

Simon Carter: Paint and Perception

One's destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.

Henry Miller

Many of us build an understanding of the world we live in through conversation, reading and travel. It is, we hope, in the exploration of cultures, ideologies and regions different from our own that we distil an understanding of a complex world and our place within it.

The British artist Simon Carter has a different approach. By remaining rooted in his native north east Essex, he studies and interprets the same stretch of North Sea coast as it appears before him each day. This approach to enlightenment has echoes in the life and work of the 8th Century Benedictine monk the Venerable Bede. Bede, who wrote *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, is considered to be one of Europe's most influential scholars, yet he never left the Northumberland of his birth and the same North Sea coast that Carter calls home.

This "monastic" approach to painting is for Carter a daily practice: a practice embedded in drawing and re-drawing the same motifs of bathers, sea walls, salt marshes, coastal waters and buildings directly from life. Carter concentrates his efforts on a seven-mile stretch of coast which lies between Holland on Sea and Walton on the Naze. This is a geography he can reach by cycling and walking, a physical constraint which is very important to his sense of meditating on the material qualities of the world. His drawings are produced hand held whilst standing up, often first thing in the morning, with each one taking around ten minutes. Once three or four sketches are complete, Carter returns to the studio where he catalogues them. These sketches, and indeed the landscape they are drawn from, are the starting point for a process of painting that recalls early Mondrian abstracts such as *Trees in Blossom* 1912 or *Composition No. 10 (Pier and Ocean)* 1915, which reduced the seemingly chaotic patterns of nature to a series of orderly geometric lines, shapes and harmonising colours.

We can think of work produced by other artists which is also rooted in the observance of a limited theme or restricted geographic region, such as John Constable's paintings of the Dedham Vale, Leon Kossoff's representations of London and Claude Monet's paintings of his water gardens at Giverny. On first reflection it seems counter-intuitive that many of the great landscape painters, like the 17th Century Dutch masters, appear to come from flat and featureless places. We would think that the Rocky Mountains, the Scandinavian fjords or the Scottish highlands could offer better possibilities for great painting. Yet it is the very lack of a substantial motif to visually engage with in the landscapes of areas such as the Netherlands and East Anglian Essex which liberates painters to create on canvas more than is apparently

there. This “emptiness” enables artists to enter a dialogue with an idea of being rather than a strict representation of place. For Carter this dialogue is a multi-layered conversation which is based on the landscape and is also a discourse in paint with artists as diverse as Frank Auerbach, George Baselitz, El Greco, Philip Guston, Anselm Kiefer and Jacob van Ruisdael. Indeed, many of his works are triggered by thoughts of paintings by those he most admires.

In his own work, Carter metaphorically breaks up the physical world he sees before him and re-assembles it for the consideration of the viewer. This re-working is based on upwards of forty or fifty drawings and preparatory studies for each final piece, which reveals a working practice where the completed painting is the summation of a prolonged thought process. Carter offers familiar clues to the “real” world, yet distance is compressed and presented as an upright pictorial plane. The colours he favours vary little and offer only a passing resemblance to the often subdued nature of the North Sea coast. He paints exclusively in acrylic colour, applying the medium fairly flatly so that it lies close to the surface of the canvas. Carter says “I started using acrylic in about 1995 I think. I was looking for a quicker way to layer up the painting and thought I might make a start in acrylic and then work on top in oil; up to then I had used oil. I like it because it’s very forgiving; there are almost no structural rules, you can use thin on thick, you can scrape it back and it’s all dry in half an hour. The things I don’t like are the slight deadness to the colour sometimes but I am learning to work round that; and sometimes I’d like to scrape back something but I’m too late and it has dried.”ⁱ

Simon Carter is a painter fully at home with the craft of paint as well as the psychology of interpretation. Many of his works, such as *Swimming in the North Sea* 2009, offer ambiguities in perception, where our vision switches between the source subject and the painted motif, which are reminiscent of visual psychological games like the Rorschach ink blot tests or the anonymous German illustration of 1888, *Young Girl-Old Woman*. They also bring to mind Leonardo Da Vinci’s advice to painters in his *Trattato* to “look at a wall spotted with stains...you may discover a resemblance to various landscapes.”ⁱⁱ It is this idea of an image formed in the mind’s eye prompted by something seen in the physical world which is Carter’s real landscape. He says “I try to make images that are arrived at through paint; it’s about being aware of what the paint will do but not being aware of it; of searching but finding something else...image and paint bound together.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What unites all artists is a desire to create a shift in our shared perceptions of the world. To create a pause in chaos so that we might find the magical in the mundane and awaken within ourselves a feeling of what the experience of human existence really means. For Carter this is a concern expressed through the making of paintings which are severely limited by the constraints of his own body. He only paints places he can walk to and physically see for himself, he only composes images from his own handmade drawings and he only paints on canvases he can carry through the door of his studio. The result is a visual universe which

elevates the ordinary through the caress of repeated observation and a body of work where each drawing and painting is unique and best viewed “in the flesh.” This has the effect of placing the viewer at the centre of the artistic experience.

Given the self-imposed restrictions Simon Carter places on his own practice, perhaps the last words should be those attributed to Leonardo Da Vinci: “art thrives on constraints and dies on freedom.”

Robert Priseman, 2010

ⁱ From a conversation with the artist, 7 April 2010.

ⁱⁱ ‘The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci, Vol. 1’ edited by Jean Paul Richter, Dover Edition 1970, p.254.

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘Get Constable’, Simon Carter, the Town Hall Galleries, Ipswich Borough Council, 2007.