

An abstract painting featuring a complex composition of vibrant colors and geometric forms. The palette includes shades of blue, green, yellow, red, and black. The brushwork is expressive and textured, with visible strokes and layered colors. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and visual complexity. 

# Looking Back: Facing Forward: Mistakes and Metaphors

Paintings, Prints and Drawings by Pete Clarke



# **Looking Back: Facing Forward: Mistakes and Metaphors**

Paintings, Prints and Drawings by Pete Clarke

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Front cover:  
*This is not guilt but grief (detail)* 2008

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	8
Matthew Clough and Moira Lindsay	
<b>Speculations</b>	12
Pete Clarke	
<b>Environs</b>	16
<b>Pete Clarke</b>	20
Bryan Biggs	
<b>Letters to Language</b>	24
<b>Unrealised Cities</b>	31
<b>In Exposed Areas</b>	36
<b>Interview with The Artist</b>	39
Gabriel Gee	
<b>Wasteland Flowers</b>	45
<b>Coast Walking</b>	48
<b>Isle of Wight</b>	54
<b>Incoherent Notations</b>	58
<b>Biographies</b>	63
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	64

*'Society is a battlefield of representation, on which the limits and coherence of any given set are constantly being fought for and regularly spoilt. Thus it makes sense to say that representations are continually subject to the test of a reality more basic than themselves – the test of social practice. Social practice is that complexity which always outruns the constraints of a given discourse; it is the overlap and interference of representations; it is their rearrangement in use; it is the test which consolidates or disintegrates our categories, which makes or unmask a concept, which blurs the edge of a particular language game and makes it difficult (though possible) to distinguish between a mistake and a metaphor.'*

T.J. CLARK, *THE PAINTING OF MODERN LIFE, PARIS IN THE ART OF MANET AND HIS FOLLOWERS*, THAMES AND HUDSON 1985.



Greenbank Studio 2003



*A Shed, A hut*  
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 100cm. 2001





*At Home*  
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 100cm. 2001

## Introduction

# Looking Back: Facing Forward: Mistakes and Metaphors

Matthew H Clough and Moira Lindsay  
Victoria Gallery and Museum, University of Liverpool  
June 2009

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 *Environs 1 & 2* (1990). The meticulously planned, sombre image of *fragmented/coherent view* has given way to a freer sense of expression in *Environs*, 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.

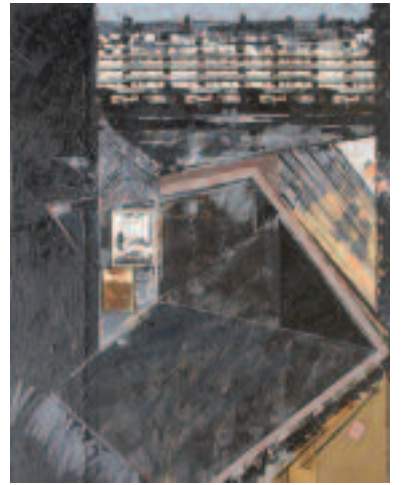
One area of change is a shift away from an overt interest in political issues to a detailed exploration of Romanticism. The early paintings show an intense social conscience. There is a feeling that each single painted mark conveys meaning. In *Liverpool Garden Triptych* (1982) the grey tower blocks 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.

*'(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'*

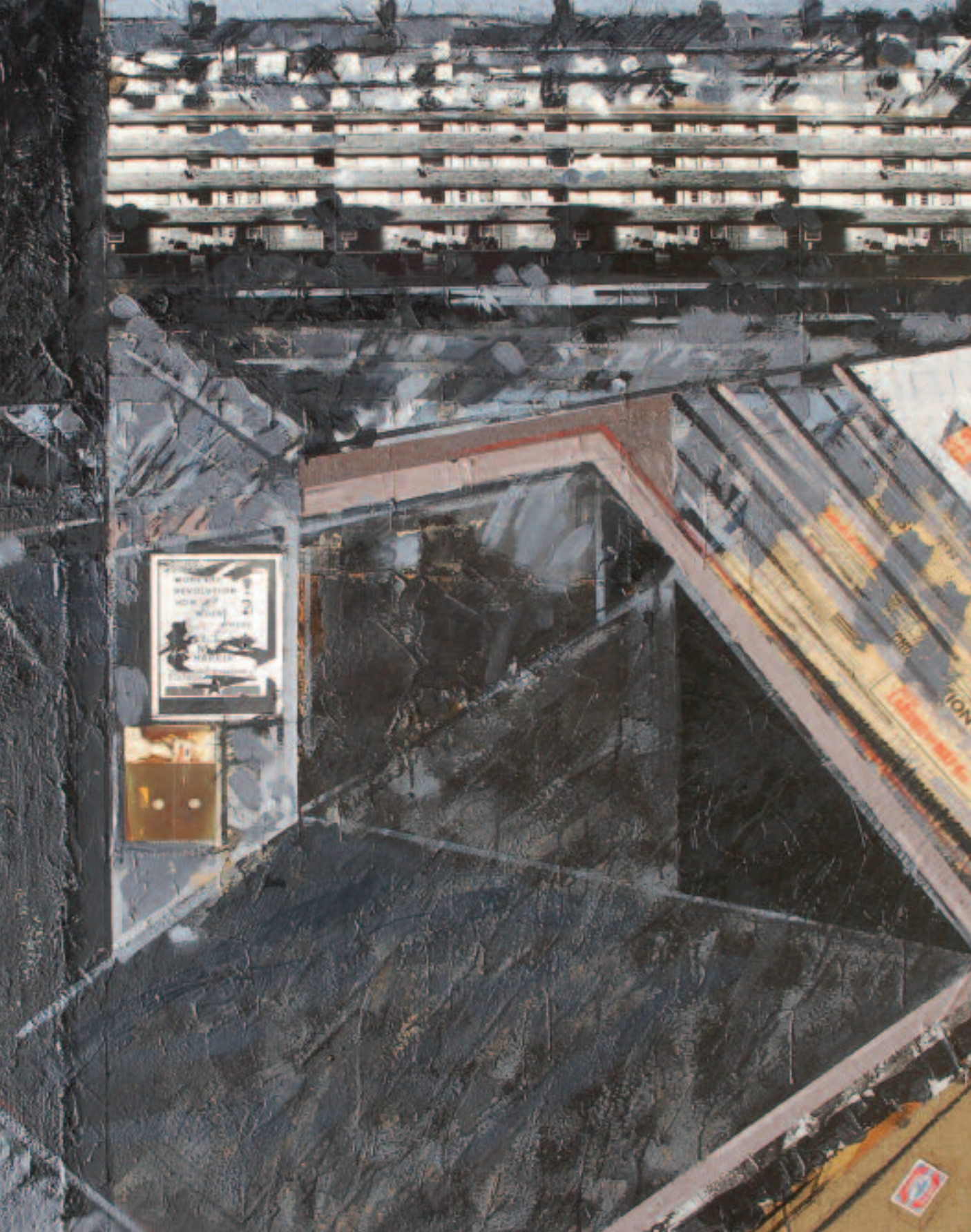
PIPER, JOHN. *BRITISH ROMANTIC ARTISTS*,  
WILLIAM COLLINS, 1942.



*A fragmented coherent view* 1982  
Oil, acrylic and collage on canvas, 152 x 212cm  
Collection of the University of Liverpool



*Liverpool Garden Tryptych 1982*  
*Myrtle Gardens, The Closure, Caryl Gardens*  
Oil and photographic collage, each painting 152 x 122cm



# Speculations

Pete Clarke

It is always interesting to speculate about how an artist's creative practice is constructed by the dialectics of history and/or the peculiarities of their psychology and personality – how we act in and on history and how we act in and on sensibility.

Geography and social context are often the mediators on personal practice. The influence of growing up in Lancashire industrial towns nestling in the valleys of the Pennines like Nelson and Burnley, with the dark industrial contrasting with the rising moorland hills creates that discontinuing perspective which becomes a recurring motif in many paintings. There is a sense of reconciling simultaneous and contradictory viewpoints, in many ways this is like experiencing a fragmented cubist world in a northern setting.

The determining influences of art education are central to an artists' development or at least the platform to begin critical discourse. In my case the introduction to the possibilities of art was the confidence and support given by the art teacher at school, how often is this the case, a curious and charismatic man who had returned to teaching after the Second World War with an artificial leg and a military sense of discipline and commitment to art and a belief in working class education. The art school at Burnley was a determined and very singular college with a philosophy based around drawing, critical observation, measurement, formal analysis and creative synthesis. The dominant influence on many Northern colleges was the traditions of Sickert, the Slade and the Euston Road – drawing, drawing and then more drawing. The Foundation Course prepared students diagnostically to develop skills and attitudes to progress, in my case, to the West of England College of Art/Bristol Polytechnic. This 'off centre' institution was a curious tension between British Modernism', the significant influence of Paul Feiler and Cornwall abstract landscape painting and the new contrasting influences of American 'Pop' – Rauchenberg, Johns and then Blake and Kitaj and a broader sense of poetic narrative.

Leaving art school after a Degree Course can be a daunting time and moving to the Isle of Wight was fortuitous and in many ways accidental but a continuing stimulus and escape, the subject of many drawings and paintings. The island is a continual pictorial metaphor; an environment where parts of the land are slipping into the sea.

Chelsea in the late seventies was very much a more significant cultural experience, a contradictory laboratory of high Modernism confronting the broader social influences of Punk, the Anti Nazi League and the beginnings of organised politics. The MA was a very productive year, discovering a sense of democracy in printmaking as a medium to explore collage, image and text with the possibilities of the 'personal as propaganda'.

And then Liverpool, on 12th September, 2008 it was thirty years since we arrived in the City from London to work at the Art School. Liverpool, then as now, was more than a geographical location and a defined place but an imagined environment of contradictory social interactions, tensions and representations, almost impossible to make sense of and understand. The city from the late seventies onwards could be bleak and dark, colourful and volatile, deprived, derelict and strangely poetic, a city of many stops and starts. Then as now, there was a sense of expectation and possibilities, an interesting and facilitating city for art, culture and social politics.



*City of Ships and Stores* 2000  
20 paintings. Oil, acrylic and collage on constructed canvas 38 x 38cm



*Old Light* 2000  
Oil, acrylic and collage on constructed canvas 38 x 38cm





*Falling Apart* 2000  
Oil, acrylic and collage on constructed canvas 38 x 38cm

## Environs

*The city does not just refer to a set of buildings in a particular place. To put it polemically, there is no such thing as the city. Rather, the city designates the space produced by the interactions of historically and geographically specific institutions, social relations of production and reproduction, practices of government, forms and media of communication and so forth... The city, then, is above all a representation... I would argue that the city constitutes an imagined environment.*

JAMES DONALD 'METROPOLIS: THE CITY AS TEXT', IN ROBERT BOCOCK AND KENNETH THOMPSON [EDS], *SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FORMS OF MODERNITY*, CAMBRIDGE: POLITY PRESS/OU 1992.



*Environ Structures Gestures*  
The Arts Centre, Darlington 1991



*Envars: Cleaning the Titian* 1991  
Mixed media on constructed canvas 183 x 376cm



*Environ: Ladders and Bridges* 1991  
Mixed media on canvas 214 x 338cm

# Pete Clarke

Bryan Biggs

His friend and fellow artist David Mabb has jokingly described Pete Clarke's art as "more Bloomsbury than Trotsky". The allusion here to the shared tension in the two artists' work between painting and politics is of more significance to a discussion of Clarke's art than the comment's reference to a clique that has come to be seen – in terms of painting at least – as an inferior English version of what was happening on the Continent in the early years of the twentieth century. That said, the Bloomsbury Group with its broader cultural influence on literature, aesthetics and art criticism for instance, its contribution to economic theory, feminism or changing social attitudes, is not entirely irrelevant to a consideration of an artist who has never been content to create art in isolation, seeking instead to locate his practice within wider cultural, social, philosophical and political discourses. Clarke, who for a time was amongst a group of young artists in Liverpool, including Mabb, who created intelligent responses to the thorny issue of how to reconcile art and politics in one's work, has continued to interrogate modernism's utopian project, a project which now seems so distant. Clarke's art however – remaining steadfastly within a painterly tradition – represents more than just an elegy for that fading promise. For his paintings, prints and drawings speak too of our uncertain present with its complex and contradictory realities.

This exhibition at the Victoria Museum & Art Gallery provides an opportune time to assess the career of Clarke, one of Liverpool's most eminent contemporary artists in terms of his exhibition profile, international connections, teaching reputation and discursive contribution to contemporary art in the city. An interview last year with Robert Knifton in *Art in a City Revisited* reveals an artist engaged with, and inextricably linked to, Liverpool, an artist who "addresses city space, layering constructed views, like palimpsests of a city on the boundary between rising forth and collapsing in on itself"<sup>1</sup>, even if his more recent work, with its playful and abstract use of colour and integration of poetic and enigmatic text, contrasts with the anxious, sombre-toned paintings produced when Clarke first encountered the city.

Looking back over the 30-odd years that Clarke has lived in Liverpool, there is a remarkable consistency in the methodology of his art, for instance in the construction of his paintings and graphic works, the use of text and historical referents, the way that the processes of production are made transparent. Placing side-by-side triptychs from different decades, one is struck by their similarities, but also by the distance the work has travelled. Clarke's current art feels in tune with the present whilst displaying a sort of nostalgia – remnants of the past seeping through into a layered present. One could describe the development of his practice as being less subject to significant ruptures or shifts, more as a series of incremental changes, as his palette has lightened, his paint handling become looser and more subtle, and there is a new-found freedom to improvise within the painting's compositional structure. This is demonstrated most clearly in the collaborative paintings that Clarke embarked on a decade ago with Cologne artist Georg Gartz, a process that continues to impact on his solo practice.

In discussing the development of Clarke's art in the broader context of both UK and European painting and art that seeks a social and political dimension, it is necessary to consider what has influenced it, relating this to its specific characteristics, and finally trying to position his art within contemporary practice – not a straightforward exercise as Clarke's art is not easily categorised, and, notwithstanding being lumped together with 'political art' in the UK, or his involvement in the collective initiative of the Liverpool Artists Workshop in the 1980s<sup>2</sup>, has never been part of an identified 'school' or grouping.

With the city being central to Clarke's work, it is unsurprising that Manet, the first painter of the modern city, looms large as an influence, less in a formal sense, more for the way in which, parallel to aesthetic considerations, the French artist's work invites a social and political reading of the urban experience. This approach is articulated in TJ Clarke's *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Knopf, 1985), with its concept of

society as “a battlefield of representation”. It is a book that remains one of two key texts for Clarke, the other being Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (Penguin Books, New York, 1982), whose call for a re-examination and renewal of the values and vision of modernism as a way of countering the destructive social and economic forces brought about by modernisation, has provided a constant reference point for him. The title of Berman’s book is taken from Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, and it is from classic dialectical cultural practice in Germany – Brecht for instance, or, in visual culture, the pioneering anti-Nazi photomontage technique of John Heartfield – that Clarke has borrowed a formal template for his work: the creation of new meanings by juxtaposing seemingly opposing elements, and laying bare the processes of production. More recently Clarke has become interested in how German philosophy informs contemporary art practice in that country, particularly Hegel’s concept of “creative destruction”.

A brief summary of those particular artists or movements that have exerted an influence on Clarke will perhaps help towards an understanding of how his approach to painting has developed. It will also illustrate the breadth of his interest in how to address formal problems of painting and of representation. His analysis of painting across the twentieth century starts with Post Impressionism, particularly its muddy British variant in Sickert and others. Cubism’s fragmentation opened up new ways of picturing the world, a disruption of space that Clarke sees as “a metaphor for engagement: you had to view things close to in order to get a sense of the context, stand back to get a sense of the bigger picture.” An early interest in the Euston Road painters – a dominant influence still in English art schools when Clarke began his studies – with their rigorous measurement and concept of negative space, gave way to the dynamism of American painting, especially the neo-Dada and proto-Pop of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg who stretched the possibilities of what a painting could be, particularly the latter with his integration of actual objects and fragmented images from everyday life and use of mixed media. While

doing post grad at Chelsea, Clarke had contact with visiting lecturer Eduardo Paolozzi, who helped confirm in the student an interest in the possibilities of printmaking as a medium in its own right, not subservient to painting. And he noted too the mixed media experimentation of another UK Pop Artist Derek Boshier, whose graphic work in the 1970s explored art’s connections to popular culture, including music, news media and politics. Boshier’s controversial exhibition *Lives: an Exhibition of Artists Whose Work is Based on Other People’s Lives* (commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979), which he curated at the Hayward Gallery, brought together politically engaged art with punk’s anarchic energy, and Clarke too felt the impact of the new music emanating from London, whose repercussions were being felt across the UK. By the time Clarke arrived in Liverpool in 1978, the city’s economic malaise was being compounded by punitive Thatcherite policies, intensifying the already volatile local political environment. It was this environment, symbolised by factory closures, an exodus of people searching for work, boarded up streets and shuttered shops, social deprivation, and an increasing political militancy, that provided Clarke with a focus for his first Liverpool paintings. The historical contradictions of the port, once second city of Empire and now emblematic of its fading glory, provided a context, a visual backdrop against which to develop paintings where paint, collage, fragments of text, photographs and printmaking were layered over each other. The effect was one of accretion, constructed compositions that lent themselves to multiple readings, their narratives reaching back into history and exploring a contingent present. They captured the mood of the city, whose soundtrack – urgent songs by the likes of the Clash, the Specials, or home grown bands such as Wah Heat, Teardrop Explodes or Echo & the Bunnymen experienced live at Eric’s club in Mathew Street – found echoes in the paintings. The sense of desolation and claustrophobia in Clarke’s *Constructed Views* paintings mirrors Joy Division’s opening refrain in *Digital*, “I feel it closing in”<sup>3</sup>.

Though punk was often caricatured as nihilistic and the new wave music that followed, particularly its North Western variant, as 'miserabilist', in the late 1970s and early 1980s there were in the UK more hopeful expressions in music and other areas of popular culture. Amongst designers connected to the music scene for instance, the trend to re-look at earlier 'oppositional' and analytical modes of representation, saw a particular interest in the Russian Constructivists, whose startling graphics were appropriated to evoke, in the face of the grim realities of Thatcher's Britain, an earlier optimism<sup>4</sup>. Clarke too gleaned motifs and bold colour combinations from this revolutionary moment in Soviet art – for instance, a suggestion of El Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, angular arrangements across the picture plane, the composition dramatically split by a vivid red block.

Clarke's interest in a more collectivist approach to making art, or at least creating a discursive environment in which to make art, resulted in the setting up of the Liverpool Artists Workshop. Between 1980 and 1985 the Workshop sought to extend members' practice into, on the one hand more theoretical debate (public talks by Terry Atkinson and Griselda Pollock for instance), and on the other an engagement with non-arts audiences. This attempt to develop a more social role for art inevitably fed back into Workshop artists' practice, the experiment having a significant effect on Clarke in particular. The idea of art as social practice has remained at the core of his creative output, which – though essentially a solitary, studio based activity – also involves writing, teaching, public debate and interaction with other artists. The importance of this last element has for the past decade been especially significant to Clarke, who has been the key player at the UK end of the Liverpool/Cologne cultural exchange, *Eight Days A Week*. Begun in 1999 as a reciprocal arts initiative established by writer and critic Jürgen Kisters in Cologne and the Bluecoat in Liverpool, this ongoing series of exhibitions and collaborations between artists in the sister cities evolved into an artists-led programme. Clarke has been at the helm for much of the process, raising funds, generating publicity

and being a catalyst for bringing together many artists from the two cities. Importantly for Clarke, the Cologne experience has also profoundly influenced his practice: through working collaboratively with Georg Gartz, an artist whom he describes as "unconstrained by the framework of painting, going beyond the rectangle into sculpture and installation".

Turning to the formal characteristics of Clarke's art, several consistent threads run through it. Drawing has always been important, as part of the process of constructing the paintings, as an ongoing activity for recording information and formulating ideas, and in its own right, seen especially in series of bold pencil and charcoal portraits. From Clarke's time as a student at Bristol, the process of collage, like drawing, has provided a fundamental technique for assembling paintings, where an assortment of graphic elements – drawn, photographic, typographic, printed and painted – may be brought together as integral components of the art making processes, remaining evident in the finished work. Another significant characteristic is the presence of words – few paintings are without text, and none are 'untitled' or have merely descriptive titles. If not as extensive as those of Terry Atkinson's, Clarke's titles similarly bring further contextual elaboration to the work. Conceptual arts' use of text, in the work of Lawrence Weiner or *Art & Language* for instance, opened up possibilities for artists to employ language as a theoretical or formal device, or as sociological reference, and Clarke has used text in this way, as well as, more recently, poetic metaphor. And literature in general informs his art, with the poetry of TS Eliot and the 1960s 'Mersey Sound' poems of Adrian Henri and Brian Patten in particular prompting several paintings<sup>5</sup>. Finally we can describe Clarke's work as a series of tensions: between form and content, between the seductiveness of the abstract paint surface and the narrative suggested by the work's imagery and title, between tradition and the new. In this last respect, Clarke privileges the handmade over the mechanical (though sometimes screen printing and photography are key elements), the gestural a conscious provocation in an age when the idea of the author is discredited.



Coming slightly after the generation that proclaimed the 'death of painting', Clarke has never bought into the idea that this medium has been exhausted as a strategy. His frequent and firsthand exposure to German painting – his particular admiration for Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, and latterly the Leipzig School – has provided Clarke with a reminder of painting's constancy, as well as its renewal at the hands of a group of artists, whose intellectual ambition has no real equivalent in the UK<sup>6</sup>. In this respect Clarke's work perhaps sits more comfortably within a European context – indeed he does not feel any particular affinity with English art (just as Liverpool regards itself as separate from the rest of the country) other than its disparateness, a result perhaps of the encouragement of the individual in English art schools.

In relation to his contemporaries in this country, Clarke discerns his work as falling between two stools: too painterly for the conceptualists and Marxists, and too political and fragmented for the realists. It is however a position that he enjoys, providing a space in which multiple ideas are able to be absorbed and explored without the constraints of more ideologically determined strategies. And it has enabled Clarke to develop a consistent practice, yet one that can make leaps into new territory. Stylistically, for example, there appears to be a shift in recent years towards an earlier, almost Romantic notion of painting, with a nod to pastoral landscape. However I would argue that within this newfound lyricism the paintings are still essentially about the dynamism and contradictions of modernity. The difference now from Clarke's first gritty interrogations of the urban is that the city has now dissolved into light, its hard edges fragmented, its monuments shaken and crumbled – melted in fact into air, on which floating lyrics suggest new songs. These are not representations of the city as gleaming towers of the new metropolis, the super cities of China or the Gulf. Rather they echo Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*<sup>7</sup>, in which the city is a speculative concept, experienced as a series of meditative conversations.

Bryan Biggs

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Knifton in *Art in a City Revisited*, eds. Bryan Biggs & Julie Sheldon (2008), Liverpool University Press, p137.
- <sup>2</sup> From the late 1970s/early 80s onwards Clarke regularly exhibited or was associated with political / conceptual artists such as Terry Atkinson, Art & Language, Margaret Harrison, Peter Kennard, John Hyatt and others. Liverpool Artists Workshop members included David and Sue Campbell, Paul Rooney, Jenny Wilson, Mark Cardwell and Terry Duffy.
- <sup>3</sup> From the band's first session with producer Martin Hannett in October 1978, *Digital* was also the last song Joy Division played before singer Ian Curtis' death.
- <sup>4</sup> Drawing on Russian Constructivist typography and symbolic imagery, Dave King created a strong visual identity for Rock Against Racism, whilst Barney Bubbles' sophisticated and often witty designs for Elvis Costello, Nick Lowe and many others (including the catalogue for Derek Boshier's *Lives* exhibition) took Constructivist styles to dizzying new heights.
- <sup>5</sup> Patten's *Through all your abstract reasoning and It is always the same image* have provided titles for paintings.
- <sup>6</sup> The 'New Spirit' in painting in the 1980s in the UK tended to be a rag bag of individuals, in contrast to the more coherent neo expressionist *Neue Wilden* emanating from Germany, or *Transavanguardia* in Italy, except perhaps the group of Glasgow painters, who emerged from the art school there.
- <sup>7</sup> Calvino's 1972 book was referenced by Clarke in a painting that was commissioned by the 2009 Edge Hill Short Story Prize, to be presented to the winner as part of the prize. Interestingly in the context of Clarke's recent paintings, Calvino talks of trying "to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language."

## Letters to Language



*Letters to Language*  
Installation, Cornerhouse Manchester 1996



*Letters to Language*  
*Dear Loss, Dear Endings, Dear Memory*  
Installation, Galerie Lichthof, Cologne 1998  
Each canvas 183 x 123cm 1996/7



*Dear Loss*  
Oil, acrylic and text on canvas  
183 x 123cm 1996



*Dear Endings*  
Oil, acrylic and text on canvas  
183 x 123cm 1997



*Dear Memory*  
Oil, acrylic and text on canvas  
183 x 123cm 1996

Greenbank Studio 1996



An abstract painting featuring a central window with a wooden frame. The window looks out onto a dark, textured landscape. The foreground is filled with vibrant, expressive brushstrokes in shades of blue, orange, and yellow. The overall style is gestural and expressive, with a focus on color and texture.

Reading the  
situation  
between

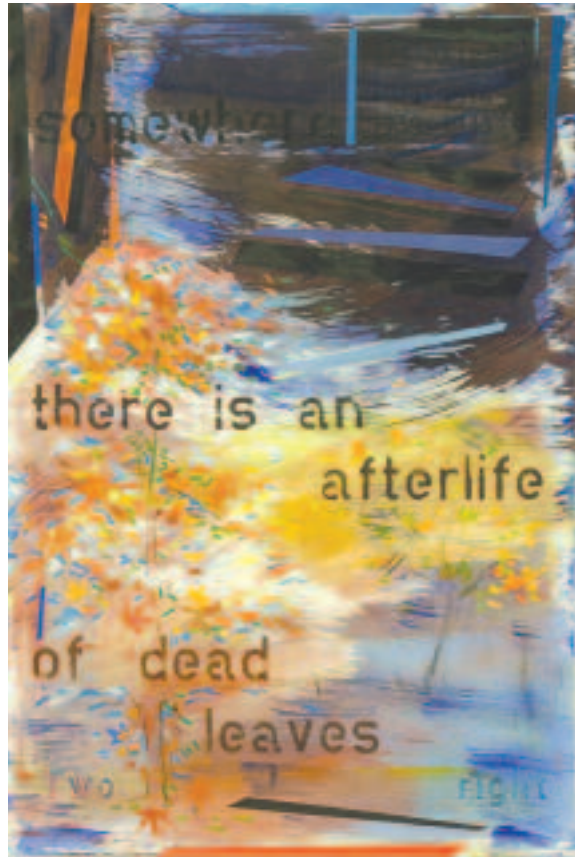
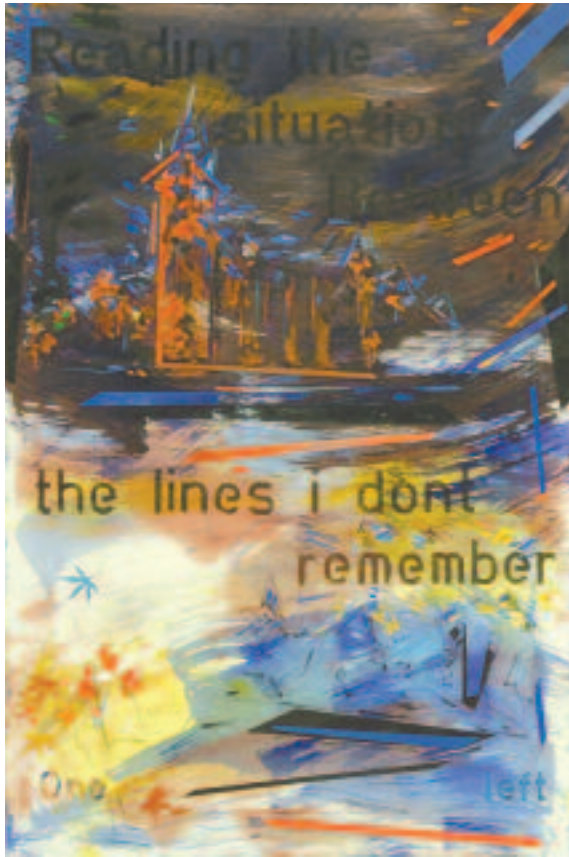
the lines i dont  
remember



## Unrealised Cities

*The process of modernisation, even as it exploits and torments us, brings our energies and imaginations to life, drives us to grasp and confront the world that modernisation makes, and to strive to make it our own. I believe that we and those who come after us will go on fighting to make ourselves at home in this world, even as the homes we have made, the modern street, the modern 'spirit', go on melting into air.*

MARSHALL BERMAN, *ALL THAT IS SOLID MELTS INTO AIR, THE EXPERIENCE OF MODERNITY*, VERSO EDITIONS 1983.



*Unrealised Cities: There is an afterlife*  
Oil, acrylic and text on canvas  
Diptych, each 150 x 100cm 2008



*Unrealised Cities: Towers and Spires*  
Oil, acrylic and text on canvas  
Diptych, each 150 x 100cm 2008

*The form of the city was the form of its social order and that to remould one it is necessary to introduce appropriate changes in the other.*

LEWIS MUMFORD, *THE CITY IN HISTORY*,  
PENGUIN BOOKS LTD, 1991.

unrealise



towers and spires  
and high-rise

A LA MEMOIRE  
DE  
DESIRE LEROUXEL  
SYMBOLE  
DE LA RESISTANCE  
AVRANCHINAISE  
MORT A SAINT-LO  
LE 6 JUIN 1944  
VICTIME DE SON  
PATRIOTISME  
1882-1944

## In Exposed Areas



*In Exposed Areas*  
*Losing the Plot, Witness, Mad as the Mist and Snow*  
Oil, acrylic on canvas 168 x 120cm 2006



Studio, York Avenue 2007



# Interview with The Artist

Gabriel Gee

**Gabriel Gee:** After our conversation from the last time, there are a few things I would like to ask you regarding the Liverpool Artists Workshop (LAW), as well as on the city or urban paintings, and then possibly the things we didn't get the chance to talk about, such as art initiatives in Liverpool in the last few years. Concerning LAW, I had a look at the nice red booklet, and I was just wondering, I know you were one of the founding members, and I think there was David Campbell, were there any other people at the start ?

**Pete Clarke:** Well there were quite a few people, when we first started, because we rented a space next to the Philharmonic pub on Hope Street, I think there were about twelve artists, and one of the problems with studio groups is that artists tend to come and go, ex students leave unable to sustain a practice, well, I was teaching which is a great support, but some of them had left the art school at Liverpool with great ideals and ambitions but, sometimes they come and go.

**G.G:** And how did you meet up with these people, was that through university?

**PC:** Yes. One of the things that is interesting about art education, is that when you leave school, you go to a foundation course, which is like a diagnostic program, and then a lot of students would either stay in Liverpool or move away to other art schools, but then when they graduate, there are one or two who come back to Liverpool, so there was always a mixture of people in the studios. But a lot had come through the art school in Liverpool, and most of us we were quite young, early twenties. But I think the difference with LAW, was that it was an attempt to have more of a communal ideas based studio identity, as a lot of studio groups are just a means to an end, where maybe ten to twenty artists just want to rent cheap studio space, whereas we wanted artists to share similar concerns. I mean it was never always possible, but there were four or five of us.

**G.G:** When the LAW disappeared, did you take part in another artist led group?

**PC:** No, one of the problems with studio groups is that your activity is centred around buildings, and the function of buildings, making sure they don't leak, repairs, and pay the rent, the electricity bill, and when the workshop finished about 1990ish, I suppose

I knew a lot of people by then. And then a bit later on I got involved in Eight Days A Week. One of the problems is that I have so many things I am trying to do as well as my own work... I go to Cologne in January to make work with Georg Gartz, for this exhibition of ten years of our collaboration at the Museum Zündorfer, Köln. I am also involved in organising aspects of Eight Days, and various other things... It's always the same problem with artists led initiatives, it always falls down to a nucleus of activists who do the work, and I suppose I have always been that sort of person. Now hopefully that activism gets channelled into teaching, organising exhibitions and focussing on my own practice.

**G.G:** When was Eight Days A Week created?

**PC:** In 1998. I think the first Cologne exhibition was in 1987, which Bryan Biggs at the Bluecoat had organised with the BBK which is like a professional artists run gallery in Cologne. I was in the first exhibition in this fantastic old Roman Tower in Rudolphplatz, and then because of that there developed an ongoing exchange programme. Bryan would do a show every year or two of Cologne artists, and then there would be a reciprocal show through the BBK. It was an interesting relationship and marriage in some way, because Cologne in the eighties had an international profile in the art world and the art market. We had always been interested in German art, Keifer, Richter etc; whereas the Cologne artists were interested in Liverpool because of the popular culture and the music scene. We were both interested in each other, but for very different reasons. But then through one of the discussions at the Bluecoat, Jürgen Kisters, who is a journalist with the Kölner Stadt Anzeiger, came over. He's always been interested in Liverpool; he shares similar concerns, politics, arts, popular culture, music... So he came, and I showed him around, and then he decided to do a festival in Cologne in 1998, he called it Eight Days A Week. And then, because we had such a great time, in 2000, we decided to do a reciprocal show and organise an exhibition of Cologne artists in venues across Liverpool. And also Georg Gartz had contributed significantly to organising the first Eight Days A Week, and since 98 he has then taken more of a pivotal role in organising projects and I suppose I have in Liverpool. And there has been small reciprocal events ever since.

G.G your paintings in the 1980s were landscape urban paintings, and they have evolved to more fragmented visions, how did that occur? Also what is the role of the strong contrasts of colours that you have been using recurrently? What is its relation, if there is one, to Liverpool, and the environment around here?

PC: The move then back north to Liverpool has been the most significant to developing a practice, the beginnings of activism, artists' initiatives and the broader social, cultural and theoretical context to the work. I have tried to picture the idea of the changing city and read its social and spatial environments, attempting to establish a dialogue between the images, surfaces and signs of the city and contemporary ways of making paintings.

It's difficult, isn't it? A lot of artists' work in a curious way is obviously related to their temperament, but also to their social backgrounds and their subjective experience of the city in which they live, almost autobiographical in many ways. I always tend to think that my concerns are not as dissimilar now as to what they were twenty odd years ago. I have always been interested in cubist questions of simultaneity and multiple viewpoints, fragmented and reconstructed images in context, and the dialectical process as metaphor. It's a bit like my interest in jazz music, where you can hold a line, a melody and play above and below, layering sound, bringing other things to the work as well, so even these new works have a collage sensibility, even though they are not necessarily collage based now. It is still the importance of image construction and the layering of pictorial space as a formal and social metaphor. And I have always been very interested in history and questions/problems of representation and politics. And whether you look at paintings and/or if you also read them, in a sense you read the totality of the relationships, the idea of that tension between word and image, and the two things working together or against each other. There are eight canvases that make up these recent paintings of the 'unrealised' city, but they are four paintings in two parts. And on each painting you can read the words vertically and across as well. When you first look at the painting, you read this contradiction, so it's dislocated in a sense, it destabilises the relationship between the painted image and the painted word. It's that cubist question, you take the world apart and try and reconfigure it. I am very interested in the relation of poetry to painting and how it is understood or at least sensed.

G.G: Have the letters been present in your work from the beginning, or have you introduced them progressively?

PC: There has always been an important influence from literature and on literary narrative and obviously poetry, from when I was a student; many works are initially influenced by poems. I have always thought painting is a form of visual poetry, that there is something more to the image like there is something more that resonates through words and the look of the poem and the typography, and obviously in Liverpool with Adrian Henri, painting/poetry is almost the wallpaper and/or certainly the fabric of the cultural city. For example recent paintings, prints and drawings are influenced by finding a rather broken and torn copy of 'The Waste Land and Other Poems' by T.S. Eliot, an old Faber Paperback that had been annotated in beautiful pencil handwriting across the text by an anonymous author, in a valiant attempt to understand the meaning of the poems. It becomes visually and textually a fascinating conceptual document, not surprisingly then it has stimulated many recent drawings and prints. My use of printmaking and print language and conventions comes from this love of words and the architectural form of letters. I collect old type and often use fragmented language in work, particularly the 'Letters to Language' series of sixteen shaped canvases which were first shown at the Cornerhouse in Manchester in 1996. The totality of this exhibition with the additional 'Capital' series of twenty six linear paintings suggested formally the idea of a disconnected and dysfunctional alphabet or the ambiguities of language and possible meaning. Fractured speech, discordant sounds, noisy colours, mute gestures and scratchy surfaces – this is the modern vocabulary – often inadequate and approximate – it is the disconnected poetry of the every day. The paintings were an attempt at a 'modern' vocabulary of public, private or remembered spaces, a sensed alphabet of structural devices and pictorial conventions.



*Liverpool Clinic* 1982  
Oil and photographic collage on constructed canvas 108 x 158cm

G.G. Because here for example, in the Liverpool Clinic Painting, it's a landscape with collage and photographs...

PC: They were sort of contextual paintings with strong formal characteristics exhibited as 'Constructed Views' like the Tenement Garden paintings and the Liverpool Clinic. But they are made of different views of the same place, the Clinic was painted from the viewpoint of Liverpool Artists' Workshop, that was then in an old car showroom next to the Philharmonic Pub on Hope Street. The building was historically interesting, initially part of the NHS as the ear, nose and throat hospital and then Josephine Butler House which is now in the process of demolition, erasing an important part of Liverpool's social history and heritage. The Garden paintings were based on the tenement flats in Liverpool 8 – Myrtle, Caryl and Kent Gardens which originally were award winning as examples of good social housing but by the eighties were very derelict and ironic as the idea of city garden living, given there was barely a leaf in sight. There were also influenced by Piranesi and ideas or problems concerning documentary conventions in photography, which is why the black and white painting over photographs was an important formal device as a pictorial and social metaphor.

G.G: It's a reconstruction, so we see the same thing from different points of view.

PC: I was thinking about dialectical painting and the experience of how we look at buildings, formally like a cubist idea of image construction. There is almost an invisible line on the floor where you stand to look at a painting – I am interested in rupturing that line, the painted images are constructed over text and photographs. It was a metaphor for engagement; you have to view the works in totality by looking close at the detail to get a sense of the context and then stand back to get a sense of the bigger picture. It's that Brechtian notion isn't it? In a Brecht play you get a whole series of incidents, a fragmented narrative, the audience rather than being passive consumers have to be active participants in reconstructing the meaning. And it also comes from a long history from when I was interested in Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg, Kitaj and English painting in general, but also Manet who is a great hero of mine, and the cubist possibility of viewpoints. Modernity has always been about the city, even when painting landscape, there has always been an urban sensibility to contemporary practice.



*The Wasteland* 2008  
Non toxic etching 15 x 20cm

**G.G:** About the words paintings, they tend to be quite sombre as well.

**PC:** Yes, the early paintings explored the idea of a constructed documentary and the problems of photography, so black and white was an important visual convention. Though some of the more recent paintings are chromatically much brighter but still follow conventions of European Painting exploring temperature and saturation. Obviously influenced significantly by making collaborative works with Georg Gartz from Cologne which developed out of 'Eight Days A Week', the Liverpool and Cologne exchange project and artists' initiative. Working with Georg has had a significant influence, I have learned a lot from Georg, about process, German philosophy and the tradition of creative destruction or negation in adding and subtracting surfaces, also when to finish work and when to leave alone and generally be more experimental with colour and light, composition and format.

**G.G:** The contrasts are still very strong. Is urbanity still present in your work these days?

**PC:** Yes, all of these theoretically are, even when based on landscape.

**G.G:** But the urban views have disappeared.

**PC:** Yes, possibly but they are all imagined and remembered spaces. They are more about space and location now than architecture, the spaces of a possible city. This is at an early stage, but some of the ones I have finished are quite urban as well. It's difficult when you make paintings. On one hand you think that you are trying to make something different, something new and that is why I like working in a series of paintings to explore difference across a given theme... There is conscious desire to change things and develop, like a musician making a new disc... You try to change... As well as being about the idea of the imagined city and what could be Liverpool, they are also about the traditions of painting, and the politics of representation, the notion of constructing

painting, and there are also possible psychological questions as well... An earlier painting was where we lived in 1978, the first basement flat we had in Liverpool, it was just the view from the window, and it was just curious that the window with the security bars made it look like a prison cell, giving it the title 'Liverpool 8' later had a social meaning, this was an interesting lesson about the possibilities of meaning and the influence of language on how we interpret an image... But I have always tried to open up the form, create the idea of possibility. Even in these early ones, words appear... a sort of palimpsests of a city. The series of works from the Eighties, if you look closely, were painted with words slowly appearing, there were large photographic prints of text, which I enlarged under the painting... I mean it's difficult to say, but I think all the work, you could almost say all contemporary work has an urban sensibility and obviously autobiographical. In the sense the works are influenced by living in Liverpool, travels and by images I have seen or somehow experienced.

Ironically many of the recent urban paintings which suggest environmental ideas and formal slippage are based on the evocative graphic images of the collapse of Rome by Piranesi combined with drawings and photographs I made on frequent visits to the Isle of Wight and the influence of the weather and coastal erosion. The Island has lots of coastal problems with land slipping into the sea, cliffs sliding and buildings falling over. This inevitably suggests broader metaphors and creates interesting formal possibilities in terms of angular composition and distorted spatial construction. I tend to think I haven't changed that much, the work is still based on my educational history, drawing, social observation and contextual questions and the significant influence of artists, friends and colleagues like Georg Gartz but I am sure other people, say I have... Hopefully if so, for the better.

**Gabriel Gee, December 2007**

**Groupe d'études Interdisciplinaires en Arts Britanniques  
The Interdisciplinary Study Group in British Art.**



## Wasteland Flowers



*Hyacinth 2 2007*  
Drawing 760 x 570cm

Left: *Hyacinth 1 2007*  
Drawing 760 x 570cm



Wasteland 2006  
Drawing 740 x 550cm





Wasteland Roses 2006  
Drawing 740 x 550cm

## **Coast Walking: different routes, different turnings**

*Mornings across the city from Hope at Everton,  
Shaw Street, Islington Low Hill, London Road, the Royal Hospital,  
Yesterday's turning  
Victoria Building and building sites,  
City aspirations – building up, building down  
Brownlow Hill, Clarence, Rodney and Canning Street,  
China Town, the Old Nook Pub, Nelson Street, Grenville Street South Cornwallis Street,  
words moulded on city squares  
Saint James Street, the presbytery, the Chinese supermarket, Brick Street, Jamaica Street,  
derelict buildings and modern business  
Greenland Street, the studio door.  
Today's turning  
Crown Street and Brownlow Hill, the University,  
The Catholic Cathedral stain glass crown, Mount Pleasant, Everyman,  
Hope Street Philharmonics,  
The Art School, investment properties, the tradition and culture for sale,  
Gambier Terrace and Anglican gothic,  
Looking through the railings into St James's Gardens,  
Inscriptions and dedications  
Parliament Street, Windsor Street library on the corner,  
Cain's Brewery and the view of the river to Birkenhead  
The Buddleia Building  
Greenland Street, the studio door*

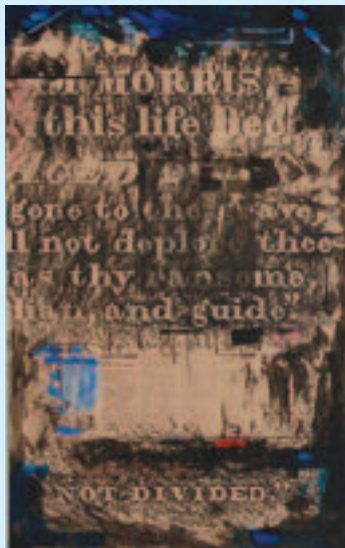


*Names and associations*

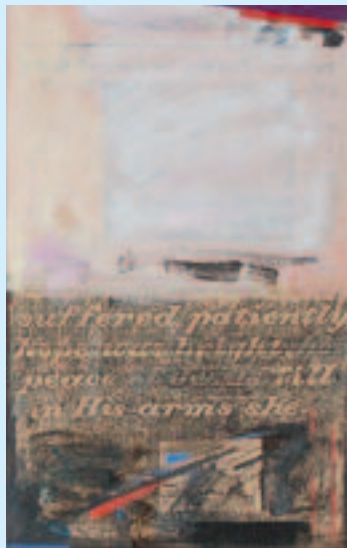
*Differing histories, different routes, different turnings*

14 walks, 14 days, 14 works

*Coast, Triangle Workshop, Residency Greenland Street,  
A Foundation, Liverpool 2007*



*Names and Associations*  
*Differing histories, different routes, different turnings*  
14 walks, 14 days, 14 works. 2007.





*Names and associations*  
*Differing histories, different routes, different turnings*  
14 walks, 14 days, 14 works

*If upright Worth  
Reader 'tis due  
Grateful, affect  
Her memory*



FOR MERCHASING P  
FOR THE BUSINESS

## Isle of Wight



*Hurst Point, the Solent from the Isle of Wight* 2008  
Drawing 30 x 42cm





*Hurst Point, the Solent from the Isle of Wight* 2008  
Drawing 30 x 42cm



*Cliff End, Isle of Wight 2009*  
Drawing 30 x 42cm



*Cliff End, Isle of Wight 2008*  
Drawing 30 x 42cm

## Incoherent Notations



*It is always the same image* 2005  
Oil and acrylic on canvas 140 x 117cm



*Turned to the past* 2005  
Oil and acrylic on canvas 140 x 117cm



*Entered by a staircase* 2005  
Oil and acrylic on canvas 140 x 117cm



*This is not guilt but grief (for Robert Sheppard)*  
York Avenue Studio 2008



## Biographies

**Bryan Biggs** is Artistic Director of the Bluecoat, Liverpool's contemporary arts centre. He has organised numerous exhibitions and international exchange programmes, and guest curated *New Contemporaries*, two Liverpool Biennials, and an exhibition from Liverpool for the 2006 Shanghai Biennale. He has written for periodicals such as *Third Text* and *Bidoun*, essays for exhibition catalogues, including Tate Liverpool (*Centre of the Creative Universe*) and *Susan Hefuna* (Verlag Kehrer, Heidelberg), edited the revised version of John Willett's *Art in a City* in 2007, and co-edited its companion volume *Art in a City Revisited* (2008) and in 2009 *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World* (all three Liverpool University Press), and written on the intersection of art and popular music. A fine art graduate, he continues to maintain a drawing practice.

**Pete Clarke** moved to Liverpool in 1978 after studying at Chelsea School of Art, West of England College of Art (Bristol Polytechnic), Burnley Municipal College and living for a time on the Isle of Wight and then London. He was born in Lancashire, lived in the family mill town of Nelson and then the move to Liverpool created the many significant influences on his work.

He is the MA Course Leader and Principal Lecturer in Fine Art at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston. He leads the artists' initiative 'Eight Days A Week', arranging reciprocal exhibitions, projects and events in Liverpool and Cologne. He makes paintings, prints and installations with the artist Georg Gartz from Köln exploring collaborative strategies within contemporary practice questioning individuality, authorship and authenticity.

Featured websites:  
[www.peteclarke.org.uk](http://www.peteclarke.org.uk)  
[www.eightdaysaweek.org.uk](http://www.eightdaysaweek.org.uk)  
[www.uclan.ac.uk/centrecontemporaryart](http://www.uclan.ac.uk/centrecontemporaryart)

**Matthew Clough** Matthew Clough is Director of the Victoria Gallery and Museum at the University of Liverpool. He is responsible for the strategic direction of the recently refurbished Victoria building, the UK's first 'red brick' university building, which houses the University of Liverpool's extensive collections as well as the special exhibitions programme. His previous curatorial projects include: *Crafty Thoughts: Contemporary Sri Lankan Art* (2002); *Memory and Perception: Tom Palin and Pete Bonnel* (2002); *Charles John Allen 1862–1956 – Sculptor and Teacher* (2003); *Peter Corbett – a Retrospective* (2004); *Earthly Delights: Mary Adshead 1904–1995* (2005); Tony Phillips – a Retrospective (2006) and Stuart Sutcliffe: a retrospective (2008).

**Gabriel Gee** has a PhD in contemporary art history from the *université Paris X Nanterre* (2008). His research focussed on 'Creation and its forms in the socio-political context of Great Britain. The artistic scenes in the North of England from the 1980s to the present'. His current research interests include 20th century British Art, visual arts and history, culture and politics in the post-industrial transitional period. He is the treasurer of the research group on British art *One Piece at a Time* ('Groupe d'études interdisciplinaires en arts britanniques') based at the *université Paris 1 Sorbonne*.

*Groupe d'études Interdisciplinaires en Arts Britanniques*. The Interdisciplinary Study Group in British Art is an association which brings together postgraduate students as well as professionals, researching British Art in the modern period. It aims to bring together students and researchers from different disciplines: art history, history, museum studies, sociology, and any area of the humanities whose work focuses on British art from the 19th century to the present.

One Piece at a Time (GEIAB)  
[www.geiab.org](http://www.geiab.org)

**Moira Lindsay** Moira Lindsay is Assistant Curator (Art) at the Victoria Gallery and Museum at the University of Liverpool. She provides curatorial support to the Director, managing the care, documentation and interpretation of the Fine and Decorative Art collections and the exhibition programme. She was Assistant Curator of Fine Art at the Walker Art Gallery for four years. Her previous curatorial projects include: *Heath Robinson* (2004); *Big Art for Little Artists* (2005–6) and *Liverpool Through the Lens: E. Chambré Hardman* (2008).

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*Collaboration with Georg Gartz*  
Pete Clarke in Cologne, 2006.



“The move then back north to Liverpool has been the most significant to developing a practice, the beginnings of activism, artists’ initiatives and the broader social, cultural and theoretical context to the work. I have tried to picture the idea of the changing city and read its social and spatial environments, attempting to establish a dialogue between the images, surfaces and signs of the city and contemporary ways of making paintings”.

“There has always been an important influence from literature and on literary narrative and obviously poetry, from when I was a student; many works are initially influenced by poems. I have always thought painting is a form of visual poetry, that there is something more to the image like there is something more that resonates through words and the look of the poem and the typography.”

The Artist in the interview with Gabriel Gee