

## Looking back: facing forward [mistakes and metaphors]

### Introduction

As the title of this exhibition suggests, 2009 is an opportune moment to reflect on the extensive body of work Pete Clarke has generated since his move to Liverpool in 1978. A superficial examination might indicate that his painterly concerns have shifted markedly during this period. Early works, often made with subdued palettes, offer perhaps bleak visions of the urban landscape. The images divide into jarring segments offering multiple viewpoints, and figures which emerge have features implied, not defined. More recent works are indicative of an increased interest in colour, a deeper engagement with the natural world and a greater certainty.

This apparent shift may in part be expected due to the timescale: over thirty years of work and a mellowing of outlook and concerns. It also indicates a greater confidence in the handling of colour and media. Closer inspection, however, highlights a number of themes or artistic interests which run through the body of Clarke's work. While the language of expression may have altered, many of his ideas are consistent: more remains than has changed.

Clarke's expressed interest in Cubism can be seen in the development of expansive and complex paintings which are divided into a series of inter-related views, or fragments. An early example is **A fragmented/coherent view** (1983), developing ultimately into works such as **Environ 1 & 2** (1990). The meticulously planned, sombre image of **fragmented/coherent view** has given way to a freer sense of expression in **Environ**, delivered with a bold primary palette.

Fragments can also appear in more literal forms. Clarke has consistently made clever use of collage, itself a fragmentary medium. Text has increasingly developed in importance throughout the thirty year period. Often it is used to provide tantalising portions of phrase or sentence which encourage the viewer to form their own interpretation: *'The lines I don't remember; there is an afterlife of dead leaves'* **Unrealised City Diptychs, Bluecoat installation**, (2008).

Clarke's work also explores marks or traces left behind by people and the environment. Early works consider the marks made by the city by recording aspects of the urban landscape. The artist, and by association the viewer, is forced to question his own position within this 'modern' landscape which is simultaneously compelling and foreboding. The use of multiple views, mentioned earlier, effectively questions what actually defines the city: does it have a reality, do these marks represent it and how does it relate to humanity? This search for significance within the image, transferred to a more general existential questioning for the individual, is a constant theme.

Later works feature marks or traces through other, more chance, associations. Clarke's discovery of a heavily annotated copy of TS Elliot's *The Wasteland* in a library in (2006) has led to a series of works on paper which use reproduced images of the marked poem together with still life compositions. The images have a wistful, romantic beauty which chimes with the poem that inspired them. The results are

almost nostalgic, an affirmation that the passage of time and the marks of history are not necessarily dislocating, negative forces.

One area of change is a shift away from an overt interest in political issues to a detailed exploration of Romanticism. The early paintings show an intense social conscience. There is a feeling that each single painted mark conveys meaning. In **Liverpool Garden Triptych** (1982) the grey tower blocks that these marks form are far from positive. Early prints make use of popular images culled from tabloids, the 'men in grey suits' who no doubt ordered the tower blocks (but are not required to reside within). They leave their mark, but it is questionable. Latterly this has given way to works which follow deliberately in the British romantic tradition. Watercolour sketches, often recording areas of natural beauty or personal meaning, aim to capture something beyond the mere mark-making. Here beauty, colour and freedom of expression are celebrated.

As John Piper wrote:

'[Romantic Art] is the result of a vision that can see in things something significant beyond ordinary significance, something that for a moment seems to contain the whole world;'

Piper, John. *British Romantic Artists*, William Collins, 1942.

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