white' washing – easily overlooked – but in plain sight.

Stark's alcoves aren't always alcoves – they may also be arches, niches and unglazed windows. However, they all function as locations for a variety of allegories, metaphors and dramas which all happen 'out of time' – somewhere in northern Europe and literally rhetorical.

These paintings are a synthesis of fable, morality tale, poetic insight and ancient aphorism. The composition is studied and they're executed with absolute precision. The past is often referred to as 'another country' but the past for Stark is much more – it's a place where a plethora of potential, parallel worlds are made to exist. Worlds in which the past is misappropriated and re-purposed. Worlds where Jane Austen, Albrecht Altdorfer, Joseph Beuys, Jacques Derrida, Chester P, Roger Dean, Mary Shelley, Yes and Francis Picabia are in constant conversation – worlds out of time.

The bee is one cell in the organism, just like a skin cell. Joseph Beuys

Graham Crowley, January 2018.