

Tim Beer Painter and Sculptor review

Katharine's reminder and Tim's reputation resulted in one of the best turnouts in recent months for a Wednesday talk. Tim's was an assured presentation, delivered with grace and great personal modesty. He quickly established a rapport with his audience, as it became clear that he was going to talk directly to, and with, his paintings and sculptures rather than through the mediation and distortions of Powerpoint. All was not revealed at once: all but one of the paintings were turned, Howard Hodgkinslike, to the wall, until the time came for their moment in the light. There was a logic to this. Tim works very fast to establish his paintings, taking only two to three hours to paint, in acrylics, on canvases that vary in size but are mostly in the range of 3 x 2 and 4 x 3 feet. Resolution, however, takes much longer, spread over weeks and months, as he contemplates, scrapes back, edits, overpaints, and very occasionally glazes.

Tim began his talk with a brief account of his early life. This wasn't just window dressing: the Devon, and particularly Dartmoor, landscape, with its changing colours, primeval rock forms, and the waterfalls surrounding Lustleigh were familiar from early childhood. A move to a new home followed. This introduced Tim to the dramatic striations of the cliffs of Hartland Bay, derived from the ancient movement of tectonic plates. Both developed in a sensitive and responsive child a heightened awareness of colour, form, and spatial relationships, and a well stocked visual memory. Both continue to inform and inspire the painter and sculptor that Tim is today. At school, Tim excelled at art despite poor quality teaching in the subject, whereas the same school's academic excellence opened a pathway to a career in medical practice at a senior level.

Student days as a London medic left



Tim Beer talks to Penny Guildea

little time for the practice of art but for the first time introduced Tim to the importance of seeing and experiencing established art. His Damascus moment sent a palpable ripple of excited recognition through his audience. This was an encounter with the sculpture of Jacob Epstein. We are fortunate in the Midlands in having easy access to two of Epstein's highlycharged and semi realistic bronzes, Lucifer (Birmingham Art Gallery) and St Michael Triumphant (Coventry Cathedral); but it was the monumental alabaster, Jacob and the Angel (Tate) that really fired Tim's imagination, with its reductionist forms, truth to materials, and the way in which the relationship between the two figures, and the changing planes and spaces of the sculpture, was integral to the whole and the essence of its emotional impact.

Several times in the course of his talk Tim mentioned the importance of the subliminal, of multiple influences, of learning by absorption, and of conversations with artist friends. Although in his years as a consultant rheumatologist he had little time to engage in art except as an occasional hobby, he continued to photograph, to develop the

bank of his memory, and to collect the stones and other broadly sculptural objects that now figure in his paintings. A temporary move to Northamptonshire became permanent, and for a while he experimented with watercolour under the tutelage of Peter Atkins.

Tim Beer Painter and Sculptor continued

Tim showed us a riverine landscape that was considerably more than competent, using the wet inwet technique; but he found that the medium had too many constraints, not least on subsequent alteration of the image; nor was it a technique that lended itself easily to the qualities of abstraction in which he had become interested. Finally, in 2002, Tim took early retirement to become a fulltime artist, working in both paint and ceramics.

For an audience largely composed of artists, Tim spent most of his talk speaking about ideas and process. He had learned his craft by trial and play, by conversations with friends – one of whom insisted that a comfortable chair was an absolutely essential tool for an abstract artist, to allow periods of contemplation and by working with a number of artists known to the audience, including Hugh Grenville, Neil Moore and Mary Riley. His work, however, was very much his own. Tim tends to use a restricted palette, working over a coloured ground – he revealed both a midgrey, and a desaturated brick red. These are both starting points recommended by another painter with light, Ken Howard. Tim uses acrylic in both thin washes and thicker paint, sometimes in combination, thinking about the process of markmaking, and his colour palette, before he begins work.

He began, however, not with a painting but with an example of his figurative sculpture, crafted from grogged stoneware clay and glazed in the manner of Hornton stone – with happy ‘accidents’ of differentiated colour produced by chance during the firing process. Reminiscent of Henry Moore’s boneinspired pieces, but in the female figure at least with a greater lightness and sense of movement, Tim used his male figure to demonstrate the importance of relative scale, and the way in which a physically small object could be perceived as monumental. He first mounted the piece on a raw wooden plinth, and then juxtaposed both with some tiny vestigial figurines. Tim’s ceramic sculptures are one aspect of his artistic oeuvre: but the point of this demonstration was as an introduction to the genesis of his paintings, summed up as ‘imagination happens’.

Tim emphasised that he was an abstract painter, not aiming at reality – but that he frequently began with observed forms. It was particularly helpful to see in front of us the way in which a fist sized and altered ‘rock’ acquired monumentality and attributes by being enlarged almost to fill a threefoot canvas, with barely realised figures giving scale to the composition. Painted in umbers across the whole canvas, the mood was threatening; in Prussian blues, mysterious and sombre. For the third in this sequence, Tim had flattened the picture plane, showing fragments only of facets of the rock in passages of both light and dark, and overpainting the whole with a neutral and opaque background, beneath which were the fissures and ridges of elements that had been painted out. This was an essay in pure abstract, with Tim giving thought also to the framing.

As a sequence, it showed the way in which Tim was prepared to pursue an idea to its limits, the outcome not predicted by its beginnings. For those who were not at the talk, it might be helpful to visualize Tim’s process in the work of Paula Rego – although her feminist/folkloreal agenda, figurative painting, and high colours, are a world away from Tim’s work – and in the abstract paintings of Prunella Clough whose colour palette comes closer to that of Tim. But whereas Clough frequently began her paintings by close observation of discarded industrial detritus, Tim begins with organic forms, selfmanufactured objects (as Rego) and the fertile bank of his own memory.

Tim Beer Painter and Sculptor continued

The second sequence of paintings also began with observational drawings, this time of pebbles collected in Paxos, their fine striations reminiscent of the granite pebbles of Ireland or Cornwall. Here, Tim was happy to show paintings that he felt had not worked – in which the pebbles were still visibly pebbles whilst being arranged as abstract shapes on a flat ground – before showing us his resolution of the imagery as ‘God’s washing machine’ – an allusion in a semiabstract work to the formation of pebbles, tumbling, as one audience member suggested, as if in a NASA image from the Hubble telescope. For an audience of artists, to be shown the journey is particularly valuable and a welcome privilege: and there was audience feedback, too, on why the earlier images seemed not to work.

The next sequence gave further insights into the work of an artist of integrity. The images arose from a fertile imagination, from observation of volcanoes, and from Tim’s deepseated opposition to fracking. The fractures of a tortured earth extended into the sky; an orange horizon became menacing; and the third in the sequence seemed to allude – probably not innocently on the part of the artist – to Paul Nash’s ‘We are making a new World’. Tim referred to that archdepressive, Mark Rothko – but what he took from Rothko was, not that every painting should be about death, but Rothko’s dictum that it should include 10% of hope – so Tim introduced into his dystopian landscape just a hint of green, for the bright shoots of life that might yet emerge.

The three final works were all very different in both design and execution, and Tim’s continuing commentary indicated that he had no intention of becoming an artist standing forever still. A Fauvian landscape, executed with expressive brushmarks, recalled from memory his journey to work in his life as a consultant; an abstract work, in luminous greens, reds, and oranges on a dark ground, may well have had its ultimate derivation from the observed rock strata of his childhood, although another obvious point of reference would be the work of Paul Klee, albeit with more minimal forms and a higher differential in the colour palette.

Those who recall Nancy Upshall’s recent talk may remember her work on rock strata, using photographs as a beginning. Tim’s painting went far further in its qualities of abstraction and, although he declared himself dissatisfied with the result, it was surely with the uneven execution, and a glazing process that had not worked as expected, than with the idea itself.

Be that as it may, it was equally interesting that his dissatisfaction had resolved itself into a steely determination to try again, and to pursue the idea to its limits. The last work was different to the rest, and was introduced as a tease. It also made a serious point. One of Tim’s declared aims was that the viewer should be able to complete the picture, to have a conversation with it, so that not all was revealed either by title or surface composition.



'Glimpse' by Tim Beer

Tim Beer Painter and Sculptor continued

A picture should have hidden corners, and invite questions. Again playing on memories of childhood, and using a flattened 50's palette, this painting combined an interior view seen as if distorted through occluded glass, with floating shapes and miraged picture planes – was a shape in front or behind? A competition to guess the title of the piece was won by Moira Osborne – whose suggestion 'Glimpse' came very close to Tim's 'Reflections', with neither title dictating the viewer's response. For this, Moira received a small prize, a ceramic nude mounted on wood – and the audience's congratulations.

This was a rewarding and thoughtprovoking talk, and a fine end to the subscription year.

Margaret Condon