ART, ARCHAEOLOGY & LANDSCAPE

PAINTINGS • PETER JOYCE

PHOTOGRAPHS • Dermot Blackburn

Charles Hall on Peter Joyce

Peter Joyce made his name with a series of paintings reflecting his love of the area around Purbeck. Love, in fact, seems almost an understatement. All his life, he has walked along the cliffs, explored the caves beneath them, and swum in the seas at their feet. More recently, he has flown over this unique landscape in a Cessna, studied its geology, and photographed the rare flowers which grow there.

But it wouldn't be quite accurate to say that his were landscape paintings. He begins, not with drawings or photographs, but with an intimidatingly bare canvas, laying down lines and colours and watching them evolve towards a satisfactory form. For the lover of abstract painting, his work is satisfying both for its draughtsmanship and for its understated sympathy with paint ~ in the tradition which derives eventually from St Ives (via Alfred Wallis and Peter Lanyon), he understands that it is not necessary to slop thick paint about in order to be "painterly". In the Purbeck paintings, it is only gradually that Joyce finds some particular piece of land is imposing itself upon the composition. Sometimes it's a familiar silhouette, sometimes simply a particular rhythm or formal juxtaposition ~ more than one of his paintings makes use of the way the horizon line seems, seen from a little inland, almost to balance on top of a particular headland. His muted palette, too, is a reflection of his life-long experience of the Dorset Coast, rather than

of a conscious decision or aesthetic position. He may begin a canvas with a strong red, or introduce a jarring pink or other 'wrong' colour into a work in progress simply to jar himself into seeing more clearly what is needed, but in both cases the interloper is eventually cooled down and contained by the colours which more naturally suggest themselves.

In this exhibition, though, things are beginning to change. Joyce has been asked to show a series of paintings and drawings relating to the land around Cleveland ~ not an area which he has previously known. The result is to force him to allow the landscape ~ and particular views of the landscape ~ a much more conscious role in the evolution of his canvases. The change is most evident in the status of his drawings. In earlier work, his paintings, as they have evolved upon the canvas, have suggested drawings which might be developed from them. As a result, the paint surface has had its own archaeology buried within it, just as the composition is structured, in part, around the residual evidence of false starts. Now, however, he is working from drawings and photographs made in the field, and has been forced, as a result, to incorporate much of his exploration into his works on paper. The result has been a new freedom in his drawing ~ a fiercely scribbled area of black charcoal, for example, is lent an extra vitality by its contrast with an uneven area of watery grey, which turns out to have been achieved with an improvised mixture of cigarette ash and water.

The paintings themselves begin, not from a vacuum, but from a pre-existing composition. The result has been to force Joyce to develop a far more strategic approach to his development of a canvas. In *Cowpen Bewley, No. 1,* for example, a painting which derives from aerial photographs, forestry maps, and at least two preparatory drawings, Joyce has begun, very early in his work, by including a series of horizontal striations down the left hand side of the canvas, balanced by a column of vertical marks at the right, a combination which introduces a feeling of rotation which is, I think, quite new in

his work. His methods of constructing a painting have been forced yet further into new directions by his desire to honour specific features: the trees at *Castle Levington, No. 1,* introduce new serpentine lines and rhythms into his painting, but they also, in breaking the horizon line, force open the closed and rounded cells into which he has tended to divide his picture surfaces. However they start, Joyce's paintings all seem to end up as upright or 'portrait' formats ~ and, despite their association with landscape, they do tend to resemble portraits. That is partly because his obsession with headlands, seen by a viewer looking out in the direction of the sea, has tended to seduce him into the repetitive use of a composition which recalls a head seen in silhouette ~ a great mass of land surrounded on three sides by what might be the sea or sky. Of course, one might say that these paintings, conveying as they do so much of the artist's intimate knowledge of his subject beyond its literal appearance, are much more like portraits than landscapes in any conventionally topographical tradition. But it might be more useful to think of his Cleveland paintings as maps, not so much of the land, but of Joyce's unfolding experience of it.

Take for example, his painting of *Eston Nab, No. 1,* in which the two apparently abstract arches to the left of the composition are taken quite directly from the entrances of old mine workings in the hillside, while the steep slope above it echoes almost exactly the profile of the highest part of the climb. The paler vertical band at the right of the canvas derives from the view which opens up to the walker as he reaches the top. Similarly, in a painting inspired by the old hill fort at *Castle Levington, No. 1* the zig zagging line at the centre of the canvas doesn't relate to any physical feature in the landscape ~ but it does recall the artist's own slow progress up a hillside too steep to climb straight on. The long looping line of blue at the foot of another canvas is there not only to supply a pictorial support for the weight of the composition above it, but as a representation of the river Joyce had to ford in order to enter the landscape beyond it.

This psychological map-making seems to lead Joyce quite naturally to something very like an aerial view, in which the lines of sheep-paths and hedge rows function in the composition as muscles and sinews do in the body ~ supplying the tension which makes articulation possible. Moving self-consciously into the landscape has allowed him to perfect a technique of whose very existence he was before almost wholly unaware. It has also suggested some of its limitations. When I visited him in February he was attempting to integrate into a painting of *Castle Levington, No. 1* an unusually descriptive image of a fence running out to meet the viewer at the foot of the hill which rises above him; suddenly it becomes clear that, in rising above the landscape, he has tended to purge it of perspectival space. That has not been a problem in representing headlands, where Joyce has primarily been excited by the sight of a great mound of earth rearing up out of a flat valley.

Perhaps, quite apart from the obvious quality of the individual works, this kind of anxiety represents the most exciting aspect of his work on the Cleveland project. It brings into focus the many developments which are going on simultaneously in his paintings, and heightens our sense that is still quite impossible to forsee the end result. As he dwells more closely on the place of the landscape in his paintings, so he finds his use of colour becoming darker and richer, his handling of materials sharper and more inventive, his feeling for the possible disposition of mass around a canvas completely renewed. He may embrace perspectival space, or definitively reject it; he may lighten his palette, or introduce collaged materials, or even try his hand at sculpture. It is possible to say, though, that this initiative has provided one of those periodic shocks to the system which prevent an artist lapsing into quirks and formulae, and push them forward with new energy and purpose.

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'Eston Nab No. 1'
52¼" x 42½" • 132.5 cms x 108 cms
Acrylic on canvas
Collection of Charles Woodward
(Photograph • James Howe)