

Paintings by
Clyde Hopkins

A path through
dark and light



Curators Note

This exhibition, looking back at the life and work of Clyde Hopkins, has been selected from paintings in the artist's own collection. We are grateful to APT for staging the show and would like to thank Liz May and David Oates for all their help.

David Sweet and Marilyn Hallam

Paintings by

CLYDE HOPKINS

A path through dark and light

A retrospective exhibition curated by
David Sweet and Marilyn Hallam

APT Gallery
4 to 14 April 2019

A·P·T
Art in Perpetuity Trust

Clyde and APT

The Art in Perpetuity Trust (APT) is now a paradigm in the London art scene. It is a truism that visual artists live 'on the run', working in rented studios on short-term leases, subject to market forces, and living with uncertainty as a constant. APT, which owns the freehold of its land and buildings, was founded to rectify this situation.

The Trust's origins lie with Greenwich Artists Studios Association (GASA) which ran for twenty years from 1974. Clyde was one of the GASA artists; many of them knew each other professionally through Colleges of Art and elsewhere. When APT was founded many of the GASA artists became members of the new organisation; the fraternity of shared ideals and interests that they brought with them at once contributed to the identity of APT, has persisted, and is still part of its essential character.

APT is an educational charity. The beneficiaries are not the artists themselves, but members of the public. So while the initial purpose of APT was to provide permanent studios, the artists are expected to contribute to the charitable aims of the organisation.

APT was registered with Companies House in January 1995 and later that year the first meeting was held in the new building on Deptford Creek. Clyde was signed up as a Director, and so became part of the management team. The administrative structure which slowly emerged was a group endeavour: sub Committees (Education, Gallery, Building, Vetting), and a team of Floor Representatives and Artist Advisers.

Early in APT's evolution Clyde, and the other artists who had become Directors, were obliged to resign when the Charities Commission pointed

out that there was a 'conflict of interest'. Clyde promptly became an active, reliable, and important contributor to the Gallery Committee, concerned with vetting applications by artists to exhibit in the gallery. His professional contacts allowed him to curate worthwhile exhibitions at APT and to generate interest in the CREEKSIDE OPEN competition.

Younger artists working with him benefited from his expertise and judgement. Artists working co-operatively can sometimes be explosively contentious. In his dealings at APT, Clyde was always a steadying and diplomatic influence.

A few years ago Clyde wrote a short publicity piece about APT. He clearly responded to the physical situation of the studios on the Creek, with its mud, tides and the rotting hulk sinking away opposite. Aptly, he commented: "Constable would have liked it."

With time, APT's operations have inevitably become more formal; thus far they have avoided becoming bureaucratic. Clyde's light touch will be missed.

Cuillin Bantock

(Co. Sec. APT 1995-2015)



All Sources 1980
Acrylic on canvas
86 x 72cm
(Image 1)

Clyde Hopkins: A path through dark and light

You would expect a body of work, created over a span more than forty years, to display a pattern of development from early attempts, to the mature output where an artist's 'signature style' has fully evolved and is then consolidated. But the paintings of Clyde Hopkins seem to resist this schematic interpretation. Those from the late seventies and early eighties are stylistically different to those produced in the late eighties. Another change occurs in the nineties and from 2008 or thereabouts the paintings seem to take on characteristics almost the opposite of those to be found in work from earlier in his career. So, instead of one signature style, there are several.

Each of these signature styles is fully resolved and sufficient, rather than marking an evolutionary stage in an ongoing narrative. Each deploys an established set of procedures and material properties. The pattern that emerges is more a series of brackets rather than a smooth gradient, each bracket containing a group of works with similar visual qualities. As in algebra the contents of the bracket have to be dealt with separately but there is a further move that can be made with the device: The paintings can be bracketed with works by other painters to widen the context in which they may be appreciated.

The first recognisable style bracket, represented by works like **All Sources**, (Image 1), **Untitled (AF)** (Image 2), **Untitled (Driving)** and **Europa**, dates from the late seventies and early eighties. The forms in these paintings are atmospheric and vaporous. They loom and gather but look like they are made from material too soft to be shaped inside defined contours. There seems to be something 'there', a pictorial phenomenon, but the elements are non-tactile. They don't interact in a kinetic or percussive manner. If they



Untitled (AF) 1980
Acrylic on canvas
182 x 168cm
(Image 2)

were to collide they would simply pass through one another. Because they appear impalpable they don't have formal relationships in the standard sense. Instead they exert influence in a space they permeate rather than occupy.

The non-tactile forms were replaced by much more aggressive and interactive elements in the next signature style. The change took place around late 1983 and the results were displayed in an exhibition of new paintings that toured nationally between late 1985 and the spring of the following year. A notable innovation was heavy black drawing creating a structure that spread throughout the painting like a burnt root system, particularly visible in **Kent to Yorkshire (via the D.T.)** (Image 3). That the structure resembles a chain of letters, albeit consisting of a limited alphabet, suggests that the works may contain hidden messages, once legible, but scattered and garbled when subjected to a highly active painting process.

In **iBox Box!** 1984 (Image4) the black drawing is more wristy and dynamic, and supports another layer of gestures all tangled together. The fibrous combined structures are anchored to the canvas ground by a filamentous system of vertical drips hanging down from the tracks of liquid pigment. **A Working River** 1985 (Image 5) also consists of drawing on drawing, though the lower part of the lattice has been washed away dramatising the section of light toned cryptic writing that has survived and would be clear enough to be deciphered, if its meaning had not been irrevocably lost.

The angry, rhizoid drawing defines the second signature style. But I want to bracket this set of works with other paintings to add what I think might be a productive dimension. When looking at **iBox Box!** recently I was struck by how good it was, and not just good in a general way. It was as good specifically as a good Abstract Expressionist picture is. Then I thought of the paintings in that category that I'd seen, and concluded it



Kent to Yorkshire (via the DT) 1984

Acrylic an pastel on canvas

67 x 79cm

(Image 3)



iBox Box! 1984
Acrylic on canvas
269 x 170cm
(Image 4)



A Working River 1985
Acrylic on canvas
203 x 167cm
(Image 5)



The Collar (George Herbert) 1990
Oil on canvas
216 x 172
(Image 6)



Cap D'Ennis 1990
Oil on canvas
226 x 170cm
(Image 7)



Capstan Full Strength 1994
Oil on canvas
203 x 150cm
(Image 8)



Night Crossing 1996

Oil on canvas

204 x 180cm

(Image 9)

was better than a lot of them. **iBox Box!** also shared some procedural and interpretive overlaps with Abstract Expressionism, especially around the theory that its gestures are intelligible in reference to the artist's emotional states. The difference is that instead of revealing the private contents of the unconscious the painting performance channels an anger precipitated by real world public events.

In the late eighties Clyde's work went through a transitional phase. An exhibition of paintings at Francis Graham Dixon's gallery in 1990 looks both forward and back, incorporating the black drawing and the spongier elements found in his earlier work, but also containing more defined areas and interlocking shapes. The pulses of dabs and spots make an appearance, animating and activating the surface in some places when applied in a painterly manner, but slowing down movement when more deliberately 'printed' in a regular pattern. The drawing becomes self-consciously iconographic, enclosing then linking symbolic entities to form a track through miscellaneous pictorial phenomena, most notably in **The Collar (George Herbert)** 1990 (Image 6) These paintings might lie between the signature styles that I'm arguing for, but I think **Cap D'Ennis** 1990 (Image 7) clearly marks the opening of the next bracket.

Unlike the countless constituents of **The Collar**, **Cap D'Ennis** comprises four superimposed major elements and few subsidiary elaborations. **Corporal Trim**, painted the following year, has a similar economy, a dark shape on an orange ground and three areas bounded by a swooping linear element. Though comparatively simplified and flattened, many works of the period were dominated by black and orange; colours that do not create much chromatic resonance. But by 1994 the palette had been expanded and the flat, planar areas had become the basic architecture of the paintings on which the colour could be displayed to fuller effect.



Bread in Pocket 1991

Oil on canvas

170 x 203cm

(Image 10)

Gould and Fleming 1994 inherit the black and orange but the stark binary is mediated by abutting yellows, mauve, beige and green. Planes also dominate **Capstan Full Strength** 1994 (Image 8) providing opportunities to flood the geometric sub-frame with colour over which other shapes can be stencilled to make local chromatic contrasts, all clamped by two L-shaped corner elements.

The linear feature, less emphasised in **Capstan Full Strength**, is more prominent in **Night Crossing** 1996 (Image 9) but it still has the fibrous, tendril-like quality found in some eighties work. It also contains two areas fabricated from small dots of pigment through which the ground colour can show. This way of dealing with an area became a feature of Clyde's later work for reasons that are not immediately obvious. Like pointillism, it addresses the retina and enlivens visual appeal by providing optical stimulus that parallels the sensations caused by colour. But it also may be a way of introducing a sharply graphic element into traditional painting procedures. The graphic and the painterly are seen usually as belonging to different sensibilities, one precise, one less precise. In **Night Crossing** the triangular, dotted shape on the left mirrors the adjacent diagrammatic 'V' formed where the orange line passes through the margin of the central area. The mechanical quality of the dots reveals the relative painterliness of the rest of the surfaces. And it also has the feel of collage, introduced and developed of course in Cubism.

As **iBox Box!** may best be seen as a successful Abstract Expressionist painting I think **Night Crossing** is good in the way late cubist paintings are good. The signature style which links it back to **Cap D'Ennis** and onward to works made in the first few years of the twenty-first century, falls within the same cubist bracket: The abutting planes and geometric architecture, the formal decisions, the flattening; are all typical of the style. But what also seems relevant about cubism, especially exemplified by Picasso's work



Thoindigo 1996
Oil on canvas
50 x 40cm
(Image 11)



Plankhead 2005
Oil on canvas
45 x 54cm
(Image 12)

of the 1920s and 30s, is the way it combines the assets of abstraction and figuration in almost equal measure.

It deals with a built rather than liquid space. The juicy elements still to be found in **Bread in Pocket** 1990 (Image 10) have to be dried out so they can prosper in a more arid pictorial environment. All the material needs to adapt to a new legibility and this throws extra emphasis on surface, edge, area, colour and relationships. Formal organisation takes on a greater importance, as does the practice of composition, all features associated with 'abstraction'. But with cubism there is always space for figuration. **Night Crossing** has its tendril curls, a 'moon' and maybe even moonlight, while other paintings in this bracket contain musical notes, 'winning posts' and wood grain.

It is Picasso's rather than Braque's cubism that these paintings recall, and that inevitably includes the thread of surrealism particularly visible in the treatment of figurative material. Perhaps unrealism is a better description, implying a departure from the rules of natural appearance and a move in the direction of the monstrous or droll, as demonstrated by Gorky and Miro. The planar interaction and the structural stability of works like **Thoindigo** 1996 (Image 11) gradually gives way to a different more reckless pictorial anatomy, where shapes seem to have more personality than they need as in **Prosaic Gulch Painting** 2004 and **Plankhead** 2005 (Image 12).

But these works still observe the relative geometric discipline of straights and curves derived from cubism, though the palette intensifies and, because the black lines are less prominent, adjacent colour areas generate chromatic relationships which create what might be seen as a colour world detached from the sense of the 'natural' that, however stretched, informed earlier paintings.

The last signature style emerges around 2007/08 and employs a similar palette but quite a different pictorial vocabulary. The darks return, often functioning as a ground glimpsed between highly coloured joined up shapes, free of hints of the geometric, which host a wide variety of smaller shapes, many produced by a technique using evenly spaced, tiny points of pigment. Stippled areas appeared as far back as **Night Crossing**, but in the last ten years their presence came to dominate the painted surface alongside other nervy, abraded and distressed textures puncturing the faces of the planes.

In this stylistic bracket there is also a shift in pictorial orientation from the assumption that we are looking at planes that are basically upright, that we see in elevation, to the view of the painting's events seen as a plan, or map, spread out before us. In **Waltswood 2010** (Image 13) this impression is reinforced by the loose chequer board (middle top), like a field system seen from above, and to the right something resembling the cartographer's contour line denoting a hill. There are also leaf shapes. The dark fissures or tracks that run through the painting are typical of this style in that they invite a figurative interpretation but clearly belong to the topography of an artificial, slightly alien terrain.

The paintings offer a non-decorative, locked pattern, where each component is separately imagined, and separately painted in a procedure that requires infinite patience and concentration on individual forms, operating on a level of maximum legibility. Because of their map-like quality, they don't participate in a shared space so the many colours they contain don't advance or recede on the warm/cool principle but stay where they are, like jewels in a treasury.

Faced with this final style it's hard not to think there must be a key to open the complex pictorial structures, as there must be another that unlocks the



Waltswood 2010
Oil on linen
85 x 110cm
(Image 13)



About the Orinoco 2013
Oil on linen
106 x 90
(Image 14)



Denn die einen sind im Dunken 2016

Oil on linen

90 x 75cm

(Image 15)

thinking behind all those titles. The titles sound like terms of endearment, nicknames, rather than official identifiers, suggesting that the works have personalities, recognised by the painter in what he decides to call them. The titles are provocatively imaginative, rather than soberly accurate, acting like a framing device around the process of seeing the paintings.

Clyde's titles have always been elaborate, but in the last signature style their imaginative stimulus suggests that the painting territory he maps should also be seen as an imagined world, as in **About the Orinoco** 2013 (Image 14). Its contents include fables and memories of the past slowly and laboriously brought to light in the present, in their original, un-faded colour, devoid of the patina that usually coats the objects of recollection.

This seems to be leading in a far too literary direction, towards Marcel Proust and his bit of cake. But maybe it will do no great damage to our appreciation of Clyde's work to try to discover his equivalent to the French writer's madeleine, the key to the world that the later paintings construct. It's tempting to leave the matter undecided, but this is a commentary on a retrospective, on a completed body of work. For what it's worth, I think the key can probably be found in experiences lived through in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Clyde himself has freely acknowledged his 'obsession' with WW2, though he was born a year after it ended. There are specific wartime references in some of the paintings but I think his interest in the event lies deeper. For him the War was over, but anyone living in the South East of England in the late forties and early fifties would have been fully aware of the strategic importance of that area, and would have experienced its cultural consequence in cinematic form of a narrative about events that were still fresh in adult memories. The exploits of English heroes, depicted by Jack Hawkins or Kenneth More, prolonged the film war well into the Fifties and

beyond, strongly influencing the imagination of the post-war generation. But I think that the key to the last signature style is not the war so much as boyhood.

It may seem too easy to claim that Clyde's madeleine was his early life in East Sussex, and there may be little iconographic evidence to back it up. But the paintings I'm concentrating on do have a sense of locale, a territorial outline, and vividness in line with Proust's concept of involuntary memories. The colour has a lustre, an internal iridescence, whose illumination comes not from perception but introspection, a mental process which perhaps can be conducted at the same time as patiently applying dab after dab of pigment across the painting's surface, listening to the radio.

To press the claim further it might help if this last of Clyde's styles, perhaps the trickiest to categorise, could be bracketed with a type of work that comes from a different tradition. I think these late works can be productively treated as 'metaphysical' paintings.

I'm not saying there is any direct influence, which may make this seem like an outlandish proposal, but I would cite the early scuola metafisica paintings of Giorgio de Chirico as a comparison. I'm thinking of well-known and fairly successful examples of the genre such as his *The Enigma of a Day* 1914, *Piazza d'Italia* 1913, and *Nostalgia of the Infinite* 1912. They have a distinct sense of place; they are 'somewhere', an imagined but vivid world, awkwardly constructed, strongly but questionably lit, riven by dark shadows, with lustrous colours and, though 'strange' or 'enigmatic', it's a world more informed by memory than the dream-like states favoured by the Surrealists.

The shifts that occurred in Clyde's practice from the late seventies to 2018, which I have only briefly outlined, partly account for his prodigious studio

output of those years. He drew out the full potential of each signature style. Each one suited him brilliantly, providing distinct aesthetic and technical challenges rich enough to stimulate and support high levels of productivity and creativity. He got inside those styles, committed to their continuing vitality and artistic relevance, for over forty years, during which the fine arts changed out of all recognition. I hope that this exhibition will give an idea of the scope and wealth of his legacy and its place in the history of European visual culture, as well as celebrating his remarkable achievement and his unique contribution to the art of painting.

David Sweet

Artist's Biography

Clyde Hopkins was born in East Sussex in 1946 moving with his family to Cumbria when he was eleven. He studied Fine Art at the University of Reading in the 1960s where he met his future wife, the painter, Marilyn Hallam. He exhibited work for over forty years, produced in studios in Greenwich, Deptford and St Leonards.

Solo exhibitions included the Serpentine Gallery London (1978 and 1986), the Acme Gallery London (1979), the Ikon Birmingham and Rochdale Art Gallery (both 1985), Salisbury Art Centre (1988), Modern Times at the Castlefield Gallery Manchester (1989), Kunstverein Kircharten Germany (Kunst Europa 1991), Reg Vardy Arts Foundation Sunderland (1994), Atkinson Gallery Millfield School (1996), *Vodka*, *a Stiff Breeze* and *Paranoia* at the London Institute Gallery (1998), the Francis Graham Dixon Gallery London (1989, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1997) and *Galeria Joan Prats* New York (1990 and 1994). In 2012 he had two one-man shows – *brown madder* at Chelsea Futurespace, London, and *Indian Yellow* at the Merston Gallery, Chichester.

Group exhibitions at public venues throughout the UK and Europe include the Hayward, the Whitechapel, the Axiom, the Bede, MOMA Oxford, the Royal Academy, John Holden Manchester, Stephen Lawrence Greenwich, Hastings Museum and Art galleries. Many private galleries have also exhibited his work.

He was awarded the Mark Rothko Memorial Fellowship (USA) in 1980-81 and in 1999 the Lorne Award. His work is in public and private collections in the UK and North America.

He taught in many art colleges and universities and in 1982 was appointed Head of Painting at Winchester School of Art. He moved to Chelsea College of Art in 1990 and was made an Emeritus Professor after leaving in 2006.

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