A black and white photograph of a rugged coastline. On the left, a steep, dark cliff face descends towards the water. The sea is turbulent, with white foam from waves crashing over a series of dark, jagged rocks in the foreground. The sky is overcast and grey. The overall mood is dramatic and somber.

Re-inventing the Landscape:
contemporary painters and Dorset

Vivienne Light

PETER JOYCE



Peter Joyce owns stout walking boots. These are an essential part of his painting life. He is a keen walker and it is through walking he has come to know his subject well, his subject being the Isle of Purbeck, its properties, people and history. Although not a true island, Purbeck still has the feel of being bounded by water; of being a place unto itself. To the North lies heathland, to the West, marshland, whilst to the South and East are the waters of the English Channel.

Purbeck is a place of contrast and conflict. It can be windswept, bare and cold or lazily warm and lush. However, its limestone geology lends it a continual hard edge and whiteness: dry-stone walls, fossilised ammonites, sculpted cliffs, rough farm buildings, worn sheep tracks, tractor-harrowed trails and marble and stone quarries which lie near the sea's throat. Contrasting with this whiteness is the black of the rich oil: Kimmeridge oil shale, which first brought oil exploration and exploitation to Purbeck.

Joyce has a strong sense of identification with Purbeck. He was born not far away at Poole, an old town and port which today rubs shoulders with Bournemouth. Amoeba-like, Poole has expanded; there are new commercial ventures, industries and suburbs as well as an active ferry port. Poole's busy pre-occupation and pace of life stands in stark contrast to the emptiness of Purbeck, where the quiet is only disturbed by visitors in the summer months. Joyce has always had a deep love for the Purbeck coast and now, once again, he lives close by in Poole. Indeed, he lives in the very same house which was owned by his paternal grandfather: "It has come back into the family and all is much the same except, according to my father, the TV is in the wrong corner!"

Although the house may look the same, the contents are very different. Each room now overflows with ceramic pots, paintings and small sculptures. Many of the paintings are those of other Dorset artists. The collection of ceramics is large and pots spill out into the main hall, covering both shelves and floor. They are crafted by some of the best potters today, many of whom live in Cornwall. Joyce has a strong respect for makers who are good at the crafting of their art. When he buys a pot he enquires into the history of the potter: "where he's been, why he's been there, who he's been influenced by" and so on. This need to know the full story mirrors Joyce's own approach to his work.

Joyce knows a great deal about the Isle of Purbeck. This knowledge has been acquired over a lifetime and comes not only through reading but also through weekly physical

exploration of the coast and its hinterland. Looking at the landscape, spending time with it is an absolute necessity for him. The landscape is not only a visual place but a sensory environment as well; a place where sound, touch and smell are as important as sight. Joyce's immersion of self in the landscape is reminiscent of Peter Lanyon (1918-1964). Lanyon spent most of his life in Cornwall and developed, like Joyce, an intimate knowledge of a particular landscape. Lanyon became a keen glider and in his layered and transparent abstract paintings re-created the sensations of flight: of wind and rain, of spiral air currents, tilted land and the unlimited boundaries of sea and sky.

Joyce, although sharing something of Lanyon's way of working, has chosen a more topographic route when converting the physical into paint on canvas. Though both use an inherently aerial perspective, Joyce's paintings focus more on the physical land itself, its detail and its earth-bound qualities. Many of Joyce's paintings are named after actual walks, as for example *Windswept Walk* (2000). There is not the total synthesising of landscape which occurs in Lanyon; instead Joyce chooses to hold on to, for example, a particular landscape feature, a specific season of the year or an exact time of day, as in *Windspit Gloom* (2000). This is a man who cancelled arrangements for a weekend in order to stay out on the cliffs of Purbeck to watch storms come in from the tail-end of a hurricane. Joyce's paintings are indeed a kind of visual diary, and most receive a title containing a reference to a location.



Windswept Walk (2000)

From the age of six Joyce knew he was going to be a painter, although he was not quite sure 'what it was'. He never wavered in the idea that painting was to be his future and at



Windswept Gloom (2000)



Detail *Windswept Gloom* (2000)

eighteen, he became a student on the Foundation Course at what is now The Arts Institute, Bournemouth. He then studied Fine Art at Stourbridge College of Technology and Art (1982-85) and subsequently was offered a place on the Masters Course at Goldsmiths. At the last moment, he decided not to accept the place. He reflects that if he had, it might have changed his work for ever. Goldsmiths at this time was turning its back on "good standard painting" in favour of "conceptual art, as practiced by Craig Martin and a young student there called Damien Hirst".

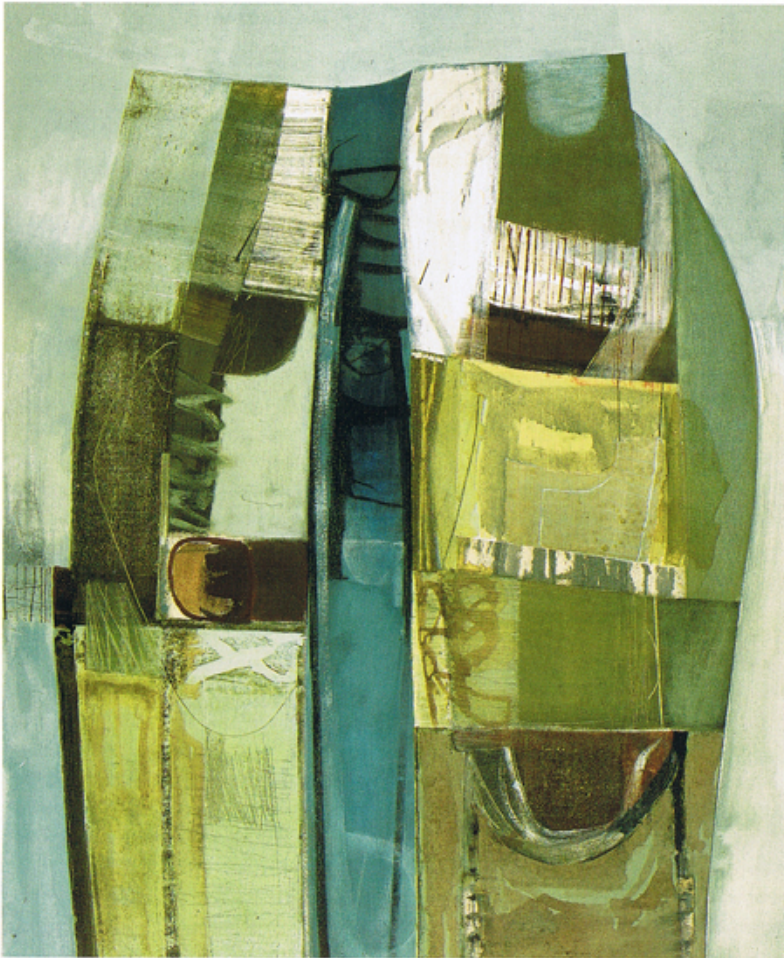
However, having made his choice, Joyce struck out with determination and energy to paint alone, where and when he could. He moved back to Dorset and for the next few years divided his time between painting and temporary employment. He worked six weeks at a time as a labourer on a building site, earned as much as he could and then went off to paint, until the money ran out again. This pattern of life continued with frequent visits to exhibitions at London galleries until he had his first show with Anthony Hepworth in 1991. At the close of this exhibition he had only four paintings left out of fifty-two. From that time on he has painted full-time.

Joyce's paintings for the most part are abstract. Over many years he has invented a symbolic language which stands for land forms and shapes. These, he says, have been built on rules he has discovered for himself. Some forms translate easily, while others remain more elusive. Although there is no intention on his part for there to be a direct translation between what is seen in the landscape and what appears on canvas, some general connections may be observed.

Many a Joyce painting, such as *Purbeck Peninsula* (2001), begins with a drawn, block, isle-shape with water, or sky, on one or more sides. Bold linear lines, sometimes curved, seem to symbolize coast and land boundaries, while less weighty graphite marks become paths and track ways. Horizontal striations, in either paint or charcoal, denote strip-lynchets, ploughed furrows or rows of crops. Figures of eight, which complete on themselves, are plough marks in the fields. Other more solid shapes, such as the oval, circle or rectangle, originate from land sources such as small walled fields, round sheep pens, shell-marks in stone or pre-historic artefacts. It is from both the natural and tilled land, from farms and quarries, that Joyce draws his material. Their lines and shapes provide him with a beginning.

Initially Joyce begins a work by making marks on the canvas or board. "To begin with, I haven't got a specific location, I've got nothing else in mind but making a painting. I'm looking for a form, a drawing to start off with." It is through the process of drawing that access is gained to the 'bare bones' of the painting. "The formalities of paint and painting take over, along with considerations of the material, properties of paint, texture, colour and so on." Gradually the work takes on a life of its own and what next occurs

Purbeck Peninsula (2001)



Joyce describes as a *déjà vu* experience. He begins to see connections to a particular place, to something familiar, to something once experienced. Once this happens, he can move forward, develop, and build the painting into a final composition.

The greatest joy of the Purbecks for Joyce has always been the limestone cliffs and quarries which extend all along the coast. The caverns of Winspit and Seacombe are favoured locations and "are equally fantastic from land or sea". From the sea, they appear as regular-sided black eye-patches in the cliff face. The nearby Tilley Whim Caves feature in the opening pages of Falkner's *Moonfleet* ... "The seams of Spangle and Grub ... you can walk in and see all those scenes you've read about, it's all there for you". Below these face quarries there are the broad dancing ledges where stone was once loaded on to flat bottomed-crafts and rowed out to ketch-rigged sailing barges.

By being familiar with Purbeck, Joyce understands "a bit more about the people, how they made use of the land, not just from the farming but the digging out of the stone". He surmises that if he had been born a hundred and fifty years ago, he would probably have lived at Kingston and been a quarryman, digging out the stone and dressing it. On past walks, he used to stop and talk with one quarryman called Mel Hayward. He had his own quarry which had been his father's and his grandfather's before him. Talking about the 'new' breed of quarrymen, Hayward once observed to

Joyce that whereas they would hit the stone twenty times to make it break, he just had to look at it twenty times and then hit it once. Joyce has found Hayward and his like a great inspiration. In many ways the quarryman's story epitomises Joyce's own approach to painting. Looking, really looking before putting something down on paper or canvas is at the heart of his work.

For over six years Joyce spent three days a week out in the landscape. Now this time is reduced. However, he still walks as much as he can and always carries a shoulder canvas-bag with him. When I inspected it, this bag contained, one paint brush; some tubes of olive green and white acrylic; tissue paper; oil and water pastels; fixative, glue and charcoal. In the past Joyce tended to do few drawings while out in the landscape, except drawings to record specific details. So, for example, an entry might be a drawing of "a flower, with five petals, with arrows pointing to details about how big it is, where the leaves come off and so on, or it might be of a bird seen from underneath, with interesting markings. Thus there may be lots of drawings, but not drawings of the landscape."

Recently however, there has been a sea-change. Joyce has begun to take time to do complete drawings and paintings at locations, such as *Above Topmast Quarry* or *Turf Rick Rock*. They are direct responses, and more figurative than abstract. For Joyce, who until now has always been a studio painter, this has been a completely different way of working. Searching for a reason for this change, he surmises it is connected to the way he works when in Cornwall or in Brittany. Here, when he draws, he has to grapple with a different landscape, one of hard unfamiliar granite. He has responded to the challenge by recording it figuratively, while at the same time searching for a new visual language to deal with the shapes and forms that are not in his existing dictionary of marks.

This figurative approach has now encroached upon his Purbeck painting. He is tackling new places, some of which he has previously avoided as being 'the too-obvious tourist places'. One location he has painted is a view from Studland towards Helstone Point, a view which takes in the chalk stacks of Old Harry Rocks. Such mixed-media works tend to be small. Many have a disjointedness about them since the sea, when viewed through the chalk stacks, seems to lack a constant level.

Besides these more occasional location paintings, Joyce continues to do his main work in the studio. Here, closed off from the physical world, he can focus solely on the activity of painting itself. "I tend to block out natural light and work in a constant light which is relatively low for an artist's studio." Controlling the light source not only frees him from changes in light quality but also differences in temporal light. "I can be working in my studio at eight o'clock in the morning and I'm potentially still there at ten o'clock at night."

His larger paintings are on 1.80m canvases but generally he works on a smaller scale. In the studio he refers to neither sketches, or photographs; instead he allows experience and memory to surface. If he begins to struggle with a painting, he will make "a drawing to take out the colour, take out the tone and just leave the composition. Often the drawings stay, they're exhibited. Even though they are working drawings the painting doesn't come from the drawing."

Until 1993, Joyce used to paint with both oil and acrylic but having had to move house several times, he found oil-painting studios were just not portable, and so he became used to using acrylic in the way that he had previously used oil. Paint is neither thickly applied nor added to. Instead Joyce overpaints in continuous layers. Textures and marks, as in *Fishing Harbour* (1998) are crafted by whatever tool it takes to achieve the required effect. Scraping, rolling, brushing, knifed direct, all and any method of application may be used. Occasionally, he will also add collage material to a work.

His colours are mostly those of the sea and earth: blues, whites, greens, browns, ochres and siennas, colours that directly link to the landscape. Mauves and yellows, the colours of flowers and crops will also sometimes appear. Joyce is conscious that his colours exist within a fairly restrictive tonal range tending towards the subtle and quiet. However, as a result of spending time in Cornwall, richer hues and deeper colours are coming into his work, as in *West from*



Fishing Harbour (1998)

Bodmin (2001). "I'm using colour for colour's sake as much as for the landscape. The considerations have become more abstract, in terms of colour, form and texture." There is also a less opaque quality to some of his Cornish paintings. Commenting on the sea near St. Ives he said: "It is as if they've left an electric light on and it's shining through". This more transparent quality is beginning to show in his Dorset paintings. There are certainly places along the Dorset coast where chalk beds slip out under the sea and turn it that same turquoise found along the north Cornish coast.

Joyce has now been painting in Dorset for fifteen years but he still does not tire of the place as a painting subject. Although new work is coming out from his visits to Cornwall they have made him appreciate the special qualities of Dorset. "They say Cornwall is a fantastic county, a wonderful quality of light and I'm not going to say, 'hang on a minute so has the Isle of Purbeck', because I really don't want them to know. Standing anywhere on that coast of Purbeck you are more or less surrounded by sea on three sides and there is an extraordinary quality of light, as there is in Cornwall. But there is also a greater variety of rock formation, of geology. As a natural habitat it's quite extraordinary."

As far as Joyce can foresee, Dorset will continue to be his home and painting base. In an assured, direct manner he simply states: "My practice is painting and my subject the Dorset landscape."

West from Bodmin (2001)

