

Wednesday Talk: Gerald Green: a Painter's Journey

Gerald's was a remarkable story of his journey towards becoming a professional artist/illustrator despite his lack of formal training; and of his journey of discovery, not just of the materials of the painter, but also his discovery of the subjects, and ways of working, about which he is passionate, and which work for him. This was a personal rather than a didactic talk, although he readily shared details of 'methods' and 'tips', an exchange reciprocated by his audience.

Gerald is above all a connoisseur of light, which shimmered through many of his paintings and was captured and controlled by his mastery of tonal contrasts and tonal balance across the entire picture plane. As Gerald talked, it became clear that enormous discipline, as well as his considerable drawing talent, lay behind his attempts to capture a special moment that would never exist again. Behind the surface impressionism there was a careful and consistent analysis of his chosen viewpoint, of the colours of on his palette, and of the tonal values of one shape against another. I was reminded not just of Impressionist painters such as Camille Pissarro, but also of a modern painter of light, Kenneth Howard.



Gerald's facility with pencil and pen was evident in childhood: but his first career was as an architect. Painting, most often in watercolour, was an occupation for his leisure hours, and he educated himself by drawing from books, and, above all, by constant practice. A series of private commissions for paintings of houses and the like gave him confidence and, at the young age of thirtyeight, he took the leap to become a fulltime artist/illustrator, specialising in architectural drawings. These were mostly executed in watercolour strengthened with line. These days, such

drawings are executed digitally, using a CAD programme. But they lack the presence and vitality, however low key, of a painting produced by a human hand and brain. Gerald's briefs would require him to produce believable images working from ground plans and architect's elevations, setting the asyet unbuilt building(s) into its surroundings. He had to decide on his viewpoint, quite often a distant one, and work consistently from that single point of focus. Moreover, this was all done in preinternet days. How to draw a car or a train? Try the childrens' section of the local library! But if a career as an architectural illustrator provided a both a living and a growing reputation, and honed Gerald's skills, it was also frustrating to Gerald Green the creative artist, since he was constantly working to a given and closely defined client brief, and often to very tight deadlines. So for the past ten years or so the signpost to his journey has read, quite simply, Gerald Green, artist.



Gerald Green: a Painter's Journey continued

Gerald is both a pleinair and a studio painter, working in watercolour or oils. He stressed that



his was a journey without preconceptions, allowing him to find the subject, or to recognize it as it found him and seize and respond to it through the medium of paint. He stressed that one of the keys to this was to approach his work as if a child at play, and to explore on the canvas without the censorship of immediate judgement on his own work. The trigger might be the play of light on water or a building, or the pleasing juxtaposition of built forms or boats. Even a subject as unpromising as a mini greenhouse (with contents), or the studio lights trained on a nude model (who was treated only as a secondary subject) could give rise to a remarkably satisfying picture. That openness to opportunity and inspiration could lead up artistic culdesacs, but could also take his journey also to new and unexpected destinations. Painting 'en pleinair' he was approached to see if he would do some paintings of an engineering works? Answer – no, but could he come and see? That casual conversation evolved into a series of wonderfully atmospheric paintings in which you could almost smell the oil and grease, and in which strange machines hinted at their

own hidden lives of unknown toil. Then, by thought association, a rich new subject opened up with a whole series of railway paintings, many based on the Great Central Railway – the heritage railway running from Loughborough to Leicester. In answer to questions from the floor about the use of rulers (for rails and signal posts) and masking fluid (for steam) – the answer was no to both. They were 'painted' with the white of the paper, with colour allowed to bleed (for the steam) or by painting the negative space that surrounded the railway signals rather than the structure itself. There were no hard edges to disturb the picture plane, and the background as well as the subject was fully painted, with tones establishing their relative value and importance to the composition, and the brain reading the drawing as complete.

Many of Gerald's images are of the built landscape. Pleinair paintings might be roughs for studio pieces – or finished works in their own right, generally accomplished in around an hour or so. They are populated with people, as well as buildings, but also with internal space that allowed the picture to breathe. The accuracy of Gerald's eye means that some can, in reproduction, seem photographic. They are very different in the flesh, a cohesive and convincing mass of shapes and tones and mark making, often with a broad brush. The eye and brain are allowed to complete the picture. The same was true of Gerald's life drawings, which are fluent sketches in monochrome or colour, mostly executed by brush. There was again an awareness of the play of light, of the way in which background and flesh might have equal tonal value, blurring their boundaries within the plane of the picture. Just as Gerald tends to work on a toned ground for his oil paintings, so he likes to use brown paper for his life drawings, not just as a third colour but also for the discipline it imposes on his use of materials, and its encouragement to fresh approach and rapid execution.

This was a rewarding and thoughtful talk that was engaging, refreshingly different in its subject matter and a short revision course in techniques of painting and composition. We were reminded, too, that the process could be one of 'unlearning', a chance to seize the opportunity of responding to a unique collection or assemblage of shapes and patterns in order to capture the essence of a special moment in time.

Gerald Green: a Painter's Journey continued

At the end, there was an opportunity to look at some original paintings and two of Gerald's sketchbooks. The latter combined pencils drawings, flickering pen lines, and rapid establishment of light and darks within the image, using hastily scribbled shading or wash in monochrome or colour. Within a broadly traditional framework, Gerald's fine draughtsmanship still registered as an individual voice. Gerald's published output shares and showcases his long experience. The books were mentioned briefly, and his recent book on watercolour technique was circulated. The list of books, and many of the images shown on the screen or in the flesh, are on his website, <http://www.geraldgreen.co.uk/>. But for the stories behind them, and all those tips, explanations, and points of guidance – well, they too were of the moment. At the AMA meeting in the Pump Rooms on 16 March.

Review by Margaret Condon

