

Peter Joyce: *Purbeck; The Observed Landscape* by Gary Topp

Peter Joyce's paintings are rooted in landscape, specifically the Isle of Purbeck on the South coast of England. He has explored this landscape intimately and though it is only a small geographical area, it encompasses chalk hills and grassland, a coast of high cliffs and coves and a tremendous variety and quality of stone. It is an area which smells of English pasture, the drama of the sea and that great industry of construction, stone quarrying. A discussion of this landscape is the necessary backdrop to Peter Joyce's work because it informs it directly.

His paintings, for all their apparent abstraction, are not about the flavour of landscape but about the specifics. They are not part of the school of 'mood' paintings that undervalue both painting as a craft and the reality and currency of the English countryside. His paintings are keenly observed and sharply focussed. They are frequently titled with actual place names and their shapes and structures are drawn directly from the hillsides and the cliff shapes.

The Purbeck hills are exposed to the sea and the sky; brutalised by modern and ancient agriculture and quarried for stone and oil. This intense level of activity, which the new leisure activities of the countryside are currently adding to, leaves indelible marks on the ground. Old field systems are exposed in the new larger fields, disused walls score lines across the valleys. This landscape has drawn itself on its own surface. It is not an area of untouched wilderness and this level of activity and layering is echoed in the work of Peter Joyce.

His paintings bring both a quality of vision and the craft of painting to this landscape. It is, you might say, edited into his pictures. In certain months, in varying seasons and through different weather, the relationships of shapes and patterns will expose themselves as you walk the hills. The hills and valleys become an enormous and inexhaustible riddle of pattern and texture, of stone and hedgerow and depths and heights. These levels of activity are brought together in Peter Joyce's work through areas of thick overworked paint, of scratched and beautiful charcoal lines next to thin areas of watercolour wash or calm expanses of colour. To re-emphasise the point, this work is based on the visual reality of the landscape and its transformation into the object quality of the painting.

Drawing is central to all the works. Over the years, there have been extraordinary tiny drawings of scant arcs and smudged depths. It is through these drawings that the information of the landscape is ordered. The card, canvas, board or paper is structured with lines. The shapes are formal without being rigid and their success lies in their understanding that it is the point between order and chaos, the point at which the pivot goes asunder, that real insight and balance exist. Similarly, the landscape is in a constant state of flux and battle. The scarred lines on the hillside are chosen and understood, transmuted through memory and endless observation. A remarkable series of drawings on paper made during 1993 matured this language with their tremendous areas of colour and above all, the skill and incision of their line.

Drawing, of course, is not used to merely define the edges of the paint and the pleasure of the work is most strongly found in the craft of the paint. It is applied layer upon layer in some areas and then scraped back or entirely removed in others. He is not afraid to rework and restructure; for a painting to come slowly or quickly.

The paint contains excitement and frustration and daring. Texture is never applied as a device or starting point but evolves into the work. In this way, the paintings are workmanlike and any poetry is arrived at through industry than impression or whimsy. Stone is not quarried through idea but through effort.

Colour is fundamental to these works. His palette is rich in its limitations. A rusty red can be spotted in some of the works, hidden and sulking at the back of the paintings. It may, remain the bright red that it often starts out as, but at the moment that would be contrived and unobserved. Colour is everywhere in the landscape: a rich palette of greens, blues, greys and browns. These colours are the presence of the sea in his work. As a walker on the landscape it is likely that the sea would be one's visual goal. Yet to reach the sea one must traverse the land. At the cliff edge the sea exists above you in the colours of the sky and underneath you as it cuts into the cliffs. It is important to note that whilst that one can often see horizons in the paintings, whatever their scale, they are contained structurally. Indeed, often they seem to be burying or falling in an attempt to push back the water. In this way, the sea is more directly understood and the energy of the paintings given drama.

Where does this leave us? These paintings are made with the love of a craft and industry of painting. They are informed and sharply observed constructions of nature. Their real strength lies in the eradication of fantasy and whimsy and the way that they find and recreate beauty rather than try to contrive it. They arise out of the labour of walking and working. Peter Joyce, in conversation, rarely talks about the poetry or philosophy of life. To do this would be to dilute the language and achievement of paint and painting.