

The Paintings of Iain Andrews

WHEN I FIRST SAW one of Iain Andrews' paintings I wasn't sure what to make of it. I just couldn't stop thinking about it. I couldn't get it out of my head. It appeared to be a transcription. A transcription that didn't seem to refer to single painting but something approaching an 'ethos'. What Iain's doing is using transcription as a means of invention. A tool. It's as if he ignores his source; which can range from populist and sentimental Victorian prints to Titian. Low and high art. As though he is transcribing the reputation of a painting and not its appearance. Even in his choice of medium, Iain doesn't make things easy for himself – who would think that referencing some of the most accomplished and sensual painting – ever – could be 'captured' in acrylics? There must be something else at work.

Contrary to what others have written about his paintings. Iain embraces elements from his source that might be described as mannered, rhetorical and downright difficult. His sense of colour can seem arbitrary and disruptive, almost violent. His 'straight from the tube' colour can almost 'stifle' both paintings and spectator. It's the fact that Iain embraces these problematic qualities that makes his paintings so compelling. So unresolvable and so provisional. These are paintings which are fascinating rather than likeable. They're memorable, irritating and confusing. It appears that as a painter Iain is driven by the desire to reclaim and expand what some might call 'painterly' language.

As a storyteller – an aspect of painting at which he excels – his narrative is seldom, if ever linear. He asks us to suspend expectations and 'trust' him. A dangerous business considering the fictive nature of painting. However, it's this high octane conflation of fiction combined with an inescapable sense of surface and object that lends Iain's paintings their tension – their unease.

The methods of paint application and handling are vast. Ranging from the wilfully ham-fisted to the almost-elegant and the sometimes rhetorical. Nothing appears to be any one thing; marks seem to change their function and some serve several functions. One of the highest accolades I can think of is that these paintings make me feel that I don't have to 'like' art to appreciate them. These paintings thrill and un-nerve in equal measure and tap into a sense of ourselves that isn't always – if ever – 'good'.

In plain English – these paintings risk failure, in a spectacular manner – and some do. On meeting Iain I rapidly realised that he and his paintings were both sophisticated and somehow 'home-spun'. Iain's paintings don't refer to any one world but many, often simultaneously, and in a confusing and sometimes disturbing manner. It's this genuine sense of the unorthodox that marks these paintings out. His approach is remarkably refreshing. He seems to be aware of current trends but hasn't become victim to them. It's as if what he doesn't 'know' – he'll invent.

Iain is a genuinely fresh 'voice', an intelligent man who as a painter seems to tread a singular path. A path that's strewn with pitfalls and false hope.

I'm always amazed at the sheer 'mix'. Iain's paintings manage to summon the impact of Frank Stella's 'postmodern baroque' relief construction of the 1970s and the heroic sense of 'spectacle' that puts one in mind of the epic 19th century luminists such as Cole, Bierstadt and Church whilst nodding towards artists as disparate as Moreau and Repin. The mixture is intentionally heady, almost intoxicating – not always convivial. Look out particularly for the depicted shadows in the midst of what is otherwise – a gesture.

Finally – when I look away, they persist. In old-school academic-speak these paintings shouldn't 'work' – but they do. I think that's because they break rules. Rules that Iain isn't entirely aware of. Iain's paintings are frustrating and fascinating in equal measure, they're also thoroughly memorable.

Graham Crowley September 2012