

# Mark Johnston

Sue Hubbard

*I paint the weather and high places and the places where solids and fluids meet.*

*Peter Lanyon*

According to Pliny the Elder, the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius staged a contest to determine who was the greater artist. When Zeuxis unveiled his painting of grapes they appeared so real that the birds flew down to peck them. But when Parrhasius, whose work was apparently concealed behind a curtain, asked Zeuxis to pull it aside, the curtain turned out to be part of the painting. In the ancient world such optical tricks caused a bit of a stir but the point and purpose of painting has changed across the centuries.

Painting is the art of creating pictures by applying colour – usually in the form of pigment - to a flat surface. A painting may capture the likeness of a person, place, or object; it can tell stories, decorate walls or the pages of a book. 2000 years ago cave paintings created a sort of magic in order to conjure up animals for good hunting, while for much of European history paintings were created for religious reverie or education, to celebrate victorious battles or show how rich the patron was who had commissioned a particular work. But with the invention of the camera the purpose altered. It was no longer enough simply to depict the world. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century painting changed from a means of representation to a process philosophically concerned with its own materiality. Absorbing both high and low culture it borrowed from commercial illustration and architecture, from advertising and comic strips, from linguistics and French post-structural theory. So what, now, is left to the contemporary painter with a sensibility towards landscape?

Well, to paint is a form of thinking. The poet uses words, while the painter explores the world through marks, line and colour. It's not a question of starting with a fixed idea or seeing a scene and then sitting down to paint it, but rather of making discoveries through the very process of painting, of remaining open to suggestions thrown up by the substance itself: its liquidity, its density, its luminosity and translucence. For the perceptive viewer this can cause

us to reflect a little harder, to look a little closer at our phenomenological relationship to the world, provide us with new ways to see what, otherwise, might not be easily perceived.

Landscape painting is often associated with nostalgia and escapism and, therefore, seen as peripheral to the concerns of postmodernism. The traditional practice of painting in watercolour *en plein air* saw the medium gradually lose prestige and become the preserve of the conservative and the amateur. In contrast, a hard-line Modernist approach demanded the progressive stripping away of illusion and association to concentrate on a painting's essential qualities of gesture and the flatness of its surface.

Visiting Mark Johnston's airy Brighton studio establishes his connection to the tradition of British Romanticism and notions of the sublime. The names Constable, Turner and Peter Lanyon pepper our conversation as we look at his paintings, along with references to de Kooning, Roger Hilton and Hughie O'Donoghue. His work bears influences as divergent as those of Samuel Palmer, Ivon Hitchens and the Scottish painter, Joan Eardley. Yet when beginning a new work Johnston puts his art historical knowledge to one side and plunges straight in, following where the paint leads. There are no preparatory drawings. Layers of paint are gradually built up as he strives to keep his canvases fresh, open and ambiguous. They take us on a series of painterly journeys rather than supplying us with closed visual answers.

Growing up in Hartlepool, near the coast, the sea and water have been constants in his imaginative lexicon. After school in Durham, where he was an art scholar, he drove round Cumbria for a year sketching and drawing and then spent time in Scotland climbing the Munros, before relocating to art school in Brighton. Now he no longer paints outside but brings his experience and sensual memory of landscape into the studio. In *Meltwater* the light is wintery and northern. The yellow tinge suggestive of the sky before snow or the fading light of evening. In *Pales Sands II* fluid gestures of chalky off-white and cream abut areas of luminous cerulean blue. Full of wind, air and veiled light, the surface of the canvas appears churned like shale shifted by the movement of the tides.

Land, water and sky are constantly transformed In Johnston's paintings by the ever-changing nature of the weather to create solidity, transparency and shadow. Nature, as in *Estuary*, where dark is contrasted with lighter tones, is presented as something elemental in which we

are involved, rather than a spectacle which we witness with detachment. As viewers we are invited to read the surface of these paintings and understand the processes involved in their making: the oil layers of pigment applied with a palette knife, fingers or brush to create different densities and thicknesses. The layered glazes connect us back to the traditional techniques used by the old masters. Their purpose is to enhance the quality of a particular colour to give depth and patina. But these layers and accretions also have another function, to act as a metaphor for human consciousness, history and existence.

As a result the actuality of the landscape cannot easily be pinned down in these subtle, fluid paintings. Johnston works in natural light and wants his canvases to have an immediacy, to look as though he has just laid down the paint, that it is still wet and he's just left them for a moment as he's stepped outside the room. What he conjures is something primal, rather than literal, something untouched by human presence. It's hard not to sense the chthonic, unpredictable force of nature, the power of the waves, and the quick movement of the clouds. John Fowles description in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* might well describe Johnston's paintings that look "almost as the world might have been if man had not evolved, so pure, so unspoilt, so untouched it is scarcely credible." Whilst these works have their roots in the perception of the real they are, essentially, charts of the imagination, maps of creative thinking executed in paint, rather than particular places or views. Interpretation exists in the space between what the artist has imagined, the eye of the viewer and the painterly gestures on the canvas. Their openness allows us to speculate and dream.

Sue Hubbard is an award-winning poet, freelance art critic and novelist.

[www.suehubbard.com](http://www.suehubbard.com)