

Mark Johnston's paintings need looking at. There is the immediate, sensory response: to the size and form of each of them, to their lightness or darkness of general tone and of specific colours, to the action of brushed marks and of lines, to the actual flatness and the sense of space in them. Already there is a lot to take on board, consciously and unconsciously, but there is another question we all want to ask because it is the instinctively human one: what are these paintings about?

I'll attempt some answers, but tentatively. Answers to such a question can and perhaps should vary infinitely. There are no wrong ones if they start from attention to the work. They are about painting. That may sound like a specialist's way of excluding everyone else; it certainly sounds dangerously like that old slogan 'art for art's sake'. But take it literally. To a real painter like this one, painting is a necessary activity, as basic and natural as touching a lover. It involves making marks on prepared surfaces. Averse to handing out prescriptions for what art should be, I only ask that it should breathe and thrive. That means letting artists lead and responding to what they produce, not bringing to it hard and fast preconceptions. Johnston starts each painting with a few initial marks that may or may not survive the activity they initiate and which is, to a large extent, a reaction to what those marks propose to him. The painting develops not as way of capturing the appearance of a chosen motif, but out of its own internal energies, as one brushstroke, patch of colour, charcoal or coloured line calls for its complement or opposite. Many an abstract artist works like that, and it started long ago. Klee made it the principle of his art, calling it the organic process, but we can catch Turner at it, half forgetting what he was making a picture of and letting the picture itself take over. With such artists we sense, and can to some extent trace, the successive actions the result of which is in front of us. We come close to participating in their action and the spirit that drove them.

People like to say that art is 'the artist expressing himself'. This sounds straightforward but it is a minefield. Do artists go into their studios to get a bad mood out of their systems? Do Expressionists work themselves into a passion before they can produce art? Art writers like to tell us how Van Gogh made pictures by letting his passionate nature, his madness even, do it all instantaneously. A canvas, some brushes and tubes of paint, *et voilà* -- that's Gauguin told off. I do not know of a painting worth a second glance that was rushed out in such a way: even spontaneous art takes time. Van Gogh was a particularly slow and deliberate builder of paintings and drawings. We get closer to what is involved if we imagine artists engaged in a dialogue with their work. Their part of the conversation may well be conditioned by spirit or mood. But the working process will answer back, make demands, offer interesting discoveries, raise problems. The picture is not finished in minutes, nor days, sometimes not for weeks and months. It looks spontaneous? There may have been long gaps between moves, and many a correction and adjustment. Mark Johnston told me that the instinctive lines with which he often starts a painting can get lost and ask to be retrieved, restated, often with a coloured pencil. Or that an area of white or near-white -- an area of luminosity -- may need refreshing, or dramatising, with contrasting brushstrokes in bright or dark colours. Or how the balance of a composition can be questioned by an additional accent here or there, because mere balance, mere good manners, would not have a voice.

But painting can suggest something outside itself without setting out to represent it. I notice that a lot of his recent pictures are square. The art trade calls a vertical canvas a 'portrait' and a horizontal one 'landscape'. Such associations do not prohibit other uses but set the tone to some degree, especially the horizontals: landscapes or the home-made landscapes we call still lifes. The tone of Mark Johnston's paintings tends towards landscape. He does not set out to picture a landscape, a real one or a generalized, poetic one. Landscape feelings often come from them, and these, once we question them, can vary widely from a benign scene to a more challenging, even catastrophic one, seen at some distance and possibly from above. Often it is the light and movement in them that makes one sense an open space.

When we speak, too curtly, of an artist expressing himself, we tend to think narrowly of what he may have in him to express. The point is that, first of all, an artist is full of art. No artist thinks of himself as an isolated creator confronting the world or eternity. (If he does, he will instantly be thinking of Casper David Friedrich's soulful individuals caught gazing at the sea or at mountains, or that Courbet of a little man, the painter perhaps, standing solitary on the shore.) No, he exists in an art network, and he works both with it and against it, not wanting to leave it the way he found it. Johnston has an enduring admiration for the art of Peter Lanyon and Roger Hilton, both associated with the St Ives School and known for incorporating responses to space and weather and the ancientness of Cornwall in paintings that are primarily abstract. He is also an admirer of the best art of Cy Twombly, an American working in Rome and known for large canvases that can look like graffiti and combine scribbled inscriptions, including references to the classical world, with lyrical passages of paint. Very post-something. Johnston cares little about that, but he enjoys their lightness and detachedness.

Finally: size, the first thing we notice (and never quite forget). Johnston makes many small paintings, and has always some larger ones on the go. Recently he has finished a big and dramatic one, 60 x 66 inches, and he is eager to move into a larger studio in order to make more large paintings and be able to see them properly. *Uncovered/Recovered* is an epic creation in which light confronts dark, and the dark area is itself a deliberate complex of dark blues and black, and glazes of black over resonant blue, and then also glimpses of fiery warmth and streaks of lighter blues, broken up with lines, that in the end leave one marvelling at the spatial ambiguities that come from this kind of persistence.

So he works currently in two basic sizes and they suit him very well: they neither inhibit him nor make demands that his nature cannot well respond to. But they are very different. The larger canvases are more dramatic, more symphonic. Bigger events, stronger feelings; more to discover over time and under different intensities and kinds of lighting. The smaller canvases, or sometimes boards, are much more intimate though they too can be emotional. I see these as more like chamber music, to be engaged with at home and close-to, in a limited setting by a limited audience. The larger ones, because the larger field calls for more assertive action, can hold their own on a museum wall and before a crowd.