

HOWARD HODGKIN: AS GOOD TODAY AS HE'S EVER BEEN?

“Howard Hodgkin’s new paintings are a mess. At least, I thought so the first time I saw them. Crude, slapped-on swathes of blue and green, bare patches of wood underneath, haphazard strokes - where was the balance and delicacy of structure, the dance of vibrantly contrasting colours that glowed on the walls at his 1997 Hayward retrospective?” These are the opening remarks of Jonathan Jones in an article that appeared in ‘The Times’ on Thursday 11 November 1999, the day before Howard Hodgkin’s current retrospective opened at the Anthony d’Offay gallery in London. He went on to say “This may be his best work, but some people will say it is his worst”.

I am going to argue the case that the work in Hodgkin’s current show is as good, if not better than it was at his Hayward retrospective: even that he may well go on to achieve even higher praise.

To do this I am going to compare the two exhibitions, concentrating on the main areas which Jonathan Jones criticised: namely Hodgkin’s colour sense or palette, his technique and the overall structure of his paintings.

What is good about the d’Offay exhibition?

I will begin with my own personal view. There is a large painting (165.1 x 196.9) cm that hangs in a stunning

position facing you as you enter the second room, called “Night and Day 1997-99”.

Its thick, broad frame quickly sweeps you up and holds you in its power: a light, bright green and a warm yellow intermingle around the frame and border, behind them cadmium red, turning to orange and yellow on the right, balanced by a greyish swirl of colour on the left. The 'piece de resistance' perhaps in the centre: a broad band of ultramarine sweeps upwards, separating the two halves of the painting.

(i) Colour

Hodgkin's colours are predominantly the primaries - plus green. The red is partially hidden and yet so intense - it can't help but make us think of the setting sun (particularly given the title), blood and fire, but also the passionate, and perhaps sexual side of our nature - the side that is hidden from all but our closest relationships. The huge impact of the red hue is of course emphasized by its relationship with its complementary green - the warmest pair of complementaries. Obviously the blue symbolizes and represents 'night' to some extent, and appears in front of the red, yet behind the green, the cloak of darkness just beginning to hide the sun from our eyes, and from what could be thought of as the green of nature in front of it pictorially.

specific subjects such as portraits of friends, lovers, and places. I will conclude with two

pieces of work which not only 'talk to us now',
but which, perhaps, show us something of the painter's mind, and the direction that he is
heading in: the emotional, formal and intellectual concerns which have got him to
this point, now, in his late sixties.

To play devil's advocate for a moment, I am going to begin with one of the larger works from his current exhibition,

'Evening Sea' 1998: the one which Jonathan Jones may very well have been thinking of when he wrote "...crude, slapped-on swathes of blue and green, bare patches of wood underneath, haphazard strokes.." Painted on an old dining-room table, measuring 175.9 x 260.4cm at its longest and widest, a huge size for Hodgkin, it is sited on its own in the furthest ground-floor room, and to me is a massive disappointment. The largely uniform brushwork leads the eye constantly to and fro across from one end of the table to the other, across the sea if you like - after all this painting is one of the few to have a genuinely

representational title - but with no excitement, nothing particular to say about his vision of what is presumably the sea near to his studio in Pourville. The blues of the central mention *'Home' and 'In the blue room'*.

portion afford no hidden depths, no contrast of brighter hues. Maybe the colour of the sea

is seen as if through a porthole window - rushing past, with no horizon definitely in sight perhaps suggested by the lightening of the blue. The brushstrokes are largely similar -

broken up slightly by the green border - maybe the green grasses by the coast. The colours are analogous and the only slight drama is created by the vertical stripe of warm yellow on the right-hand side. In his interview in "Transcripts", Hodgkin admits that oval shapes are difficult in terms of dynamics because of their predominant direction, which has

"an even stronger identity than a disc, a circle, or a square".(p15). He goes on to say that "the problem of large scale has, to me, become paramount"(p24): he has experimented

with larger sizes increasingly, and says that “You can put more into a larger version ...in the big picturesthere is room for space and light. And much more of the subject”.p23

I would argue that this painting is a bad example of these possibilities, and shall be looking at “Night and Day” and “Memories” to show some examples of his work which use these effects to good advantage.

In 1988-91 Hodgkin painted ‘Home’(*compare with other works in the past*)

One of the most striking things about Hodgkin’s work is the balance he manages to create between representation and abstraction. As Robert Hughes says in “The Shock of The New”, “(Hodgkin’s work) cannot readily be classified as either abstract or figurative, though it is subtly autobiographical. In the 1960s, he painted ‘Dancing’, where “he reconciles figure and abstraction”. P13 HH. He made the decision early on in his career to work with a mixed formal language, never completely yielding to either pole. In ‘Evening Sea’ we see him obviously leaning closer to the ‘representational’ side, and I think that this explains in part, why the painting is much less successful than most, in my opinion.

There is no real attempt to create a particular moment or emotion, which is strange, for he describes himself as “a representational painter, but not a painter of appearances ... (painting) representational pictures of emotional situations”, nor does the colour excite or inform us of any underlying concerns. On the contrary, ‘Bombay Sunset’ 1972-73 manages to combine the literal hot, analogous colours of India with an abstract design which boldly conveys the claustrophobia of heat and humidity.

So where does Hodgkin fit in, for example, with the Abstract Expressionists? He is obviously an 'expressionist' painter with a small 'e': his gestural approach and obvious mark-making show to be such, and also he is concerned with emotions, or emotionally-charged meanings. He is not, however, to be confused with the early Expressionists, European artists who showed that "abstract compositions could serve as effectively as subject pictures". (P30 expressionism in 'Concepts'), where "the expressive power of colours and shapes, of brushstrokes and texture, of size and scale (were) shown to be sufficient". (p30 as above). Among the New York-based Abstract Expressionists working between the wars, de Kooning, for example, stressed the importance of spontaneity and of 'gestural' painting, Rothko, a leading figure in the movement, whose "formless canvases" are said to "evoke the true spirit of the movement - an ultimate response to the unattainable mysteries of the human psyche". (The Art Book).

I would now like to look at one of the works in the current exhibition which`

I talked earlier about the representation of depth (or lack of it) in 'Evening Sea'. Hodgkin painted 'After Degas' in 1993 and it has huge depth. How does he create this? The frame is much more separate from the picture than usual. The green, almost monumental structure appears to be quite far back in the picture plane, and this effect is emphasized by the blue of the background - which clearly reads as 'blue sky'.

Hodgkin builds up his paintings often over a period of several years, and during this time layers and layers of paint are laid onto the wooden panels, usually leaving spaces where previous layers are allowed to show through. 'Memories' 1997-99 is a good example of this. (*colours and how they work*)

What of the frame itself? In 'Evening Sky' the edge or border of the table is separated by a narrow join, but is emphasized by the use of the bright green. Here in 'After Degas', we

have seen how a frame can be used in the more traditional way - as something separate from the picture, but providing a way of looking at it.

“The End of the Day” 1999. A title that can be read in a number of different ways. Is it as it sounds - a depiction of a particular time of day, or is it ‘the end of the artist’s day?

Maybe he is feeling more vulnerable now “..he admits that he’s getting older and feels a need to do things.” Jonathan Jones. The frame is “swathed in an oily black” JJ which “creeps in over the painting”, gradually obscuring light and colour and life”.JJ. Hang on a minute, what about the intense, vibrating colour relationships inside this frame. There is a strong feeling of ‘push and pull’: a hedonistic, optimistic centre waiting to burst out. The dark band is pushing in, but which will win? Perhaps it is just the end of one day, when gloomy thoughts were uppermost in the artist’s mind, and who know’s, tomorrow will bring another bright masterpiece. Here the frame is used pictorially to set off the loudest of colours - what better way than to place them against black - It is used in a similar way in ‘Comeback Dull Care’

And now to come to a painting that seems to me to be the epitome of Hodgkin’s continuing genius: “Night and Day” 1997-99. It hangs in a stunning position facing you as you enter the second room. Its thick, broad frame quickly sweeps you up in holds you in its power:(*comments on size from Biennale interview*) light green and warm yellow around the frame and border, cadmium red behind, astoundingly set off by ultramarine. Hodgkin favours a limited palette, often using varieties of the primaries, and therefore the hues are rich in intensity and brightness. He

knows just how much of each to set against the next. Hodgkin was much influenced by the Fauves - and of course Matisse. (*add notes on these two influences*). He comes from the French tradition much more than the English tradition of painting. By this I mean that he is not afraid to use colours which shout. They are exciting and innovative colour combinations. They are passionate, powerful, controlled.

The passion in 'Night and Day' can be seen in other paintings at this exhibition, such as 'Learning about Russian Music' 1999, (*add more*): indeed his own physically passionate nature is much more overt than it has been in the past. 'Good Morning' has a slightly curved erect shape, which is decidedly sexual; 'Keepsake' can easily be read as a sexual orifice, and these in turn refer back to 'Lovers', in which the encounter is hinted at (*other sexual picts.*)

(*comments about life and art from older Anthony d'Offay exhibition catalogue and large HH book*). Hodgkin has talked about Art as a replacement for language and is very unkeen to talk about his work. Perhaps the fact that his work becomes at times more like a personal visual diary is too embarrassing - or just too intrusive on his private self. I don't consider 'Keepsake' to be a good example of his work - it seems to be largely representational and more like a private love letter than a great work of art that relates to everyone - but it shows how close he gets at times to mingling his private life and his public life as an artist. It is also a token of his total honesty in his work - it is his own personal expression.

It seems to be a good point to look further into the depiction of psychological space in the

paintings. To go back in time almost to Hodgkin's very first painting (*"name ist one of all - in large HH book"*) "Name of First" deals with (*see notes on HH Book- refers to it*)

There is an obvious retrospective flavour to 'Memories', but not a specific memory. It is presumably a broad sweep across the years; it conjures up a mood. The marks read like a dictionary of what he has used over the years: (*describe brushstrokes etc.*) The title brings to mind the earliest surviving picture 'Memoirs' 1949: two figures in an interior, painted from memory. There is a reclining woman, with her head not visible and a seated man. We feel a sense of watching something that we perhaps shouldn't be: a prurience or voyeuristic stance, something that Hodgkin does again in ?? He seems to be almost saying that he has as it were come round again to that point that he started out from. Figures frequently appear in his work, but with a increasingly abstract base over the years. Friends often - Hodgkin's overriding preoccupation with recording what he called 'the emotion or feeling of an encounter' (*find quote*) He makes no sketches or studies, except with his imagination - often storing the images away for years before attempting to represent them in paint. We are confronted by the emotional space of that particular moment - how it fits into the artist's psyche and sense of himself and his life, and also the space of time since the actual event and the way that the representations have been built up. Interior space as a formal concern began as claustrophobic 'Memoirs' and continued to realistically controlled 'Grantchester Road', gradually turning into the light emanating from the colours themselves (*see 'light and colour' from colour and culture*)

Conclusion.

the emotional, formal and intellectual concerns which have got him to this point, now, in his late sixties.

PLAN

INTRO.

'BAD PAINTING' "Evening Sea"

SIZE - compare with "Memories"

how colour relates to size. - see Maria's bk.

(MEMORY)

COLOUR - analogous

'Home', 'In the blue room'.

REPRESENTATION v. ABSTRACTION

'114 Sinclair Road'. How does he use colour? Like Abstract Expressionists, or Realists? (some of each). 'Shock of New' and 'C.of Colour'.p253.
Expressionist.

SPACE AND DEPTH - "Grantchester Road", and history of his work

pictorial space, and depth, interior/exterior space and history of it.

'After Degas' 'Memories' - psychological space (maybe here or with 'layering' below).

USE OF WOOD

‘OTHER PAINTINGS’

SUBJECT MATTER AND TITLES

Memories - intro. Specific emotion, moment, person, lover

PORTRAITS - FRIENDS

Sachs. (both) p30 HH

‘Kathy at Heuze’, ‘Kathy at the Ritz’.

PORTRAITS - EROTIC

voyeurism. ‘Lovers’. ‘Memoirs’. (relates to ‘Memories’.)

‘Keepsake’, ‘Good morning’, ‘Once more with feeling’.

‘D.H. in Hollywood’.

PLACES - ‘Theatre’

‘Snapshot’, ‘Pourville’.

PLACES - ‘India’

way colour is used. See particularly ‘actualites’

End with memories - nostalgia.

‘Once in Kashmir’, ‘Caeralla’ (India)

‘Bombay Sunset’. ‘Come back Dull Care’.

'GOOD PAINTING' - "Night and Day"

COLOUR - OWN

green - grandmother.

'A leap in the dark', 'In the blue room'

'Fisherman's cove'.(astounding colour).

COLOUR - MATISSE

originally from N.Y.visit

'Pourville' - relates to Matisse at Collioure 'Open Window'

(Itten bk.) links with 'Piano lesson' - see newspaper article.

'After Matisse'

COLOUR - FAUVES

LAYERING - own techniques

brush techs./splodging/pattern/dynamics

'When did we go to Morocco', 'In Rutland Gate', 'Chez Stamos'.

FRENCH TRADITION v.ENGLISH

conflict. Tradition.

FRAME - PHYSICAL

dark border/ Bright, part of ptg.

'Patrick Caulfield in Italy', and 'Patrick in Italy'.

FRAME - PSYCHOLOGICAL

MODERNIST/POSTMODERNIST/OUTSIDER

influence of Hayward exhib.on HH

picture surface.

HANGING

AUDIENCE

Language v.visual

END OF WORK - especially 'End of Day'. 'Come back Dull Care'

relationship with career - end? Vagueness of some titles.

Quote p32 mid. 'at his boldest, as well as most vulnerable'. (?1999 exhib.cat.)

Absence of colour - darkness - 'Sunset', 'Dark Mirror'.

END ON UPBEAT NOTE - BRING MAIN POINTS TOGETHER FROM 'END

OF DAY'.

COLOUR SYMBOLISM or not

quote from Maria's book, mention very dark pics.

CONCLUSION

(Colour History has not been included - use bits in different sections).

[First of all, let's think about the colours he chooses. Hodgkin painted 'After Matisse' in 1995-99. It is one of a sequence of occasional homage paintings (such as 'After Corot', 'Morandi', 'After Degas') Strangely the palette he chooses is not that of Matisse, with whom we are much more likely to associate red (such as in 'Red Studio' 1911) or blue ('Blue Window 1912 or 1913). Therefore he must be choosing colours that are more concerned with the mood of Matisse's work - colour as an equivalent of attitude. It is an expression of the way that Hodgkin uses colour as capturing a feeling or emotion, rather than in any literal sense. This is linked with memory, and will be discussed later on. To look back again at the colours in 'Evening Sea': they are harmonious, analogous and cool, and Hodgkin feels no need to set them off with something complimentary or warmer.]

