

**William Scott, Peter Lanyon, Patrick Heron and Terry Frost**

**The subject matter of all four of these St Ives artists was always the complicated matrix of sensations evoked by something seen, and their greatest hope was that the spectator looking at their paintings would experience an analogous reaction. They dealt in equivalents to reality, not in transcriptions of it. As Patrick Heron wrote: 'The ancient valid response of the painter to the world around him is one of delight and amazement, and we must recapture it.' The pictures in this exhibition, all of them exploiting the uniquely visual language of paint, help us to do just that.**

**William Scott (1913-89)**

Cézanne, Whistler and Bonnard were some of the first influences on William Scott, all three of whom were painters of appearance, however abstract their work might occasionally be. In 1954 Scott declared: 'I cannot be called non-figurative while I am still interested in the modern magic of space, primitive sex forms, the sensual and erotic, disconcerting contours, the things of life.' He was a tough pure painter of taut, even austere forms, who took apparently simple still-life subjects and turned them into grand architectural paintings. *Still-Life: Black and Grey* (1952) is a case in point: it consists of a spindly-legged tabletop, flattened to the picture plane in black and white and shades of grey, like a rug hung up to dry. Barely monochrome, the orange underpainting sends shivers of visual excitement through the thickly layered paint, and two vertical red accents offset the white oblongs and squares. The composition is as radical as anything Scott painted, imagery pared back to a minimum, and invites comparison with Mondrian and early Roger Hilton.

Scott was more of a tonal painter than a colourist, as can be seen from *Blue, Yellow and Brown* (1957). This painting is really a blue table-top still-life, with a crowded array of bowls closely distributed across it, some fading into the table itself, others clearly delineated. A narrow strip of brown at the top left of the canvas establishes the space in what might otherwise be a much flatter arrangement of blue, white, yellow and black. Scott aimed for an instinctive lyrical expression, intuitive and vibrant, and said about this time: 'I have a strong preference for primitive and elementary forms and I should like to combine a sensual eroticism with a starkness which will be instinctive and uncontrived.' His austerity of design contrasted tellingly with his dynamically textural paint, dense and weighty. Over the years, the paint was less lavishly applied, but always with a Gallic panache. Look, for example, at *Pyramid* (1965), allied to the celebrated Berlin Blues series, full of jazz-like

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improvisations on a basic repertoire of emblematic forms: dynamic triangles and upside-down bowls like heel-prints, dextrously placed with assertive frontality.

The plangent colour harmonies of *Strong Note Orange* (1972), with its two white horizontals at top right like louvred lights, and a paler orange bowl at bottom left like a sinking sun, project an unexpected serenity. Scott said in conversation with the painter Tony Rotho (published *Studio International* December 1974): 'My subject is the division on canvas of spaces, and relating one space or one shape to another'. He was very much a compositional painter and what he called an edge-painter. 'Although my paintings are flat, I want to achieve an illusion of space within. You see, I want to have the feeling that you enter the painting and then spread out.' He drew our attention not so much to the objects themselves, but to the spaces between them, as can be seen in *Orchard of Pears No 10* (1976-7). One of a sequence of 17, these paintings were first shown in Tokyo and appealed greatly to the Japanese sense of understatement. Here is a group of three pears and a bowl, succinct and sensual, a supremely distilled statement about art and life. A tendency to careful picture-making was balanced in his work by an innate poetic resonance which lifts his paintings into a higher realm. Patrick Heron wrote of Scott: 'He is one of our small handful of really significant painters.'

### **Peter Lanyon (1918-64)**

Although primarily thought of as an abstract landscape painter, one of Peter Lanyon's great subjects was the figure in the landscape, and his hidden figuration often referred to women, or to the gliding he took up in later years. 'Many of my pictures are of weather', he said in 1963 in a recorded talk for the British Council. 'I like to paint places where solids and fluids come together, such as the meeting of sea and cliff, of wind and rock, of human body and water.' For Lanyon the sea was male, the land female, and his native Cornwall provided the impetus for much of his investigation of landscape. However, he was also a traveller, and the stronger colours of his last years, and a mixture of hard and soft-edged forms (as can be seen in *Blue Day* and *Saltillo*, both 1963), were in direct response to his experiences of travel in north-east Mexico, western Texas and the Tatra Mountains of Czechoslovakia.

*Saltillo* is named after the capital of Coahuila state in Mexico, and the thin, brushy paint is applied more in veils than in Lanyon's habitual method of over-painting and building-up of the surface. Perhaps this, along with the broadened palette of yellows, pinks and reds (though the typical Lanyon arctic blue is probably a Cornish input) reflect a closer acquaintance with the work of de Kooning. Certainly, in *Blue Day* the paint is even thinner

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and the canvas visible, though the vitality and freedom of the marks make this smallish painting a perfect formal statement of unexpected sonority.

Lanyon began to make constructions very early in his career. Ben Nicholson wrote appreciatively of him in a letter to a friend (dated January 11th 1940); 'He has done a good deal of photography & has adapted his knowledge of this in a most interesting way - Barbara [Hepworth] & Gabo say he has solved, in his "ptg-constructions", in a month what Moholy [-Nagy, the Hungarian painter, photographer and Bauhaus professor] has been trying to solve for 20 years.' The constructions were a three-dimensional way of thinking about painting, exploring space and movement, and were part of the scaffolding of a subject, temporary expedients (not intended for exhibition), ways of working out problems, and thus contain some of the most direct statements we have of Lanyon's thought.

The circular object *Untitled (Orpheus Construction)*, 1961, seems to be related to his painting *Orpheus* of the same year. It thus engages with the theme of love, loss and death, in the story (as related by the Roman poet Ovid) of Orpheus' descent into the Underworld to rescue his beloved Eurydice. Disobeying explicit instructions not to look at Eurydice if he wished to take her back into the real world, Orpheus was unable to resist looking back, fearful that his wife's strength was failing. At once she disappeared into the depths and he lost her forever. This is the scene that particularly fascinated Lanyon, in both the painting and construction. He identified with Orpheus, saying in 1963: 'The muse disappears if I look back or repeat myself. I have to make new ground in each work.'

The critic Lawrence Alloway called Lanyon 'our last landscape painter', but the artist himself always said it didn't matter what the pictures were about, the viewer must accept them as they are. Their principal subject - as of all the paintings in this exhibition - is paint.

## **Patrick Heron (1920-99)**

For Patrick Heron, colour was the sole field for legitimate contemporary enquiry in painting. Taking his direction from Matisse, Braque and Bonnard, Heron conceived of colour as space, and the dynamic contradiction, by colour relations, of the flatness of the canvas. In a sense, his paintings offer a European response to the colour fields of American Abstract Expressionism, and (being an excellent writer and art critic) he was extremely vocal in support of the achievements of British art in the face of American cultural imperialism. His paintings attend to the meaning behind appearances: the hidden structures of form and colour, the linear rhythms that underscore the surface patterns, the

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underlying harmonies. His work, resolutely modernist, does not partake of traditional modes of perspective but deals rather in spatial sensations. For Heron, art was a species of metaphysical speculation and he interpreted the act of looking essentially as revelation.

The soft-edged paintings of 1959-66, of which *Big Violet with Red and Blue* is such a fine example, reflect Heron's urge towards a new type of painting which transcends the speedy and spontaneous gesture, and replaces it with an approach altogether more considered and deliberate. In the wobbly hard-edged paintings of the 1970s, such as *Five in Scribbled Violet*, the colour - most specifically here the violet - has become more opaque, and the painting's thrust resides in the telling juxtaposition of the orange, pink, yellow and green shapes. Intuitively arrived at, this sequence of apparently flat forms has an implied decorative order that is nevertheless capable of projecting unexpected vibrations of space and light.

Heron had a structural approach to colour, in which the shapes were meticulously plotted and thought out in relation to the edges of the canvas, and the picture surface was thoroughly re-complicated and re-activated. The shapes were swiftly drawn in and the pure unmixed colours applied with small soft brushes to achieve the distinctive quality of vigorous 'brushiness' that he wanted these paintings to have. Each colour was applied in a single session to ensure uniformity of hue and texture. Heron wanted the effect to be very much of vivid colours crisply juxtaposed, not overlapping or layered.

'My gouaches are not a substitute for the oil paintings,' he wrote in 1985. 'Nor are they preliminary sketches, or means for trying out new colour-shapes, or configurations of dovetailed colour-shapes to feature in later paintings on canvas. They are works in their own right; and their quality, in fact, doesn't even overlap with the canvases in many respects. Or so I feel.' The emphatic drama of these fluent small-scale works is dependent on several factors: the fluidity of the drawing, the softness of the area-shapes, the starbursts of brilliant colour and the feeling that these gouaches might just be more spontaneous and less controlled than the oils. Are we privy through them to a more direct method of working in this intensely self-aware artist? Heron recognised that his gouaches were indeed more involuntary than his carefully considered large-scale paintings. 'I like the water in the paint mixture to lead me', he admitted, 'to suggest the scribbled drawing which gives birth to the images.'

### **Terry Frost (1915-2003)**

It is always something of a surprise that imagery which is in essence so severely geometric as Terry Frost's can also be so human, so sensuous and so full of joy. And yet Frost

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manages it, with his slice-of-melon suspended forms and bowls of cherries or olives. Not that he was a still-life painter in the same way as Scott was, but the references are definitely there, hidden under the rigorous play of forms and colour-shapes. The early influences of Ben Nicholson and Victor Pasmore lasted throughout his career, allied to the inspirational debt he owed Roger Hilton. The subtle feeling for surface he took from Pasmore, 'a sort of dry opulence of touch' as Heron described it, was less in evidence in later years when collage played a greater part in his pictorial strategy. But it can still be seen in the red vertical stripe in *Composition with Purple, Red and Black*, or in the swaying rhythms of *Moon Quay* (1950). *Moon Quay* is the earliest painting here, a tall abstract richly evocative of sailing boats tilting and riding at anchor along the St Ives quay under a quiescent moon.

Frost's vocabulary of shapes, his discs, quarter disc segments, arrowheads, triangles and looping lines, are deployed with skill in the search for proportion, rhythm and interval in his compositions. Arcs and circles within forms send ripples of movement through his pictures, distributing spatial largesse and unmistakable good humour. Even an apparently simple, almost minimal, painting such as *Black and White* (1980) is filled with colour. His teardrops and lozenges and halved-ovals articulate the picture surface, but also suggest depth - particularly the totem-pole negative spaces (on the far left like Brancusi's *Endless Column*) in *Blue Collage* (1969), a quintessential Frost design. The circle moving towards an oval is a favourite motif, and used to great effect in *Suspended Purple, Ochre, Green and Black* (c1971). Black and white and red was his favourite combination of colours and can be seen here in different correlations, from the austerity in *Olives of Aphrodite* (2000), to the swelling opulence of *Long Dew* (1995).

Frost's abundant generosity of spirit was recognised by his friend and artistic sparring partner, Roger Hilton, who wrote to him: 'Painting must be given back its soul. In this respect your painting is an object lesson to all of us.' Frost's sense of wonder at the natural world was balanced by a lively appreciation of the larger patterns which underlie everyday reality. An ebullient character, he lived his own maxim: 'You make your myth and paint it'. Frost liked to describe the act of seeing and feeling as one of giving, accepting and returning. That potent interchange is what all real art is about.

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August 2019

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