Colin Watson in conversation with Dickon Hall

**You are just back from a visit to London to see a Poussin exhibition. Would you like to say something about the importance of seeing great art in the flesh and how it feeds back into your work?**

I think it’s important when you’re working with a visual language to have some kind of understanding of that language and how things can be communicated. Seeing pictures in reproduction can only give you so much; you need to see scale, you need to see the subtleties of colour relationships, you need to see the surface and you need to experience the picture. Reproductions, no matter how good they are, can only go so far. You mentioned the exhibition of paintings by Poussin, and it was wonderful to see how he was able to meet the challenges of each painting, how he solved the various problems. Seeing these helps me to go back to the studio and find solutions to my own problems within picture-making. There is also an important thing to remember about looking at a picture, that it is both an image and a painting. The image conveys information that can be de-coded and you can do that quite easily with a reproduction, but when you are in front of a picture it works on your senses; painting works through your emotions and your whole being. You’re not preoccupied with working out or deciphering the meaning from the image, but rather you are experiencing the painting and that can only be done by standing in front of a picture. Scale, colour, tonality, surface, all of that cannot be reproduced and can only really be experienced by being present with the picture.

**Your comments on scale are interesting; I think that in this exhibition there is one very large painting and the other paintings are on more of a medium scale. Presumably that idea of the image being appropriate to the scale of the painting becomes important, that you need an image where the various elements are communicated and the emotion is communicated in a more limited space, so the elements of the painting are constructed around that.**

Yes, each idea demands its own way forward, so an idea will suggest a scale. Each painting begins with an idea which is then worked out in drawings, and it’s immediately clear at that stage what the dimensions should be. Obviously bigger pictures are more complex and allow for more complexity between the figures and the setting; smaller pictures are more intimate and demand a more intimate approach. Each subject suggests the scale to be realised, and in the doing this is either confirmed or altered. Ultimately the painting itself dictates the way forward.

**It almost feels like a distillation, a discipline as you grow as a painter, a real consciousness of exactly how you can achieve what you want to achieve.  The expression becomes more complete within a smaller canvas as you refine symbolism and structure, with no sacrifice of scale or ambition.**

Exactly, and it’s about intensity as well. Some of the subjects that are on a smaller scale, because of the size, become more intense and you are drawn in, so scale is always important to a picture.

**And when you’re talking about experience, it always strikes me your paintings are constructed in a very intellectual manner, and demonstrate a great awareness of other artists and an understanding of the reason why things are done and why these things are effective in paintings. But these are also paintings that have a very strong emotional element, a very strong emotional impact, and you manage to achieve an extraordinary balance between something that is quite beautiful yet unsettling, with the suggestion that there are elements that we cannot control in life, that there are moments of implied beauty and perfection but overlaid with great emotional complexity.**

Absolutely, I think the paintings I’ve been doing in recent years are about transition and change. It’s not spelt out, they’re not narrative pictures in that sense, but rather they are about representing an atmosphere, an atmosphere in which things have the potential to be transformed or that persuades us that an auspicious event is about to take place or is being played out. I try to construct the paintings in such a way that the figures and the landscape together take on a significance that is beyond the everyday. Every element in the picture hopefully combines to create this atmosphere. Sometimes this mood can contain things that are unsettling, but there are always elements that are hopeful,  it’s really left open. Each person will come to the paintings with their own experiences and will be affected, or not,  according to these experiences.

**It always seems that in your paintings people are actually signifiers; you’ve always used people you know as models, and certain sitters are recognisable, but they become more than that.**

Yes, they’re never portraits. I’ve always used family and friends, but I don’t set out to depict or illuminate consciously any aspects of their lives, the figures become more symbolic, more universal. That’s the difference really, they don’t represent individual people and are not tied to any particular time or place, they’re quite ambiguous.

**Do you find that the universality of the image or the painting is something that people find difficult because people seem more comfortable today with a definite narrative, or need to understand something specific, whereas you’ve created universal types and a universal landscape, with the two often integrated together?**

Narrative is suggested, but the paintings should remain mysterious and I think to read these paintings purely in narrative terms is to misread them. That the figures and landscapes are universal types is probably a lot to do with how the paintings have been constructed. It’s going back to the idea that pictures should work on your senses first of all. So, although there are figures within definite settings and the paintings represent tangible things, the pictures are constructed abstractly, with pictorial elements, the interactions of shapes and lines with one another, the distribution of colour and, above all, in the composition, and so any meaning is more likely to be communicated by pictorial means rather than by narrative means.

**And I suppose the symbolic meaning of what you are painting is more important than the literal or specific, so that water takes on a greater symbolic meaning than a specific sea or river, or a tree or a building can take on a specific symbolic meaning that is important to you? I think what is often missed is that the emotional impact of that is greater than we understand, that people expect to have an emotional impact from the narrative rather than from all the things that you are  building up that they are perhaps not even conscious of.**

When I first looked at great paintings in the flesh, when I was in my teens visiting the Louvre and the National Gallery, there was a connection with certain paintings that I didn’t quite understand and It was clear that it wasn’t anything to do with the content or any narrative qualities, but there was something that set aside great pictures from the others. Take for instance Duccio’s *Annunciation* in the National Gallery, there are endless versions of Annunciations by lesser artists, but Duccio’s rises above most, not because of the content but because of the arrangement of the pictorial elements. So, there is something to do with the composition, the shapes, the colours, the exaggerations, the nuances that take it to another level. Other artists who dealt with the same theme but without the same understanding of the abstract qualities of painting, who were more interested in realism or narrative, were less successful in communicating the more profound aspects of the subject.

**It’s interesting, that sense of you developing as an artist. People might see development as change, but you have been working on a search for the same thing.**

I think so. Rather than going broadly, you’re going deep. You’re trying to penetrate to the centre, rather than exploring the circumference, and it’s not a matter of repetition but of trying to penetrate deeper, of realising more fully the subjects.

**And I suppose different aspects come through. Going back twenty years your work was mostly based around figures in interiors and, to me, very formal arrangements of the figure or figures, with particular symbolic meanings within those and then, partly through beginning to use casein tempera, colour became such an important emotional and symbolic element, as it still is, like in Poussin. Increasingly then the landscape you are using in these paintings has become a more important element and clearly has a lot of associations and symbolic meanings, so it seems to me that at different times certain ideas become more effective or appropriate for your work. Even going back ten years when your figures were highly symbolic and you weren’t really working from the model so much, there is a sense of a journey all the time. There isn’t a change in terms of your ambitions changing, it’s just the particular aspect you’re looking at, at that moment, of this great truth.**

Yes, it’s trying to find out the best way to represent ideas and interests at each particular time. Twenty years ago, I couldn’t work out a way of successfully combining figures within the landscape consistently, so I needed to distil things within interiors and allow the figure to become symbolic there. Once I was able to grasp how it might be possible to make the figures symbolic, I then worked on how I could make a landscape go beyond just being topographical. Although my aims were the same, the methods changed, and the paintings became more stylised and more obviously abstracted. At that time, and still now, I was very interested in art from other cultures, Indian and Islamic art, and art from the Far East, and how they were able to answer the questions of how to represent things. Since then, the pictures have become more intensely connected to observation, but yes, the aims are unchanged.

**When you are talking about the landscape, you’ve mentioned before about very specific elements where the landscape becomes more integrated with the figures or it takes on a different form or shape, or at least it suggests that it might do that.**

Yes, some aspects of the landscapes help subconsciously perhaps to convey meaning. For instance, in the picture *Companion*, the fields behind the girl walking towards us appear almost to be wings and so help her take on an aspect of being perhaps from another realm? Is she really there at all, or is she just a girl with the boys in the landscape? The fact that the landscape helps to present her in this way communicates the ideas of the picture subtly and not in an obvious way, not in a direct, literal way. And it’s the same with the painting *Riverbank with Boy Running*; there is a part of earth in the painting that I wanted to take on the appearance of a big cat chasing its prey. It’s not, of course, it’s just a bit of earth and a shadow, but I wanted the landscape to combine with the figure in a representational way as well as in an abstract way to create an atmosphere of disquiet. In the painting with the boy, tension is created by the relationship of the boy with the landscape, and in *Companion* the sense of reassurance and calmness contained in the figures is echoed throughout the landscape, hopefully!

**And it gives a sense that in some way these are supernatural pictures, that they point to something beyond a material life, or a physical life. These figures can perhaps occupy two different realms, but also express something of the very direct and emotional way that children do see life. We were talking about the painting of the child where there is a gap between the rocks and they are on the edge of this gap as if they might fall in to the water, but one child holds back and protects the younger child, and points into the distance as if indicating something desirable that they can travel towards. That sense of experiencing life in a very emotional way, that there is something you are frightened of but beyond that there is a great reward, or the way that children might see certain shapes in landscapes for example, it’s an incredibly resonant vision of life, sophisticated and yet very simple.**

Yes, these are things that in the initial working-out of ideas I’m very conscious of. While I was working on *The Immense Ocean* my daughter came in to the studio and saw the figures on the rock and said ‘That looks a bit dangerous’, and I was pleased, because although the gestures of the figure in yellow convey stability, reassurance and peace, the rocks and sea do indicate uncertainty.

**The sea or the water don’t become threatening but they do introduce that sense of a foreign element**.

Well, the vastness can be threatening, but I suppose in these paintings the sea is separate from the figures, the sea is always in the distance, signifying a journey, a voyage.

**And that idea of the journey is interesting, that a journey contains along its way so many stages, so many moments that taken their place along it, even though in these paintings the journey is not always obvious.**

Few of these paintings represent actual physical journeys, they are more to do with journeys imagined or remembered, or even inner journeys. The large painting *Spring*, possibly the most explicit in its reference to journeys, is all about change and transition, the figures are all in their own ways preparing for a journey. What these journeys might be is not for me to say.

**Do you find that because you are working from children in some ways that it has a different emotional resonance for you? Does the potential of youth offer something different to painting adults who are already embarked on a journey.**

Yes, there is a difference, and I suppose having children in the paintings is a way of representing the potential, or rather the inevitability of change, of becoming, and in a way that is straight forward and easily understood.

**Clearly your work is underpinned by strong abstract arrangements and treatment of form; has there ever been a point at which you have thought you could make a satisfying work without it being derived from a representational image, or do you think there ever will be a time when you do not want this reference to the physical world?**

I don’t think so, there are too many things in nature, I mean in observing nature and the challenges of representing nature that interests me. Pure abstraction would be, for me, too limiting. In any case, I think to attempt to paint successfully in a representational way forces you to be even more rigorous in the pictorial construction, the abstract construction, than if painting purely abstract pictures.