

Patrick Heron: a Memoir

Patrick Heron was a real artist caught up in a world that has its own surreal dynamic. My wife and I knew him through his dealer Leslie Waddington, who, like us, used to holiday in The Old Poor House – a free-standing annex to Eagle's Nest, Patrick's large home perched high on the cliffs above Zennor, a few miles outside St. Ives. The location was all. The houses looked down over a large, tessellated headland to the sea beyond ("isn't the calligraphy fantastic!" said Patrick who read landscape like books), and the rocks and boulders, so often transmuted into Heron's distinctive 'abstract' shapes, were craggy but infused with typically soft Cornish light. More still, the place had pedigree. Virginia Woolf and the Emperor Haile Selassie had stayed in the main house, the Arnold Foster garden was filmed by Germans who were as fascinated as they were bewildered ("they can't understand why I tolerate weeds," mused Patrick), and in the lane below were houses once lived in by D.H. Lawrence and Kathleen Mansfield. Our holiday flat was strictly an artist's vision: everywhere Patrick's vivid prints on white walls (a touch of *France sud*), the facilities meagre (the children bathed in the china kitchen sink, and loved it) and the beds ferociously uncomfortable. Patrick was thrilled that the Cornish Tourist Board withheld its approval ("no television!" he cried, "no mod cons!").

To live in an artist's domain is to enter their life through the back door. True, their everyday persona may stand apart from their creative persona, but, as Freud said, the two somehow belong together. Patrick was obsessive and militant. He personally complained to the Prime Minister James Callaghan about the US dominance of the aero-space industry; he fought the Ministry of Defence against their plans to use the moor above Eagle's Nest for exercises (we urged him to tone down his letters); and he joined Henry Moore and others in a deputation to Margaret Thatcher to drop her two-A-level entry requirement for art schools (when, at the end of the meeting Thatcher said nervously "I hope I wasn't too awful", Patrick replied with Delphic aplomb "Minister, you are our only hope.") Closer home, he used the press to insist that his Abstraction had 'got there' before the New York Expressionists; he showed a martinet's sense of exactly when each of his works had been executed; and he not only presented himself in print as a colourist (he had been a remarkable writer on art), but also colour-coded his dress, his handwriting and his car in a signature mauve. Not surprisingly, he threw himself into the development of Tate St Ives, which now has a breathtaking large glass window of his. But there was domestic humour too. Suddenly molehills appeared on his carefully-tended lawn. Traps were laid, but to no avail. Then one morning I saw a dead mole lying pitifully on the grass. I hurried into Eagle's Nest. "Congratulations, Patrick!" I said. "On what?" "Catching the mole." Patrick looked

non-plussed. Then: "Jefferson!" he cried, "Jefferson's done it!" and raced out, thrilled. Jefferson was his cat.

Patrick was articulate and happy to talk about his work, from the impressive figurative paintings of his schooldays, through the Matisse-like semi-abstract canvases of his middle years to the vital abstraction of the present (insisting that its roots were still figurative). But the teleology was not that simple. For he also showed me the many of the sketchbooks he took with him wherever he went, especially to Cornwall and the Scilly Isles. In this he was like any artist, though, as Leslie Waddington said, "he could see into the *structure* of things". I asked about the style of the drawings: "Like Ben Nicholson," said Patrick, "only jazzier." I then noticed how he worked to the sound of jazz. Indeed, drawing was a barometer of his being. When his wife Delia died in the late 1970s, Patrick fell into a creative freeze. In 1980, Leslie took him on holiday. Suddenly, in the French hill-top town of Montpazier, Patrick took out his sketchbook and began to draw obsessively. They went on to Venice – and the same again. When I saw these pictures, I was moved by their focus and intensity – indeed, I bought one on the spot. But the surprises weren't confined to drawing. Patrick taught me to pay close attention to the brush-strokes of his oils where I had blandly registered expanses of colour, and he astonished me with the rapid oil sketch he made of T.S. Eliot prior to his carefully-worked cubist portrait that now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery: his sketch was affecting in its sombre immediacy, its sense of awe at being in the presence of – yes – a genius.

The afterlife of an artist is in the hands of agents, dealers, curators, biographers and others, all of whom serve their own interests: so much is obvious. But for anyone who sees the artist in their home, however briefly and tangentially, and hears their story first hand will inevitably sense a disparity between the public and the private. For myself, I cannot see any work of Patrick's without resolving it back into the complex, bigger picture of life in Zennor. Nor, without at all disparaging the dedicated work that has been, and is being done on his behalf, can I help looking forward to some future exhibition that celebrates that disparity – *Heron Beyond Modernism*? My only regret, of course, is that Patrick wouldn't be around to oversee it himself, enthusing us all with his very particular and engaging sense of purpose ...

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London, 2019

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