

Drawing Into Landscape.

Introductory Essay by Marco Cali

Four artists brought together by something similar in the methodology of their working practice, each one spends time outdoors, sketching directly from the landscape. And yet, there is something of a contradiction between these artist's quest for a direct experience with the land, and the making and viewing of their work in an indoor environment, distant from the land.

On first impression, I'm struck at the casual play, the sense of fun that each seems to be having with their work. They are all serious in what they do, but I don't see the beat-your-head-against-a-wall effort of a photo-realist say. They all seem to share that childhood wish of prolonging the game as much as possible, not wanting the fun to stop, of being somewhere new, that instant when we feel joy, this moment on this winter day say, and we want it to never end. But also that feeling of wanting others to join in, to revel in it, to share with them and see it as they see it.

Here, drawing is the basic tool, with paper as the experimental surface. The ephemeral disposability of this medium is liberating, even if in the end, it's worth keeping really. Every scrap is part of a never ending series of visual try-outs. One way of understanding this could be as one continuous process punctuated by individual paintings that act as waymarkers. Like most artists, they are on a journey which combines a very personal existence within a wider experience. The traditional aim of only showing the completed work, painting in this instance, is what we normally expect. However, by sharing these more ephemeral pieces, ones which are not usually intended for display, they are being very generous in giving a warts-and-all view of their practice.

What can be gleaned from seeing all this? What might be conjured up from walking into their studios and being allowed to root around their desk-space so to speak?

Simon's studio. Piles of sketch books, many opened, scrawled black line drawings cast adrift grouped here and there, tumbling off tables leaving a path. The same landscape drawn and redrawn. Finished paintings stacked to one side, unfinished ones on walls, egging-on the view from the large windows that make up the opposite side. We're high up and the day streams in. Walking the dog along the cliff-top maybe, seeing the same tide pulled in by the aged moon, and that light of a fading Sun. It's just a coincidence that this was once an undertaker's building and this room was where bodies were laid out.

Amanda, in her quiet space with its small window a rectangle of green and water. Creaking floorboards damp walls that are so solid and silent with years. The room is so neat and tidy, everything in its place, or is it just because she knew we'd look in? An image, a retracing of a gesture, wanting to find the moment, to catch the fleeting mood. Finding the line that says more than the sum of its simplicity. Going outside, close to, because even on tiptoes it's had to really see through the glass pane. The colour is so much more out here, so intense, so many ways to be green.

Emily, in a wide white space, painting large, on the floor or the wall, dabbing, scraping, smudging, retracing something. It's difficult to put into words but the results speak for themselves. Visceral is too strong, but of the body as much as of the head. I can feel the loam beneath bare feet. I can feel the chill of the earth that sucks through the air. It's there in the texture of the charcoal, soot crumbs that cling onto paper fibre. Strange to think that her final paintings come from such a clinical place, small high-up windows and bare walls. Outdoors she spreads the material on the ground, plastic tarpaulin and she reaches over the paper with a seemingly messy control of the medium. It's something akin to making mud pies, or spreading clay water over a stone. She works surrounded by the damp landscape, time, fragility, motherhood.

Keith's paintings, small and somehow precise, simple awkward shapes in straight-out-of-the-box colours. A bank holiday trip to the countryside, drawing in the backseat waiting to arrive expecting the adventure to come, fizzy pop and ice lolly, then the view after the long climb and being left mouth wide with the wonder of it all. His studio is a boys den. A chair here, a small box-book case crammed full from the last 'tidy-your-room' order, CDs and a snare drum. The retreat from the world where it's possible to re-assemble it. And the many fat sketchbooks, gorged with paint, stuffed in between the paper like pressed tree leaves.

These paintings and sketches are all emotive responses. Adults being children, playing with paint. Guided feelings, allowed to flow freely but that in the end must work within the boundaries of the frame. They exist as paintings in their own right and not optical equivalents, and must satisfy the unwritten rules that make such pieces successful. They might be completed in a process of continuously returning to the painting over days, months or even years, or maybe in that fortuitous moment in time when they are done and dusted in one sitting. In each case, Amanda, Emily, Keith or Simon are completing a painting, wanting to wish out of thin-air that something they experienced whilst outdoors. And in each case, the painting must satisfy both this wish and that need to work within the logic of the surface it sits on. And of course, since they are not aiming for strict visual representation, then they are not like postcards of the place that act as tokens of ownership.

Or perhaps they are. As John Berger put it in *Ways of Seeing*:

Oil painting depicts things that are...buyable... This analogy between possessing and the way of seeing which is incorporated in oil painting, is a factor usually ignored...

To paint is to own. To paint something is not unlike buying it and putting it into your house. *If you buy a painting you buy also the look of the thing it represents.*

But what these artists want to own is not the acreage but that moment of wonder, the ecstasy of seeing, of being at this point at this time feeling this way.

This is the unintended consequence of a painting tradition; *Plein-air*. Like many pleasures or moments beyond words, in English we like to hide behind the skirts of another language. And in this instant it's wanting to own that moment that is out-and-out marvel and yes, play.

So how do we get there? How do these artists stay within this frame-of-mind? How do they stop it becoming a mannered exercise?

They return each time to where the experience is. To where they can rekindle the moment.

This is where the adult within guides the child. Each has come to understand how their own internal clock mechanism works. Through persistence and open-minded curiosity, they have each made this individual discovery, a journey that continues, a life-long obsession because even as the adult understands, the person within moves on.

An intricate circularity then. The painter returns to sketch the land, to renew the feeling for it as time passes and the season moves on.

So what is at the root of our fascination with landscape painting anyway?

It is a long tradition, although not so very long within the story of Western art as a whole. But for us, here and now, we can take one painting and one painter from the past and frame it all to suit our current world view.

The painter I am referring to is Nicolas Poussin and specifically his work *Et in Arcadia Ego*, now in the Louvre. This depicts a pastoral idyll, of pure, free, rural existence into which our own mortality comes into question. Like Poussin's complex painting, full of symbolism as it is, the works in this exhibition seem to say that paint itself can offer some solace to this fact of our own transience. Just as we are aware that these fleeting moments must pass, we wish them not to and in some way, they do not. They continue to exist as paintings.

And here we are again with that painter's paradox. Because as they continue to leave the studio to return to the land and work anew, they are back to the moment of bliss, when they can themselves settle back into that fleeting-for-ever. This escape to Eden of sorts, is a running back to a lost golden age, that wish within us all to go back to the place we were happiest, where eternal youth and the endless future reign. A never ending summer-long school holiday perhaps.

There is something about wanting to unlock this mystery, how to return to that distant past. It seems that there is some alchemy at work here in front of these pictures. Pigment is caked onto some surface and it is itself off the land, dead and inert as it sits there, but it can evoke a deeply emotive response. Perhaps, by spying over the artist's shoulder, it is possible to unlock this mystery. By seeing the drawings, the scraps of notes and by peering into their studios, we are looking at the odd monastic devotion to a subject matter. A way of being where these adults with their serious intent, play with paint, smudge and scribble to get at the moment of not thinking.

There is something immediately playful about each artist's work, with a vivid energy in each of Emily, Keith and Simon's works whereas Amanda seems more thoughtful. Was she such a child I wonder? And is there something in Keith and Simon, both male artists that can be read in their work? Both seem to sit distant from the landscape, ascertaining it from afar, observing, taking a measure, perhaps in thrall to the view, light, sublime... Or is this just masculine stereotype, surely they are not conquering or surveying with these streaks and daubs.

But maybe it's Emily and Amanda that show how they are a counter to this. Both sit within the landscape, are more intimately involved with it. Theirs seems to be a much more intimate and internal journey.

Is this a coincidence? After all, a sample of four to stand for all humanity is no sample at all.