

When English painters take to landscape, they nearly always, even today, seem to refer to a prelapsarian countryside, where they can plug into some sort of pantheistic vision of unity with nature before the towns came to spoil it all. In that respect Bill Jacklin is very exceptional. He is fascinated by the urban scene; he is interested in people, but for the most part in large groups rather than as individuals. When he transferred his activities to New York in 1985, the move to the archetypal modern city of course changed his vision somewhat, but it did not basically transform it into something it was not before. The formal preoccupations which had directed his eye in London remained exactly the same. Just as Kokoschka had an ideal of bird's-eye-view landscape in his mind, and found it so consistently that you have to look carefully to work out whether the painting you are seeing is of London or Salzburg or Istanbul, so Jacklin had his archetypal images, patterns which had fascinated him ever since his beginnings as an abstract minimalist, and which underlie everything he does, however much the local incidentals may vary.

He is fascinated, for instance, by the way light falls slantwise across a field of vision. In his abstract days it might take the form of diamonds in carefully graded shades of black and grey arranged to create a pattern of gradual lightening or darkening from the upper left hand corner to the lower right. In America precisely the same effect could be evoked from the movement of fans at a rock concert, or skaters on an ice-rink, or bathers on a sloping beach. Another preoccupation has been with strong verticals, sometimes making a pattern by themselves (an almost inescapable subject in New York), sometimes set against curving or serpentine shapes as in his evocations of London's Regent Street on a rainy day or Hong Kong's Queens Way. A third kind of composition which recurs is the intricate, rather formal figure composition in which the rhythmic dispositions of Poussin are found again in a crowd of New York demonstrators or the dubious denizens of 42nd Street or the groups that gather round openair chess-players in New York or Hong Kong, fortune-tellers or meat packers on a lunch-break.

Of course one might ask: If the underlying patterns are always the same, why does the artist need to move around at all? Monet had an answer for that, in the form of a self-question. He admitted once, writing home during a seemingly endless search for painting-sites which "spoke" to him, that he had not the faintest notion why he could pass by twenty solitary trees silhouetted against the summer sea, and be moved to paint only the twenty-first, while to any outside eye, and even to his own consciousness, they were virtually indistinguishable. He did not know why, but he knew very well when the spark was struck and when it was not. Jacklin, I think, must work in the same way.

But while it is important to emphasize the formal consistency of his work, one should not thereby downgrade too much the human side. It seems probable that when, at a crucial stage in his career, Jacklin foresook geometrical abstraction and returned to figurative work, a vital reason was that he felt a need to come back in a more obvious way to the contemplation of humanity. In some of his later work the humans are present, admittedly, mainly as elements in a pattern, ants far away beneath the spectator's feet. Against this,

it has to be said also that some of his most intense inventions before his move to New York were variations on a human theme that might have come from some claustrophobic drama by Harold Pinter: the mysterious, uncomfortable, sometimes menacing relations of two people or a person and an object within the shadowy limits of a room.

On his first arrival in New York he responded immediately to the varied and sometimes bizarre types who worked in the meat-packers below his studio, clustered around Washington Square, or advertised their wares on 42nd Street. The patterns are there, but are given extra urgency and intensity by the human situations, of confrontation or sensuous repose, in which they are clothed. The repose is less frequent than the confrontation, since that is the way of the modern city but it does still exist. When he decided to spend time in Hong Kong in 1993, it was inevitable that he should be drawn to the sheer masses of people who crowd the streets and public buildings, swarm along the raised walkways or ride the Mass Transit. But it is not surprising either that he should be drawn as well to the peace and harmony of the little urban temples where one or two worshippers find comfort in the candle-lit glow of tradition.

The choice of Hong Kong for his latest painting-site was, if not inevitable, at least very consistent with his earlier transplanting to New York. Hong Kong resembles New York in its clustering high-rises, the bustle, colour and variety of its street life. No place for an old-fashioned English pantheist, evidently, but ideal for anyone whose adrenalin is set racing by the urban scene in all its hurly-burly and complexity. What Jacklin has found in Hong Kong is, at the very least, New York with added local colour. But if that were all that interested him as a painter, he could have found much of it in New York's Chinatown without ever setting foot outside Manhattan. Local colour as such is not to be despised, but if it is really to mean anything it has to arise naturally from a different life-style, a different ethnic mix, and it is those rather than the superficially picturesque which attract the true artist.

Sure enough, in these Hong Kong-inspired works, Jacklin goes directly to the roots of the Hong Kong experience. They are at once incredibly cosmopolitan and intensely specific. From the start, Jacklin has been struck by both the similarities and the dissimilarities of what he sees in Hong Kong to what he has seen elsewhere.

At a glance, the chasms of cement glimpsed from the balcony of the China Club are not so different from, say, Manhattan seen from the World Trade Center; the highrises of Central seen from Kowloon are like enough to the highrises of New York illuminated by the evening sun from across the Hudson River. And yet there is a difference. The light is different. The boats in the harbour are different. And the patterns of people are different. When the artist moves closer in, this is even more apparent. Naturally the artist who found such fascination in the chess players of Central Park would be drawn to the chess players of Victoria Park also. But whereas the New York paintings are studies in monumental immobility, the Hong Kong paintings are full of restless

movement: bystanders in Hong Kong do not stop and stare, they swarm and seethe.

What Jacklin has plugged into above all in Hong Kong is the burgeoning energy of the place. The grander architectural designs of his pictures remain, but within them everything is in a state of flux. Life vibrates in them, tensions crackle, people and buildings blur into one another, eddy, and re-form. It is the familiar world of Jacklin galvanised by some unpredictable new force. As T.S.Eliot says in *The Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

-John Russell Taylor (1995)

In the 1980s, when most painters are involved with tapping a free-flow of fantasy images, with juggling the multiple facts and fictions of art reproductions and photography, or with maintaining the ivory-tower purities of abstraction, it is something of a jolt to recall that one of the weightiest pressures on the mid-nineteenth century origins of modern painting was a new urban reality. The city then in question was Paris, from the 1860s to the 1880s, and the artists involved in these fresh explorations ranged from Manet, Monet, and Renoir to Degas, Caillebotte, and Seurat. All of them, in different and personal ways, restructured their art to conform to their private vision of the strange new pulsations, both regular and offbeat, that emanated from the modern city, while keeping their eyes attuned to the exciting new facts of a crowded, mechanized world that we can still easily recognize today, on both sides of the Atlantic. Given the reflex that makes most artists continue to flock to urban centres, where they collide constantly with an infinite variety of real art and real life, it is, come to think of it, most peculiar that so few artists today are concerned with the nitty-gritty truths of that urban experience which gave the masters of Impressionism so many challenges of style and subject.

Looked at from this angle, Jacklin's paintings are at once remote and familiar: remote, that is, from most artists' preoccupations of the moment, but familiar in terms of longer-lived dynasties of modern art that seek out a personal confrontation with street life, with cafes, with grand boulevards, with public parks, with buses and railroad stations, with riverside factory views - in short, with what most of us city-dwellers live with the instant we cross our thresholds. Jacklin's urban impulses are both aesthetic and reportorial; and as an Englishman now residing for long periods in New York, both these responses have been rejuvenated by what Europeans, at least, have usually considered the most archetypal of modern cities. As for aesthetic matters, New York, of all great metropolises, surely imposes, from surface to skeleton, the most relentless infinity of gridiron patterns, an abstract scaffolding that Mondrian himself echoed vibrantly in the masterpieces he executed in New

York during what turned out to be the last four years of his life. In Jacklin's case, that insistent checker-board structure had already been deeply ingrained in his art through his earlier abstract work which so often used these repetitive, criss-crossing patterns as a system of ideal geometric order; but in New York, these cerebral ground plans could be fleshed out with the pervasive realities of the urban and architectural parallels and perpendiculars that measure and regiment all pedestrian movement. As for reportorial matters, Jacklin, with the fresh eye more familiar to the visitor than to the native, has seen fit, as so few New York artists do, to document passionately and scrupulously the most mundane facts of human order and chaos as they are molded into the city's straitjacketing, right-angled environment. On this wave-length, Jacklin has the eye and spirit of a journalist, and perhaps a foreign one, at that. For what New York artist would ever have imagined that a local police precinct, the sleaziest porno parlors of Time Square, or the depressing, derelict community of human flotsam and jetsam found nightly in Grand Central Station's waiting room could possibly be the subject of ambitious painting that resonates backwards into the loftiest modern traditions? One is reminded of the way that Degas, visiting New Orleans briefly in 1872-73, selected, as no local painter would have dreamed of doing, an oblique glimpse of the cotton market, where the assembly of individualized portraits and clothing, the routine dialogue of inertia and activity among business men all seemed for a French visitor to be fresh, exotic material from which to make an unprecedented work of art.

For both native New Yorkers and probably outsiders, too, Jacklin's choice of subject comes as a surprise. In general, he is drawn to scenes that involve an almost ceremonial order, which may range from the regimented rings and display rituals of a dog show in Madison Square Garden (where poodles, their masters, and their judges are distributed with a precision worthy of the Rockettes) to the unanticipated and melancholy disclosure, inside a church, of a stranger's funeral, where the living and the dead are all regulated within the modular, axial beat of coffin and altar, pew and cross. Even within Frank's, the noisy, bustling restaurant near Jacklin's West 14th Street studio where salesmen in the meat-packing industry lunch and trade together, a strangely sacramental solemnity restrains these business men, who in real life would be shouting, eating, drinking, smoking and trading all at once. As Jacklin recreates them from life sketches drawn in his neighbourhood restaurant, they seem transported to some mythical table-setting, as if the Supper at Emmaus or Cezanne's card players were casting their long and grave shadows over a Zolaesque slice of the New York meat industry.

Typically, we sense throughout Jacklin's work the labour and the honesty of the most acutely direct, almost sociological observation, a point substantiated by the many preparatory drawings made on the spot in such unartistic haunts as police stations and sleazy Times Square back rooms at all odd hours of the night and early morning when most sensible people, especially working artists, would never think of gathering source material for their work. But these urban data, which can range from anonymous portraits of the rowdiest or most depressed of city dwellers to the fragmented verbal records of signs (FILMS, EXIT, PRIVATE BOOTHS) that recall the Cubist fascination with the

barrage of printed words in the Parisian cafe world, are invariably disciplined by an overriding aesthetic order that transcends these particulars of time and place, of clothing and faces. It is telling that in Jacklin's gloomy view of a waiting room at Grand Central Station as it makes its nightly transition from commuter bustle to hostel for the homeless, the imposing round clock that conventionally symbolizes the ongoing, racing pulse of rail - roadstation activity reads 9:00. 8:42 or 9:11 would have interfered with Jacklin's world of abstract generalization, so that here, even a public time-piece is forced to comply, in both minute and hour hand, with the 90 - degree spatial clarity Jacklin has imposed, like a perspective net, on this potentially slovenly, loose - jointed composite of urban misery. Similarly, when a crowd of anonymous New Yorkers of the widest ethnic range (including Jamaicans with dreadlocks) congregate in Washington Square around a tight cluster of chess players, everything clicks into place with checker -board regularity, a metaphor that becomes literal in the red-and- black-squared pattern of the shirt worn by the bearded stroller at the left.

As a still more unanticipated departure from the initial data so carefully culled by Jacklin when he dons his documentary hat, his paintings, we realize, can take on not only the unreality of ideal geometry, but another kind of remote, even phantom presence. The constant shifting between sharp and soft focus, while partly corresponding to the continually roving view of the active pedestrian, who alternates rapidly between noticing some things and blurring away others, also gives an oddly veiled, otherworldly ambience to these earthbound scenes, as if they were witnessed through a hazy scrim of memory and might, in fact, be more fiction than fact. This uncanny double -take becomes even more disquieting when Jacklin repeats, as he often does, the same figures in what is assumed to be a unique field of snapshot vision. In Incident on 42nd St. for example, the same cast of characters - the hooker in white, the policeman on his horse - seem to pass before our eyes not once, but twice, or even again and again, transporting a prosaic street scene to the poetic fringe of dream or hallucination. The distant ghost of Seurat, often conjured up in discussions of Jacklin's art, is relevant here; for in his work, too, social documentation of Paris at a particular time and place first moves to the eternal, immutable order of an abstract Garden of Eden and then, more stealthily, to a realm of fantasy, where modular figures, against all common sense, are endlessly repeated in imaginary spaces.

Even Jacklin's distant urban views share this mix of on -the-spot truth and unreal reverie. Such is the case in his pair of Hudson River vistas that, from the highest window, sweep us from the long projection of a Manhattan pier far across the water to the ugly utilitarian skyline of New Jersey. These views of urban geometry versus river, light, and cloudy sky might have ended in a tidy, prosaic pattern, but they unexpectedly seethe with an almost apocalyptic energy. Blurred and agitated crowds of Lilliputian urbanites seem imprisoned on the pier's strict rectangle as nature's cosmic luminosity threatens to dissolve the manmade order on earth below. Yet the pairing of these two views also relocates us not in the domain of Romantic drama but of a Monet - like empiricism, in which the luminary and atmospheric changes of different moments of the day, from noon to dusk, are intensely documented.

And lest it be thought that Jacklin can cast his spell only with the help of New York's thrilling mix of the sublime and the gritty, there is strong evidence here that he can transform London as well into this vibrant fusion of fact and fantasy. So it is with the startlingly lofty views of Regent Street, seen in a preparatory drawing and two paintings from the kind of perch few artists, not to mention pedestrians, would choose to settle on for more than seconds. Having secured this place on a balcony at Austin Reed, beside a flagpole that cuts across this sweeping urban vista, Jacklin then proceeded to record these eagle's nest views of the elegant urban arc that John Nash carved from Piccadilly to Oxford Circus. It is the kind of upper-storey city view that recalls, say, Monet's ambition to capture the *perpetuum mobile* of pedestrians and their transport milling about the grand new boulevards of modern Paris; but here, characteristically, Jacklin has injected into this ordered urban Utopia a sense of uncontrollable drama and mystery that, by strange coincidence, even he could not have predicted. For these views document, with the most regular streaks of torrential rain, the gathering storm that darkened over London on 15 October 1987, just hours before the hurricane which, that very night, would devastate so much of Southern England. In an ironically objective way, these views remind one of that old Romantic lesson about nature's capacity to threaten, at any moment, the regular structure of art and of our manmade environments. And in this, they reverberate within Jacklin's New York views, where, in more sociological terms, we sense, within the insistent grids, the volcanic throb of crowds who seem at once to be shepherded by and to be rebelling against the modern city. Momentarily restrained by the awesome domination of axial rhythms, the strongest pulses of human passion keep beating in these works.

Robert Rosenblum  
New York, March 1988  
Marlborough, London catalogue

## Introduction

Recent Work: New York Paintings, Pastels and Drawings  
Marlborough Gallery, New York, 1987

by John Russell Taylor

A number of prominent pictures in each show Bill Jacklin has had since he forsook abstraction in 1976 might well give colour to the idea that he is a happy hedonist. And indeed, what is wrong with that? No one has complained -- or not too much -- that Matisse was throughout his life unaffectedly delighted with the shapes and textures, and above all the colours, of the world around him, and hardly aimed in his painting at a deeper meaning than that; he would, no doubt have felt that such was the deepest meaning painting could be expected to bear. In any case, does not that seem logical as a development from abstraction, of a minimal variety! From the cool, zen elegance of Jacklin's abstract works to the sensuous repose of his later nudes and still-lives does not seem like so big a jump.

And yet...Not that there ought to be a problem in such a simple diagnosis; but there is. More and more the feeling creeps up on one that, though Jacklin appears to be painting the rose, he always has a haunting awareness that deep inside it is the invisible worm. Some of Jacklin's paintings are truly comfortable. But not many. Even when he was living and working primarily in Chelsea, there was usually a vague sense of unease underlying the work. Not only in the pictures of old people in hospitals (Jacklin's own mother and father, as it happens), but very distinctly in the series of studio pictures, the most indicative of which is called *Man and Monster*, and the later series of pictures of people in a room, particularly a woman in a chair, about to rise from it, or risen and lurching (menacingly?) forward. This latter group always suggests the plays of Harold Pinter to me -- not because of an intention (as far as I know) on Jacklin's part to illustrate, but simply because the atmosphere created between people by something that lies unspoken, the undefined sense of menace, are so extraordinarily akin to Pinter's theatre.

By talking of the moment when Jacklin "forsook" abstraction, inevitably one makes it sound as though he has somehow been politically involved in the latest round of the "war" between abstraction and representation. To a certain extent he has, willy-nilly: though in the sober British art scene it is hardly likely that he would find, as Arikha did in Paris in similar circumstances, irate abstractionists spitting at him in the street, there have certainly been a few cold shoulders from the new middle-aged Establishment, who mostly got to their present eminence by way of movements fashionable in the Seventies like Conceptualism and Minimalism. In consequence, it is important to remember that Jacklin was not born a minimalist: indeed, looking at some of his prints of the early Sixties, one is struck by the very clear continuity between them and the latest work.

In fact, he was a rigorous minimalist for only about seven years, the result, it seems, of an imperative need at a certain point to explore more intensely the architecture which underlies all his work, early and recent. In the classic Mondrian fashion, images were gradually denuded of their connotation, until only the bare skeleton survived, and then even that was bleached and blanched almost out of existence. But that, it now seems, was only a period of holding breath, until relaxation was achieved and a whole world of shapes and colours could come flooding back. If, in the earliest of the new figurative canvases, Jacklin seems to revel in colour for the sake of colour, who shall blame him for thus celebrating the end of his self-denying ordinance?

He certainly still appreciates colour, but not just for its own sake. The rich reds and yellows and greens of the still lifes gradually take on an added complexity, a smoky, smouldering quality which also implies that something not quite so palatable may be lurking in the shadows, behind the easel, in the corner, masked by the potted plants. Whether this betokens some kind of existential discomfort in the artist one would hesitate to guess -- and in any case he would probably feel no more qualified to answer than anyone else. (Pinter also disclaims symbolic intention and refuses to pose as an authority on his own psyche.) But Jacklin's visits to New York and, more recently, his

year-or-so's residence there has certainly brought something new and exciting to the surface in his work.

The first New York-inspired pictures were a series suggested by some fascinated/repulsed visits to Forty-Second Street peep-shows. When Jacklin moved his painting operations to New York he took with him a couple of unfinished canvases, to work on while getting acclimatized, but found that was quite impossible, as they seemed to belong to a different world. Instead, he took to painting what he saw around him, in his usual fashion of making a lot of sketches and studies from life, then elaborating the finished pictures at leisure in his studio. It was no doubt partly by chance that his studio happened to be right above the meat packers towards the westward end of Fourteenth Street. But the bizarre images there on offer at once seized his imagination, and led to a series, some from high above, some from close in, of men and carcasses -- and sometimes, hardly less bizarre, the packers eating and drinking in the local cafe.

These first images have the sharp excitement one often encounters when an artist suddenly finds himself reacting to an unfamiliar environment: he somehow re-invests it with a sense of wonder which locals have lost from long habitude. The same implies equally to the later groups of New York paintings. There are several extraordinary pictures based on a march along Sixth Avenue glimpsed from the window of Jacklin's first New York apartment: the small, ant-like figures bombarded by sunlight, making their way, as it appears by a curious trick of perspective, up and over a great bulge in the earth, as though part of some contemporary equivalent to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. There are pictures of the Fourth of July celebrations in 1986, the year of the Statue of Liberty celebrations, as experienced from a balcony high above the Hudson -- again, the superficial jubilation undercut by the slightly threatening glare of the lights on a hot summer night.

And, perhaps most remarkable of all, there are the pictures inspired by Washington Square, seen in one sequence by night, and in the other wrapped in the intense shade of a summer afternoon under the trees, where the chess-players go intensely about their business, watched with no less intensity by a heterogeneous group of onlookers. These last in particular give a clear indication of where Jacklin is coming from, or, more precisely, where he fits in. There is in the monumental immobility of these large figures, and the way they are disposed about the pictorial space, more than a hint of Seurat and *La Grande Jatte*. Movement in Jacklin's paintings always seems to be frozen or implicit, rather as though he sought -- like Seurat -- to capture and preserve for ever the fleeting moment in the amber of memory.

In the principal triptych of this series movement is even suggested by the duplication of some peripheral figures, as though by some sort of stop-motion photography. But that only emphasizes the drowsy stillness of the scene. In his work, at least, Jacklin has reached a position of equipoise. But it seems unlikely that he, or we, will have too much time to get used to it before his demon drives him on to some fresh and probably disturbing experience, and



brings us some finely challenging, richly satisfying expression of it from this most painterly of today's painters. The art, as it always should, carries us further than we mean to go, and leaves us loving the experience, ready for more.