

Dionysus in Bohemia

by David Sweet

'The elements in Hopkins' work seem to come from strikingly different, even contradictory traditions, as if he is seeking to cover ex-tremes of expressive language rather than occupy a unified middle ground. The juxtaposition produces a peculiarly complementary effect as though two implacably opposed artistic visions had collided in the same work. The result is an increase in intensity so great that the contents of the painting seem to pass through a tangible ordeal, a sort of visual pain barrier.'

I wrote that over twenty five years ago on the theme of dissonance, or conflict in Clyde Hopkins work, a theme which can be traced through up to his death in 2018 and forms the crux of the current exhibition at Castor Gallery, London.

This conflict is best addressed through the lens of ideas which were popular in the sixties, and which featured in some of the theorisation around Abstract Expressionism. These were set out in Friedrich Nietzsche's first book, 'The Birth of Tragedy' (1872) that examined the origin and subsequent decline of Greek tragedy, taking particular interest in the role of music in this history. It's complex and idiosyncratic but the stand out idea, at least the one that seemed more readily understandable, was his argument about the two main principles within Greek art and culture associated with two deities, Apollo and Dionysus. In addition, it is important to consider certain events in Hopkins' career, which, though seemingly mundane, may have influenced developments in his paintings.

The two deities represent two mutually exclusive sets of characteristics. Apollo, the god of light and harmony, stands for form, structure, and rational thought, while Dionysus, the god of wine, revelry and tragedy, for intoxication, chaos, ecstasy, and emotion. The implication is that there must be some mixing of these opposites for, without the relevant counter influence, Apollonian art would be dead and Dionysian art would be nonsense.

Hopkins's paintings of the eighties like !Box Box! (1984) and Kent to Yorkshire (via the DT) (1984) - now in the Tate collection - were clearly inspired by Abstract Expressionism. Indeed they seem exemplary instances of that movement even though they were made a quarter of a century later. His work of that period was freighted with almost stereotypical Dionysian traits like passion, chaos, instinctual frenzied action, excess, and suffering. But in the paintings in the present show, 'Paintings 1989-1993', at Castor Gallery, there seems to be more of an attempt to engage dialectically with the Apollonian approach. This accommodation of the rival dispensation happens in slightly different ways.

Bread in Pocket (1991) is a clear example of combining the two Greek aesthetic principles in a mutually enhancing interaction. The Apollonian element appears on the left, its geometric compositional qualities shown to good effect as it lines up with the framing edge of the canvas. It's not visually inactive but the decorative circles and dots it contains stand apart from the dynamic forces that the rest of the painting generates. Outside of the Apollonian zone the inexhaustible phenomena of pigment, thinned or thick, is explored to the maximum, establishing a large, compound form, with different areas held together by an extensive system of vertical drips. Laid over these diverse pictorial events is an open structure consisting of a continuous black line that swings in convex and concave arcs, turning back on itself to create loops and rings.

Continuing to pursue the Dionysian theme it might be possible to interpret the looping structure as a reference to the dance or dithyramb. It might plot the movement of figures following a choreographed track, like revellers in the entourage of the Roman version of Dionysus in Titian's Bacchus and Ariadne.

A similar structure can be found in The Last Quarter (1989). On the left, a rhetorical tangle of brush marks links to an even more tangled passage running across the top of the painting, like a redacted signature which is just possible to make out. The activity is divided up into four abutting areas each with a different technical style. The curtain of drips running from top to bottom emphasise the verticality of these divisions which discourages reading the image as a landscape, promoting a stronger feeling of abstraction. But on the right hand side the activity is counterbalanced by passages of slower, denser painting, with more chromatic charm, and Apollonian reserve. Scumbled and modelled in white, near white and yellow, here Hopkins creates quieter areas over the underlying gestures.

Untitled (1989-91) employs the gestural, active pictorial iconography found in the other paintings, with clear expressive intentions, but with such a light touch, using transparent washes and softer drawing, that it has the calm aesthetic appeal associated with Apollonian art.

The methodology in Seagulls, Brian Sewell, Kicking etc (1992) is different. It has more structure. With its flat, solidly painted planes and more organised air it looks to have a stronger claim to be following Apollonian principles. It contains the pictorial architecture, in rudimentary form, that was to appear later in his work in the nineties. But in this iteration these potentially more formal compositional elements are brutalised, filled with drab colour, and offer no respite from the forces at work in the top part of the painting. The upper configuration is complex and highly manipulated. It also has hints of surrealism, reflecting the partialities of the god of irrationality, and suggesting an alignment with Joan Miro in its use of black drawing and anthropomorphic echoes.

Through the eighties and into the period represented in this exhibition I think that the Dionysian tendencies dominate, but are not unopposed. By the mid-nineties on the other hand Hopkins' work took on more Apollonian appearance, Capstan Full Strength

(1984) and Night Crossing (1996) being good examples. I want to explore what factors may have played a part in this evolution, starting with the social circumstances of Hopkins' wider practice.

The paintings in this show were made in Greenwich. Hopkins was a founder member of the Greenwich Artist's Studio Association, (GASA) an artists' collective, inaugurated in 1974, which occupied a number of large huts on land owned by an order of Catholic nuns. The association members acted, in effect, as a peer group that constituted the first audience for the work produced on the site. This conferred a particular culture of expressive and creative freedom on the painters and sculptors who worked there, which might have been limited if their first address was to the public.

In a 1984 painting Hopkins had scrawled an expletive across the lower part of the canvas at a time when the word itself was not accepted as now. But this wasn't an attempt to shock the audience. Modern art has often wanted to shock. To fling a pot of paint into the public's face, as Ruskin accused Whistler of doing, or to indulge in a little *épater les bourgeois*, that the French decadent poets favoured. However, the peer group to whom Clyde's work was directed would not have been shocked by the word. And neither would they had been put out by the 'unfinished' look of the painting, or the disorderliness of the brush marks, or that it was an abstract painting, or that it was large.

Not having to worry about a whole range of concerns the public may hold dear permits the artist a wider degree of freedom of expression and action within the process of decision-making, of what to put where, to swing from Dionysian broad brush to Apollonian tight edges without needing justification. In short it allows for what might be thought of as 'advanced' painting. In creating a world within a world this way GASA could be described as an authentically 'Bohemian' project.

In its many manifestations in the nineteenth century Bohemianism amounts to a group of artists, writers, musicians, etc, bound together by a sense of distance from prevailing orthodoxies. In the twentieth century probably the most prominent bohemia was based at Andy Warhol's New York premises, where people behaved in a way the public may have found shocking, whereas the cast of the Factory most certainly did not.

In considering the development of Clyde's painting one has to mention that it happened in parallel with a distinguished career in higher education at a senior level. He was appointed as Head of Painting at Winchester School of Art in 1982 and became Head of Painting at Chelsea in 1990, a move that coincides with the period explored in this exhibition. It seems odd to link the pursuit of an ambitious creative endeavour to the everyday business of having a job. However Clyde took his academic role very seriously, so it would be slightly surprising if it had no effect on him when back in the studio.

This is entirely speculative of course but there was an undeniable stylistic shift away from gestural animation towards paintings constructed with abutting planes of hi-vis colour following the principles of dynamic composition. The Dionysian spirit was faintly legible in the arabesque linear elements overlaying the large flatly painted areas but otherwise it would be possible to see Capstan – Full Strength and Night Crossing as masterpieces of Apollonian art.

This increasing formality coincided with his tenure as head of painting at Chelsea at a time when the experience of working in English art schools was changing. There was a marked swing towards the managerial and bureaucratic and away from the Bohemian. In this more regulated educational space most of the behaviours associated with Dionysus, and the world within a world of Bohemia, would have not complied with the demands of art school etiquette.

I seem to have left the works in this show behind with this speculation, but I wanted to use this opportunity to add to my understanding of Clyde's overall achievement. Again it may be coincidence but paintings like Walt's Wood (2010) and About the Orinoco (2013) were produced after he set aside his academic career. They are made from very different material to Bread in Pocket or The Last Quarter, with high colour, packed forms, pattern, complexity and careful facture. But they retain the energy and force of the overtly gestural examples in this show. Instead of discharging they store this energy, as in a clock spring, to be transferred in pulsing dots and convulsed boundaries, put together, I've come to believe, under the spell of Dionysus.

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