

Notes on Clyde Hopkins' Paintings 1989-90

In the late morning on the long creamy white beaches of Queensland in Autumn the light has such intensity, due I'm told to the angle of the sun for an hour or two, that colour, light, space itself all objects, seem to take on a powerful dark glitter. It's like light pouring off the surface of black jet, this enveloping fierce glare in which everything seems to have a black underside. There's no black visible to the eye but it's there. Thin sharp black shadows across the sand seem to have snaked out directly from the few isolated people and things projecting them. Just a few feet away, tanned bodies look almost black. Even the pale but bright blue sky fading above the ultramarine sea to almost a white haze along the horizon has this implicit blackness built in. The sun itself is a searing disc of white-gold, impossible to look at.

You can find a rather different accentuation of colour in England in early evening, or late afternoon in hot, sultry weather when the sky is white and drained of colour. Then the light is so dull that colour briefly seems to swell and deepen and finally becomes richer and stronger. But it lacks that jet-black vivacity of blazing light that I've found only in the Pacific world and which has such a fierce and tragic beauty, as if innocent and inchoate nature were briefly tinged with - not mortality, but something highly sophisticated and perhaps toxic.

In painting, you get a similar sensation, though less intense and from different physical causes, in some of Van Gogh's landscape paintings around Arles and in Turner's moody and fulsome elegy for the final blaze of sun and the death of a man in his octagonal painting, *Burial at Sea*. Here the black hulk of the ship is blocked in against the setting sun. Artists had located a physical sort of expressionism in nature itself long before later painters, from Kokoschka to Appel, began to portray an interior, psychic disequilibrium. Dufy painted a series of pictures towards the end of his life of *Le Cargo Noir* in which a huge patch of black nearly obliterates the canvas. Against this black mass you see the sketchy white outline of an old cargo steamer scratched through the black paint as if the ship were trapped in its own black cloud - or as if you were staring at its bulk against the sun. As the blackness fades off, unevenly around the sides of the painting, the brightly coloured identity of Dufy's beloved Le Havre reasserts itself, vestiges of a port, swimming, shrimpers, other boats. Those *Cargo Noir* paintings, filled with a sense of mortality, for Dufy was crippled by arthritis when he painted them, are among the loveliest inventions of our mid-century. Dufy had in his mind a saying of La Rochefoucault about not being able to look at either death or the sun in the face.

In the fifties Rothko painted at intervals a small number of abstract canvases in which the familiar rectangles are set in counterpoise but in which the colour is exceptionally sombre: dull reds and blacks but used rather differently to their appearance in the Seagram paintings. The canvases have also that sense of colour seen against the light - though quite drained of negative implications of light and

glitter that you find in Dufy –and although outwardly calm in their formality embody also an illusion of buried imagery, of something muffled, like a distant explosion.

Miro uses black and white against vivid primary colours and achieves in his own fantasy the sort of dark, sun-drenched intensity analogous to the physical violence that I have described. Miro's good spirits sometimes verge on the cheerfully manic. His use of black and white has a physical presence which goes beyond mere dramatic impact when seen with such dynamic reds, greens, violets and acid yellows. But these juxtapositions do not invoke dazzle so much as an alignment of darkness and light, black and white, with small, sharply registered areas of bright colour which together produce another kind of sensation, concerned with extremes of feeling and a specifically dramatic presentation, like a scene on a stage or within an arena. Another kind of intensity and concentration can also be found in the work of some other Spanish painters in the fifties. In the black and white paintings of Saura and in the meager, etiolated and atavistic shapes and marks in the work of Tápies, for example. Here the intensity extends to the abrupt expressive roughness in the brushwork of Saura's paintings and the occasional gestural wildness in the sensuous graffiti of Tápies. The neo-primitive quality of the imagery that we see in Miro's paintings has its own intensity, not unlike the poetic wildness of Lorca's imagination.

What I am really thinking about, of course, is the work of Clyde Hopkins which I so wholeheartedly admire. I believe that his use of colour and blackness reflects some of the characteristics of light, colour, blackness and forcefully compacted imagery that I have been trying to describe. His work, consistently strong, has moved over the past decade or so through various points of emphasis from dense imagery to a more flowing, airborne handling of form – and back again recently to earlier points of departure – but essentially Hopkins' painting seems to have only grown in strength and remained quite remarkably true to itself, its central vision. It has always been very beautiful, full of feeling, excitement, energy, and with occasional undertones of anguish or melancholy. But everything is disguised, concealed behind the scenes, oblique, never frontal despite the obvious forcefulness of the idiom, always on decisive if sometimes baffling terms of abstraction.

My reaction to the appearance, at any rate, of camouflage, is divided. One half of my mind understands perfectly well that Hopkins' work is abstract but finds it impossible to avoid thoughts of the 'is it an ear, is it a nose, is it a scrotum?' kind when faced with such richly circumstantial abstract compositions in which some kind of a situation or state of being is so carefully set out. These paintings are very exact in their structure. I don't seek to reduce everything to representational terms but as an analyser, searching out essences, I want to know about each element in a painting. The question, 'where does this shape come from?' is different, after all, to 'what does this shape represent?'

Happily, the other half of my mind is content to accept what Hopkins does on his own terms, which I enjoy and indeed relish. He shows us a spectacle we have never

seen before, after all, and yet invests each painting with an emotional authority that colours and informs some sort of dilemma or tough situation trapped, recorded and formalised as it unfolds. This moody feeling is strongly to the fore in *Chaunticlere* 1989 in which a large dark mass, not so much illuminated as dramatised by flashing whites to its left, is dragged or scraped into existence. A big, circular-topped slow red eruption appears to its right as if emerging from behind the dark mass. Spiky lines stick out of the top or head of this dull red area to galvanise the space. The painting is very explicit in the distribution of its parts and projects some deeply felt sense of one thing shifting to another - less a metamorphosis than an illusion of the present being engulfed by the past, or breaking clear. Something is happening, moving, *becoming*.

Hopkins is naturally painting images beyond words, or he would write them. Even a really good figurative painter like Edward Burra creates images which, however representational they appear to be, are also quite beyond words, well beyond the reach of straight description in their mood and inner fantasy. And Hopkins, if pressed, is willing to indicate specific points of departure in his painting. 'They often start with some kind of incoherent memory of a place - not so much incoherent as unresolved, more of a sensation. And more particularly, some years back, urban environment; the way the light falls in certain streets. Or even the shape of a particular insect, moth or crustacean. A lot of paintings seem also to have two sides, particularly in the horizontal ones where there are two areas jostling side by side. In vertical paintings, there's sometimes a full zone opposing an empty space - or an angry, burgeoning mass set against a cold, inert area'. Hopkins doesn't see why abstract painting should not also be able to express social disquiet - the political or social *status quo* - as well as figurative painting. He sees much of the painting of the 80s as expressive of this disquiet, or at least partly so.

I can see for myself an enjoyable ambiguity in Hopkins' work between interior and exterior space as well as in the play between the sense of a closed room or an open vista and the parallel ambiguity between an event, a situation or a place. The component parts of these dualities are also inflected by Hopkins' sense of irony, in his use, presentation, deployment of shapes that are formed partly by a double-take on the shapes in some French abstract painting in the 1950s.

I can see this edgy game going on in *Southdown* 1990, *Busy Old Foole* 1989 and *Tres Principals*, April 1990. These paintings make play with shapes not unlike the sophisticatedly infantile forms of Gaudi: in their vibrant patterning, they also recall however remotely, the interiors of Vuillard, as in *Southdown* 1990. And those blue spotted tree shapes ... And those pocked or spotted octopus-like tendrils that are also like the wavering, speckled bands in aboriginal bark paintings. You can go on for ever. Hopkins says that *The Collar* 1989-90, in my view a magnificent and highly original work, is titled after a poem by George Herbert and 'has something loosely to do with throwing off restrictions, finding peace, a private rant about being constrained'.

The urge to 'read' a painting too explicitly can be a red herring with Hopkins - or with artists of the *CoBra* group, much admired by Hopkins at one time. And apart from receiving the generalised impression of high spirits, biomorphic wit or a primitive sexuality, it doesn't work if one tries to decipher the content of Miro, either. Hopkins reveres Miro and feels strong affinities with Spain and Spanish culture. My references to 'blackness' in modern painting and the black glitter of light in Queensland have extended also to Spanish painting because of obvious affinities though I am not trying to hint at a 'death in the afternoon' element in Hopkins' work. What interests me is that Miro's ancestry gave him access to a vital world of Catalan folk art, inherited signs and symbols, some moons, stars and a nearness to those primitive spiky cactus-like shapes we find in Gaudi. But Hopkins comes from another world and I wonder about his own references and alignments, and to what extent they come out of art and how much comes from life. He plainly aims at unity. I believe, too, that it should be possible to express social disquiet abstractly, but it can only come as a by-product of what you're after, not as a directly stated frontal endeavour. It has to infiltrate from the side, like a sense of luxury spilling over from a utilitarian project into an involuntary and excessive consummation.

I like the way in which Hopkins' work is so strongly rooted in, without in any way resembling, the best work of the fifties, in French and Spanish abstract painting, Fautrier, Dubuffet, Wols, Bissier, Deyrolle, Saura, Davie and others. Hopkins claims only an ironic or wryly amused attitude to work of this period but irony is really only the other side of passion. One doesn't seek to 'date' his paintings so much as to indicate their links with art of commensurately serious purpose. The fifties were a time of exceptional strength in European as well as American painting. It seems in retrospect to have been the most cathartic period in European art since 1910.

Hopkins is faintly exasperating in his use of high-flown or opaque titles, assigned to paintings which, if we are to believe the artist, are not about anything whatever that might be defined in words. 'What is this slab of vermilion pigment doing in this corner?' I ask politely, hopeful as ever of enlightenment. 'Balancing the other patch of vermilion in the other corner', says Hopkins, equally polite but quite properly evasive in response. Nothing is about anything. I find that the painting is called *A Day at the Races ...*

Hopkins' paintings don't really require words; they are, finally, so spectacular and evocative on their own terms, so fulsomely expressive, that something filters into our awareness and finally they make a world of their own. They add to one's sense of life very strongly, they expand and contract in one's memory, and they belong to European painting.