

Hannah Brown's recent paintings

"When I sit down to make a sketch from nature, the first thing I do is to forget that I have ever seen a picture" **John Constable**

IN ANY DISCUSSION of Hannah Brown's recent paintings it's important to acknowledge her journey from text based work to landscape painting. A journey that has embraced English culture in many different forms, from Radio 4's 'Test Match Special' and 'You and Yours' to green Sylvac rabbits, Ercol and G-Plan furniture, the poetry of WH Auden and glorious examples of English eclecticism like A La Ronde, the house built for the Parminter cousins, Jane and Mary, in the 18th century.

Initially it was Gustave Flaubert's Dictionary Of Accepted Ideas that caught her attention. This insightful and satirical little book, which was first published in 1911, is an alphabetical list of platitudes, clichés and lazy thinking. A primer designed with the righteous and generally 'hard of thinking' in mind, perhaps? One excellent example of Flaubert's prescience is the entry for art, which is as follows, "Shortest path to the poorhouse. What use is it since machinery can make things better and quicker?" which rather elegantly deflates much of Walter Benjamin's too often quoted essay 'The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction' of 1936.

Hannah made lists of contemporary mores and presented them as if they were notices in the manner of public information announcements, like the cynical and rather sanctimonious 'Protect & Survive', echoing Flaubert's thesis. Not content with this she mobilised (literally, as some were mounted on castors) these statements and started to exhibit them. All the while she was also making sculpture.

And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead **W H Auden**

Hannah's sculpture and painting, whilst looking nothing like each other, have much in common. They share many aspects of what might be called – Englishness. What isn't in doubt is that they share a profound sense of purpose. For Hannah, both painting and sculpture are vehicles for the study of value and identity. Some years ago the word English when used to describe a piece of work was used in an exclusively pejorative manner, something that Hannah's work blatantly defies.

In appearance her sculpture bears a resemblance to that of Fontana and to a lesser extent that of Rebecca Warren, quietly mated to a piece of what vaguely resembles a fragment of post war, mass produced furniture. The cupboard or whatever seems not only to function as a plinth, but a discreet part of the sculpture.

This synthesis lends her elegantly conceived sculpture a veneer of spontaneity. Sense and sensibility. Her sculpture can also be a startling and sometimes violent mix of Sylvac green or pink (described as rose pink ombre), tumorous lumps of clay, combined with twigs and shells, all fused together beneath a liberal coat of Crystacal Lamina and glaze which confirms upon the work the appearance of a glazed ceramic.

"I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful" **Leon Trotsky**

When the opportunity arises Hannah exhibits her sculpture alongside her paintings. This is not because of a similarity of appearance, as clearly none exists, but a common sense of intention. This is because there's a strong conceptual element to all her work which co-exists alongside a sense of what it is to be English. Her paintings aren't simply about English identity, they're forged by it.

One of the legacies of conceptualism for painting has been an opportunity to rethink and reclaim 'first order meaning'. This has lent a new legitimacy to experience and challenged the dominance of 'second order meaning', or the necessity to quote from previous art, which had become a wearisome cornerstone of postmodernism. The legacy of conceptual art is what's come to be known as post-conceptual painting.

"I don't like cricket,..." Dreadlock Holiday by **10cc**

Iconoclasm, shock and confrontation have long been rendered obsolete as they've become institutionally orthodox and routine; fit only for the pages of the Daily Mail. Instead they've been replaced by an art that is characterised by reflection, empathy and a general sense of humanity, reflecting a shift in social values.

Post-conceptual painting doesn't have to 'look like modern art' to be noteworthy. Terms like radical have no meaningful place in contemporary discourse. Post-conceptual painting is a significant part of that discourse. In the 1990's terms such as avant-garde were appropriated as a trim option on entry-level Mercedes and Picasso became a Citroen.

"Resting on your laurels is as dangerous as resting when you are walking in the snow. You doze off and you die" **Ludwig Wittgenstein**

Hannah has long been an admirer of 18th and 19th-century romantic landscape painters like Alexander Camale and Johan Christian Dahl. But due to her recent work, she now has begun to reevaluate the work of Samuel Palmer, Ivon Hitchens, Giorgio Morandi and Graham Sutherland amongst others.

There's a subtle and sophisticated sense of the political about all of Hannah's work. Her's are paintings that acknowledge the influence of the BBC, the

National Trust, public service announcements and redbrick polytechnics. This sentiment is reflected through the music of the contemporary label Ghost Box with albums such as *Other Channels* by The Advisory Circle and *The Belbury Tales* by Belbury Poly. It evokes the England of Pressburger and Powell. A world that seems to have evaporated, only to exist in the imagination.

"He could not die when trees were green, for he loved the time too well" **John Clare**

But Hannah's England isn't without its 'skeletons'. She is aware of the difficulty in referencing English culture without slipping into clichés or nostalgia. She can't bear to listen to 'The Archers'. I sympathise, as the strained and contrived sense of what it is to be English is too painful to bear.

Morandi is particularly relevant in this context as his small undemonstrative landscape paintings are the epitome of the intimate, the reflective and the undramatic. It's this sense of the almost generic and uncelebrated aspect of his subject matter that fascinates Hannah. It's what Michel Foucault has termed a heterotopia; a conflation of many locations, time and memory. Another aspect of Hannah's paintings is a sense of luminosity which is brought about by 'old school' glazing. Glazing can lend luminosity to a painting and luminosity is synonymous with a sense of light, air and ultimately life.

"There is such a thing as the impression of luminosity" **Ludwig Wittgenstein**

These paintings are a clearly a synthesis of the English landscape tradition and contemporary anxieties. But in spite of Hannah's paintings being executed with great precision they're far from photographic or mimetic. Their exquisite appearance is located in the actual painting as object and not in any apparent or illusory sense of reality. These paintings are very much their own object, compact, solid and shiny. In order to make paintings of this precision it's necessary to concentrate on the task in hand, so a self-conscious sense of rhetoric is almost untenable. Which means there's no embellishment or meretricious bravura; a kind of narrative minimalism and emotional restraint.

"Steal softly through sunshine, steal softly through snow" **Don Van Vliet**

When we think of these paintings it appears as if we've taken a B road and ended up somewhere between Ambridge and Midwich. It's probably spring, the sky is a dismal grey and appears almost absent. There's a sense of quiet menace. I'm getting the feeling that it's probably a good place to bury a body. They're finely judged and culturally specific. It's painting that references the notion of the indigenous. There's much that we can't see, but can imagine. Its the familiar rendered unfamiliar.

There's a sense of being out of time. As there's no signage, no fencing, no litter and no sign of human presence except the fact that it's a field, some trees and maybe a hedgerow, all of which appear tended and mown. Welcome to Heterotopia.

Hannah's paintings also demonstrate an awareness of conventions and clichés that govern the idealised and domesticated references to landscape as reflected in ornaments and paintings, all commonly found in the post war home. Think Sylvac and Wade; Rowland Hilder and Julian Trevelyan.

There's also what can only be described as an intellectual efficiency about Hannah's work. Her audience will immediately understand the references and the signification. Shades of Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* combined with the finesse, the reserve and sensibility of Austen.

"In the landscape of extinction, precision is next to godliness" **Samuel Beckett**

Although landscape as genre, seems to have been with us for ever, it's a cultural construct established in the 16th century. The term landscape is derived from the Dutch word 'landschap' which referred to a painting that depicted tracts of land, sea and sky. The term was subsequently used to describe the actual subject matter. Previously there were only fields, trackways, rivers and sky. A sense of stasis is palpable. The paintings have the appearance of being stills from Antonioni's 1966 film 'Blowup', particularly the bits in which nothing much happens. The slow, sweeping shot that is intended to arouse suspicion.

Landscape painting is by its very nature static, immobile and seemingly fixed. Intelligent landscape painting doesn't simply depict a place or a state of affairs but a state of mind. A state in which the leaves never fall, the seasons never pass, winter never comes and there's no tomorrow. We too are briefly out of time. Like the model railway layout in which the sheep unceasingly graze and the woman on the platform never gets a train. Nothing ever happens. And it's this glimpse of the infinite that is the key attraction. Time to think and time to reflect. As Hannah puts it 'time hangs heavy'.

"Hang the blessed DJ Because the music they constantly play It says nothing to me about my life" **The Smiths**

All of which is evidence of 'a beautiful mind' and the fact that conceptual art is probably the most significant influence on painting since cubism. Hannah's work reminds us that there's more to art than just the art market. There's always been anxiety that art has become a secular religion. We now discover it's become a shopping channel, which probably amounts to the same thing.

Hannah's work reminds us that when talking about art, the most important thing to do is forget you're talking about art. What remains is a sense that presence and precision of mind have combined to render the invisible, visible. Remember to lock your doors tonight.

"The way to know life is to love many things" **Vincent Van Gogh**

Graham Crowley November 2014

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Film

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