

GENERATION PAINTING 1955-65

British Art from the Collection of Sir Alan Bowness

THE HEONG GALLERY

This collection of paintings was assembled in unusual circumstances and needs some explanation, which involves the beginnings of my interest in contemporary art.

In the last years of the war, the great art museums were of course closed, but my interest in painting was suddenly brought to life by the amazing Picasso and Matisse exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum at the end of 1945. I was 17 and wanted to see more. I quickly discovered that the most advanced British art was to be found in the dealers' galleries around Bond Street, particularly the Lefevre, Redfern and Leicester Galleries. Here were works by Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland, Paul Nash, John Piper, Ivon Hitchens, Victor Pasmore – artists popularised by Kenneth Clark's series of Penguin Modern Painters books, which I owned.

I loved these artists and thought highly of the British school – it must be remembered that almost no twentieth-century foreign art was on view in 1946 – but I also wanted to find the newest painting. This was being done by the 'neo-romantics': John Minton and Keith Vaughan, John Craxton, Lucian Freud and the two Roberts (Colquhoun and MacBryde). When I left school in the summer of 1946, I was awarded a prize for English and chose a 1945 edition of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* with wonderful illustrations by Michael Ayrton. The youngest of the neo-romantics, Ayrton was only seven years older than me and felt like a contemporary.

I was out of London from late 1946 to 1950, and my interest in modern art was on hold. When I arrived at Downing for the Michaelmas term of 1950, I brought with me my first major acquisition and my twenty-first birthday present: a lithograph by Vaughan titled *Village* (1949; pl.1). This hung prominently in my Downing rooms.

I went to Downing with the intention of studying English because of Dr F.R. Leavis and, though I read Modern Languages, I was always very much in the English group. It was a wonderful time for me and my fellow undergraduates, most of them in their early twenties because of national service obligations. My extra-curricular activities were broad – if exclusively cultural – and included the Art and Film Societies, acting in the

College play, running an existentialist reading group and editing a literary magazine with the poet Thom Gunn.

I would always retreat to the Fitzwilliam Museum to look at pictures. Art conveys its meaning best when directly confronted – an idealist attitude, but one to keep in mind. When I started to be involved in writing about contemporary art and to select work for displays or acquisitions, I found that I needed to live with the art. This is the rationale behind this collection of paintings which I now want to pass on to others.

My interest in modern art led to the invitation to run the Cambridge Contemporary Art Trust in my second and third years at Downing. This was a picture lending library, exhibited at the beginning of term, from which anyone could borrow a work on payment of a small subscription which was then used to buy more paintings or drawings. It had been established in 1946 by an architecture student, Bill Howell, and was later superseded by College picture collections and Jim Ede's lending scheme at Kettle's Yard.

Running this Trust gave me two opportunities that, with hindsight, were crucial for my later career. I was buying not for myself but for a public body – Cambridge undergraduates – and needed to take their likely tastes into consideration. In these circumstances an awareness of one's personal tastes and of a less subjective judgment is essential. I have always remembered this distinction.

Secondly, I now had the opportunity of meeting the painters I most admired in order to persuade them to sell a work at a special price for Cambridge undergraduates. My two major acquisitions were from Hitchens and Vaughan. Visiting Hitchens in his makeshift home and studio in the depths of Petworth forest was eye-opening. I saw at once how he was translating the natural world into rich, painterly landscapes. That meeting led to a lifelong friendship that in due course saw a Tate Gallery retrospective exhibition in 1963 and the publication of a major book a decade later.

If Hitchens was the painter of the older generation I most admired – he was 60 in 1953 – Keith Vaughan, then 41, was my choice among the younger. At that time he was sharing a house and studio with John Minton in St John's Wood. A master of pictorial construction like Hitchens, he was the intellectual heavyweight among the neo-romantics. He was fascinated by the paintings of Paul Cézanne, whom we agreed was the key to the understanding of modern art.

Meeting Keith Vaughan taught me another important lesson. My admiration for his paintings of the late forties and early fifties was genuine, and today I feel his later figure compositions and landscapes are undervalued.

But Keith became intolerant of the way painting developed in the fifties and sixties, and because I favoured abstraction, he thought I could no longer understand what he was doing.

I had a sudden change of heart at the end of my three years at Cambridge. Instead of writing a doctoral thesis on symbolism in the novels of Émile Zola, I went to the Courtauld Institute of Art in London for a two-year diploma course (not yet a master's degree) in the history of art. I had never heard of the Courtauld until Karl Winter, the Director of the Fitzwilliam, suggested it to me as he thought I might be interested in working in a public art museum. The Courtauld was the only place in England where the subject was taught and it was undergoing a complete upgrade from 1947 under its energetic Director Anthony Blunt.

I found the study of Art History totally absorbing. In those days everyone at the Courtauld spent the first year studying Renaissance painting and then chose a special period for the second year. I chose the 'modern' option, which meant studying French painting from Jacques-Louis David to Picasso, taught by Blunt himself. Like Leavis, he was an inspiring teacher who believed in the supreme importance of his subject. The Courtauld had only a few dozen students, and we were Blunt's acolytes, being trained to take the new discipline of Art History into the wider world.

Back in London, I continued to visit every exhibition. I also began to write reviews in the fortnightly magazine *Art News and Review*, which was the training ground of so many of my generation, including Reyner Banham, Lawrence Alloway, David Sylvester and Terence Mullaly (another Downing alumnus). When I finished my studies in 1955, I began contributing to *The Observer*. The first book I reviewed was Patrick Heron's collected art journalism, *The Changing Forms of Art* (published that year), which I approached from an anti-abstract, socially aware view, much influenced by the writings of John Berger.

I have written before that there is a period of about ten good years in an artist's career when they break through and win recognition. Only the greatest artists seem to be able to continue to work at the highest level or have other periods when their work excels. Many excellent artists never quite match that period of early inspiration, though their work always remains of interest. Art ebbs and flows. I developed these objective observations, applicable at any period and to any artist, in a lecture later published as *The Conditions of Success* (1989). The notion of a decade as a marker of a generation – a period of change in a single artist's career, in a cultural field or in a medium such as painting – seems particularly appropriate for this exhibition.

The late 1950s were to prove a wonderful moment for modern art when suddenly the long shadow of the war years lifted and everything began

to change. The expectation had been that the next major development would take place in Paris, as had been the case for over a hundred years, and in 1955–56 I had bought a small group of prints by Parisian artists: Hans Hartung, Pierre Soulages, Roger Bissière and Alfred Manessier (now in the Fitzwilliam Museum's collection). This was not to be, though the seeds of growth were seen in the work of Jean Dubuffet and Nicolas de Staël (who, however, took his own life in 1955). Heron and Berger both prophesied a kind of amalgam of Matisse and Picasso from very different standpoints. But this didn't happen.

Something closer to the truth emerged between 1956 and 1959, the dates of two major exhibitions of American painting at the Tate Gallery. Because of what had happened in New York during the 1940s when Europe was at war, Paris had lost its ascendancy. It was immediately clear that the prevalent British view in the early fifties, that there was no future in abstract art, was completely mistaken. On the contrary all kinds of abstract art, from painterly to constructivist, were possible. It was a very exciting moment and I was converted.

At the beginning of 1956, I started my first job, as a Regional Art Officer of the Arts Council. The Council's art department, under the direction of Philip James and Gabriel White, was at that time very active, by far the most important provider of art exhibitions, both large and small, in the country. My job was to look after touring exhibitions, and to contact galleries, artists and art groups in my region: the South West, which stretched from Bournemouth to Wolverhampton, including Bristol, Birmingham and, of course, Cornwall.

I was particularly looking forward to visiting St Ives, because this was where the flame of abstract art had been kept alive during the forties by Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson. I also wanted to see more of the younger generation of painters, in particular Peter Lanyon. St Ives was then recognised as the only centre of artistic innovation in the country that could challenge London.

I was not disappointed. In April 1956 St Ives was a very exciting place, confident that the future of British art lay in the hands of its painters. Ben and Barbara were very welcoming: their work had reached a second peak in the fifties, and I found Ben's large post-Cubist compositions and Barbara's enormous abstract wood sculptures deeply impressive. The light, landscape and antiquities of West Cornwall lay behind their abstract art, enriching it in a distinctive way.

This was also true of the paintings of Peter Lanyon, and though he was antagonistic to outsiders like Ben and Barbara, we immediately became close friends. The reason was simple. Peter was a fanatical Cornishman and I could claim to be Cornish too – my schoolmistress grandmother was

born in Perranuthnoe, a village on the south coast between Loe Bar and St Michael's Mount. My forebears had always lived in West Cornwall. Like Peter, I had this very real link with the land, and his exploration of it meant much to me. To understand this, you need to know the austere beauty of the West Cornwall moors and cliffs, long inhabited, with stone circles and quoits everywhere and a field pattern that lies unbroken for two millennia.

I was to write about Peter's paintings and I think I saw every picture he completed until his untimely death in 1964, sharing studio conversations on my regular visits. He admired the new American painting, but did not feel inferior. He had after all shown *Boulder Coast* (1952; pl.4) in New York in 1953, before Willem de Kooning introduced landscape into his abstract language (as Peter liked to remind me).

The other very self-confident British painter I met at this time was Patrick Heron. He had just left London to settle in Cornwall, buying Eagles Nest, the romantic and exposed house at Zennor on the St Ives to Land's End road which became his home until the end of his long life. Again a rich friendship resulted. My wife Sarah and I have spent every summer in Cornwall for many decades, and seeing Patrick was a rich and regular privilege. In 1956 Patrick was making a complete break with his earlier figurative work, which had been indebted to the work of Georges Braque. At first it was the garden at Eagles Nest that inspired him. But then, believing in the all-important role of colour in painting, he began to make pictures that were only colour. *Horizontal: March 1957* (1957; pl.9) was among the first of them. At the time it was a bold and decisive step, not understood by many.

There was a depth and richness about the art in St Ives that was perhaps surprising considering the smallness and isolation of the place. Two painters who caught my attention were Terry Frost and Bryan Wynter. Terry had a natural *joie de vivre* and was always surprised to find himself a successful painter. He loved colour but I preferred the more subdued grey pictures that he painted when he was Gregory Fellow at the University of Leeds, such as *Yorkshire Black and White* (1955; pl.3).

Bryan Wynter lived as close to nature as he could, preferring isolation on the Penwith moors. He drew inspiration from the rushing water of the rivers he canoed in when making paintings such as *Yellow Painting, Spate I* (1964; pl.22). Immersion in water for Wynter was comparable with Lanyon's immersion in air; in 1959 Lanyon took up gliding in order to know the landscape of West Cornwall better. I saw *Drift* (1961; pl.5) in Peter's studio when it was just painted in 1961 and simply felt at once it was a picture I had to have. Fortunately Peter agreed.

I am attracted to pictures that might be called difficult, which have secrets that are only slowly revealed. There is a puritan streak in me too

that I recognise. I like my colour subdued, often monochrome, the artistic gestures restricted and the eroticism present but hidden. You can see this in Roger Hilton's *January 1962 (tall white)* (1962; pl.16) or William Scott's *Ocean* (1960; pl.8) – both by painters with strong links to St Ives whom I came to know well. I sit at my desk looking at *Ocean* every day, and have done so for fifty years. It still remains mysterious to me, a palimpsest of forms and gestures suggesting the residues of a still life. Scott's *Blue Still Life* (1957; pl.7) is more straightforward, but it has for me the antiquity and rootedness that I find in Scott's work. It was a picture that haunted me for years before I could acquire it.

I see Scott and Hilton, with Lanyon and Heron, as the major artists of their time and place, and in no way inferior to their American or European contemporaries. I was fortunate in knowing them well and in being able to talk and write about the work, though in the end I feel it defies verbal analysis and demands something more like a gut response. Art, like music, is its own language.

At this time – the late fifties and early sixties – I was active as a writer on art for *The Observer*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Spectator*, and as London contributor to the New York-based magazine *Arts*. I wrote about the first John Moores exhibition in Liverpool (1957), the Venice Biennales and Mark Rothko's 1961 Whitechapel exhibition, for example. But to understand the art better I felt I needed to talk to the artists, and this quickly led me to give up art criticism altogether. I enjoyed meeting the artists and the challenge of finding words to describe new painting and sculpture, now reserved for more interpretative texts.

My circle of artist friends quickly widened. Of the older generation, many were embracing abstract art, but with reference to symbols, music, nature and the body, for example. I particularly admired the work of Scott, Ceri Richards and Alan Davie – painters, not coincidentally perhaps, also from the Celtic fringe, hailing from Ireland, Wales and Scotland respectively. I wrote about the sculptors Kenneth Armitage and Lynn Chadwick too. David Sylvester asked me if I would like to take over the cataloguing of Henry Moore's sculpture and this led to a long and close friendship with Henry and Irina, who was to ask me to take over the running of The Henry Moore Foundation after Henry's death in 1986.

London was a scene of intense artistic activity, which included new dealers (Gimpel Fils, Erica Brausen, Robert Fraser, John Kasmin), new writers, new artists and new galleries. I was very interested in the constructive art of Kenneth and Mary Martin, Anthony Hill and Gillian Wise, and of course Victor Pasmore, whose apostasy from Euston Road realism surprised his painter friends William Coldstream and Lawrence Gowing, both of whom I also got to know well.

Coldstream was the enlightened head of the Slade School, part of University College London, where the émigré art historians Rudolf Wittkower and Ernst Gombrich were regularly lecturing. I was a frequent visitor from the Courtauld and saw all the student work. I particularly remember the Cohen brothers: Harold was an 'abstract impressionist' before he turned to computer-inspired art, and Bernard was endlessly inventing beautified linear paintings and drawings.

I spent more time in the painting school at the other great art school, the Royal College of Art, then at its apogee. Here there were three remarkable generations of postgraduate students, who attended in quick succession and were all very different. First, my own more or less exact contemporaries who graduated in 1955 when I left the Courtauld: Frank Auerbach, Bridget Riley and Joe Tilson. They were to be joined by Peter Blake and then by Robyn Denny and Richard Smith, who both graduated in 1957. This was the first generation of British painters to get the full impact of American Abstract Expressionism (or 'action painting'). They were also at the beginnings of British Pop art, which was evolving independently from the United States. Smith's *Alpine* (1963; pl.21), 'menthol cool', is based on the advertisement for a cigarette pack.

A most remarkable generation of painters arrived at the Royal College of Art in 1959: David Hockney, Allen Jones, R.B. Kitaj, Derek Boshier and, a year later, Patrick Caulfield. They were an insurgent group. Allen was thrown out after his first year. Ron Kitaj was the intellectual heavyweight and the one I got to know best. He was very well read and had a political background – anarchist (as popularised by Herbert Read) – not unlike mine.

Kitaj persuaded Hockney to stop painting in the manner of Davie – the Gregory Fellow in Painting at Leeds when Hockney was studying in Bradford – and to paint from his own experience. I remember seeing David's first etchings before proofing. His *Myself and my Heroes* (1961), for example, and his early paintings reveal a freedom to express his own homosexuality.

The Royal College of Art's painting school was not the only nexus of invention in the early sixties. The Bath Academy of Art at Corsham, where Scott was Senior Painting Master, had a succession of part-time teachers including Jack Smith, Gillian Ayres and Howard Hodgkin. The other main centre outside London was Newcastle, where Lawrence Gowing was the very young Professor from 1948 onwards and where Victor Pasmore and Richard Hamilton also taught. Lawrence moved to London in 1958 as Head of Chelsea School of Art. He brought with him Ian Stephenson and he employed John Hoyland and Patrick Caulfield as part-time teachers. He asked me to give some History of Art lectures to the painting students. I enjoyed this but soon passed Chelsea History

of Art to the care of my good friend Norbert Lynton. This is how the art world functioned in the fifties and sixties, and largely remains how it functions today. At the time, I was happily in the middle of it.

In the early sixties, I began to make exhibitions, which I found more rewarding than writing art criticism. With exhibitions you work directly with the art objects and have to consider the visual impact. I like this.

I had the good fortune to make two major exhibitions of contemporary art at the Tate. The earlier, with Lawrence Gowing, was called *54:64 Painting and Sculpture of a Decade*. This was an attempt to replicate (and celebrate) Roger Fry's Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition at London's Grafton Galleries in 1912. In other words, we thought it a good moment to show British painters and sculptors in an international context, to see how they would measure up to their American and European contemporaries. There were about thirty-five British painters in this exhibition, most of them already mentioned above.

The second exhibition and an accompanying book, *Recent British Painting*, followed three years later in 1967. This came about because of an invitation from the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation to Norman Reid (Director of the Tate), Lilian Somerville (Director of the British Council's Fine Arts Department) and myself (by then a Reader in History of Art at the Courtauld). There was little disagreement between the three of us as to the fifty artists chosen and it offers a near definitive choice of the major painters of the period. Such judgments are not set in stone but are offered as a necessary part of an ongoing critical process.

Just under half of the fifty artists in *Recent British Painting* are represented in the collection I am giving to the Fitzwilliam Museum. It seems an accident that I have nothing by Riley, Tilson or Hodgkin, artists whose work I have always loved. On the other hand, there are certain artists I objectively admire but whose paintings I couldn't live with: Francis Bacon, Auerbach or Hamilton for example.

By the mid-sixties, I was on the advisory committees of both the Arts Council and the British Council, and was often called upon to advise on acquisitions or on selecting artists for international exhibitions, such as the Venice or São Paulo Biennales. My own collecting diminished and I have barely extended the scope of my collection since. Younger painters didn't especially attract me. At that time, I thought that British sculpture, on the other hand, was exceptional: Barry Flanagan, Richard Long, Gilbert and George, David Nash, Antony Gormley, Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor and so on. But we have works by Hepworth at home and they don't seem to welcome other sculptures.



Alan Bowness, November 2015



Terry Frost, *Yorkshire Black and White*, 1955



Patrick Heron, *Soft Vermillion with Orange and Red: April 1965, 1965*



Roger Hilton, *January 1962 (tall white)*, 1962 (left) and William Scott, *Blue Still Life*, 1957 (centre)

How did I acquire the major pieces in the collection and exhibition? Many were gifts from the artists for help and advice, and for producing books and exhibitions, for which I often took no fee. This includes Scott's *Ocean*, Lanyon's *Drift*, Davie's *Tree of Life* (1962; pl.13) and Heron's *Horizontal: March 1957*. Allen Jones gave me *Parachutist* (1963; pl.19) and Ceri Richards his *La Cathédrale engloutie, profondément calme* (1962; pl.18). Artists are very generous. For the Stuyvesant exhibition and book I took no fee, but the Foundation gave me (my choice) Smith's *Alpine* (1963), Heron's *Soft Vermillion with Orange and Red: April 1965* (1965; pl.10) and Hilton's *January 1962 (tall white)*. Mrs Lanyon gave me *Boulder Coast* and my wife Sarah gave me *Loe Bar* (1962; pl.6) for my work with the Hepworth Estate. Scott's *Blue Still Life* and Frost's *Yorkshire Black and White* (both long coveted by me) were bought with the pension lump sum I received on leaving the Tate in 1988.

I also bought at auction, or in the trade (as they say) for very low prices – no-one else was interested – early works by Scott and Hilton and Frost's *Pink Summer's Day* (1951; pl.2), as well as Stephenson's *Reddi Painting* (1961; pl.17). I gave the latter to the Fitzwilliam in 2000, after Ian's early death. A large group of paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints, chosen with David Scrase's help, followed in 2006. This included sculptures by Brian Wall and Michael Kenny, paintings by Harold Cohen, Davie, Denny, Frost, Hilton, Richards, Scott and Wynter, as well as works on paper by Gillian Ayres, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, Henry Mundy and William Turnbull. Richard Smith's *Alpine* was given to mark the Directorship of Duncan Robinson. More will, I hope, follow.

Thus, despite the obvious omissions, the collection does give an in-depth picture of British painting, principally from 1955 to 1965, which was I believe an important moment in its history. With my books and catalogues, which are going to the University Library, it will provide a valuable research tool for future students of the period, and, I hope, pleasure and inspiration for visitors to the Fitzwilliam Museum.



A party in F.E. McWilliam's Holland Park garden following the opening of *54:64 Painting and Sculpture of a Decade*, April 1964. Left to right: Terry Frost, Patrick Heron, Bryan Wynter, F.E. McWilliam, Mary Scott, Beth McWilliam, William Scott, Delia Heron, Roger Hilton. Photograph: F.E. McWilliam

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