

jessica cooper essays

a place to be : catalogue introduction by sam bleakley for the hart gallery 2001 |

A surfer as well as an artist, Jessica Cooper knows what it is like to sit on the skin of the ocean still as a bird while all around seems to boil. The very tip of west Cornwall, that must have seemed like the world's end to the Ancients, plunges dramatically into a sea stirred overnight from glassy calm into a white-tipped frenzy, the weather rushing in to dip and kiss its blessings and curses, and move off hurriedly. Jessica's new exhibition of landscapes and still lifes captures the calm geometry at the centre of these elaborate weather changes, celebrating more than a sense of place, to mirror a sense of movement around place. Paint is sometimes left to drip from the canvas, leaving traces that are tethers, tracks for the eye to follow upward, to finally rest on a deceptively solid house, a symbol of shelter not just at the heart of the storm but also at the heart of the calm.

The short drive from St Just to Sennen is a regular journey for Jessica – what the Greeks called *katabasis*, the journey from interior to coast, from shelter to adventure. She leaves behind the whispering remains of tin mines to embrace a coastscape by turns bathed in reflected light from the sea. Her painting *An Interrupted Silence* is full of this luminous white light. Just the burrs of burdock can be made out, as if to shout, 'I am alive'. It is what you cannot see and hear that is revealing in such apparently minimal work – the surplus, such as riotous beds of gorse, restless sand dunes, inventive skylark harmonies, a pounding shorebreak pulled up and pulled back to the twin tidelines by the distant moon, like a bedsheet cast off and then recovered. By bracketing out this surplus, yet hinting at it slyly, Jessica's paintings are far from minimal, but sing, and advertise body. The tidal layers are repeated as white acrylic on canvas, the painter's arm like the surfer's paddling motion, moving one presence smoothly over another. The white is not languid phrasing, like a lazy jazz player quoting common riffs, but intensely beautiful moving space, or better, a location in motion. Making such a space sing, with eloquent phrasing, is again the secret to Jessica's latest paintings, working at the animal edge of silence: the cliff-top hobby locked into a hover. The mark the bird makes stains the human memory

as Jessica's paintings do – such as *Scraggle Tops In The Rain* - shifting your attention away from the obvious to the unexpected. Not the bird suddenly dropping like a stone, tipping the ground and wheeling away, but the nearby foliage stirred by the movement. And this is, paradoxically, music to the eyes.

Track To The Beach reveals a density of silence, a deep anticipation, in one of the pathways that lead to the edge of Gwenver beach (skirting Sennen and forming the north of Whitesands Bay). *Nothing But Blue Lines* is like an aching silence bouncing off a calm sea punctuated by a perfectly timed cluster of blue lines. After the set of waves passes, a big space opens up, and there is, again, a familiar noiseless calm. As Jessica says, "The point is to spend a little bit more time looking and listening. People don't seem to do that enough. I try to notice. I have these things I look for on the beach, like cowry shells. And I've noticed how they only come with certain tides, and cluster after certain winds." For Jessica, reality should be experienced as it presents its face, neither prettified nor avoided. "I like to watch where the cormorants dive for fish," she adds. "It always seems to be the spot where the wave energy is highest." This hot spot where the familiar greets you is readily identifiable in any of Jessica's paintings as the point of balance.

So, the point of a life is not to gain materially, but to capitalise on one's senses in close noticing - an aesthetic adventure. A trip from St Just towards Sennen is "never a wasted journey." Jessica's sketchbook accompanies her whether surfing, walking, or just sitting in the van and gazing. A recurrent theme in her work describes visits to her close friend, Miki Ashton, from whose cottage you can stare beyond Whitesands Bay to strip back the horizon and reveal an imagined Nova Scotia coastscape. This house offers the template for the vibrant still lifes and interiors in the exhibition.

In *Have I Told You Lately* the green lilies seem to reach out from a patterned vase to unlatch a window. The tabletop slopes towards the sea in an effort to marry wood and water. Jessica's ubiquitous fruit bowls reflect the changing moods of that sea, where light scooped up now bounces off the bowl as it would from the slack drumhead of a calm ocean. The sense of the familiar reveals the sea and its creatures as familiars. A cup and saucer drawn in the same room is entitled *Sitting Deep*, echoing surfer sitting on seaskin as saucer, ready to be tipped. This urgent sense of being at sea is most apparent in the recurrent image of houses, often central to the painting. They promise hospitality at the heart of a stark landscape. In previous collections, Jessica's houses are grounded through a horizon line or a link to the canvas edge. My

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Heart Lies In It shows greater freedom and possibly a new terror: two houses with russet roofs float at sea in darkness, arks without immediate purpose.

Like all surfers, Jessica is not all at sea. There is promise of a return to shore on each wave, and the expressive movement of anabasis – from coast to interior, from Sennen to St Just. Jessica's paintings will find homes, the floating houses at least temporarily tethered to feed the domestic imagination, terroir – the very smell and taste of the place - replacing terror. A deepening commitment to surfing (Jessica is hardcore, she goes in whenever possible in all conditions) has offered a new and acute sensitivity to the coastal landscape that promises new movement in Jessica's work. I know the feeling, having been bitten by the surfing bug many moons ago, turning surfing and surf travel writing into my livelihood, and returning to live above Gwenver. A recent fierce low tide had left the vast expanse of beach raked with salt patterns, and I spotted Jessica, a lone figure walking in a big arc across the sand before paddling into the sea as if this were really her first home. Her new works reveal this kind of rhythmic engagement with coastscape, and capture the fluidity and surprise of surfing without resorting to cliché: "There is a raw feeling of dread and exhilaration when you surf," says Jessica. "When it goes wrong it totally jars. And there is an element of risk with a painting. If I leave a piece to dry flat it might thicken a line too much. Or, if left upright the drip might change the whole feel of the canvas." Risk here is not fear of drowning, or getting frostbite as you slip on your wetsuit in sub-zero temperatures in Sennen car park. Rather, the risk - and its attendant fear - is of fully inhabiting the pulse of places, so that, like a musician, you can play in tone. Such tonal risk is exercised in *The Hidden House*, an essay in scales.

For Jessica, the process of translation from senses to sketchbook to canvas can vary. Some tracks leave traces as forms of inscription in the sketchbook, following a songline. This might lead to layering with paint, perhaps 20 layers of white, built and rebuilt as the form of poesis familiar from Homeric epics, where standard lines are said over and over to work as building blocks so that improvisation becomes possible. Renaissance alchemists called this process the *iteratio* – iteration – repetition, rehearsal, getting the basics down. However, other paintings call for instant improvised acrylic lines. Painting is like surfing. You do not get anywhere before you have mastered the basics. But after that,

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spontaneous and sometimes unintentional movements can produce poetry on the waveface.

“The lines in the sea are the hardest to paint and read,” says Jessica, and much of this exhibition is about “trying to follow that fluidity”, interlinking it to a sense of place. The outcome is again making space and movement out of a sense of place. In analysing these paintings, it is easy to move away from their initial inspiration and final location in the heart, in straightforward love of coastscape. Jessica has found a home in this genre. “I have come to terms with a lot of things,” says Jessica. “I am at home in a new house, at home in the sea, happy with life as a professional artist. So I have been able to let go with my work because I feel like I have nothing to prove.” The world is first and foremost expression, an aesthetic event, a ‘giving off,’ just as birdsong is mostly not about marking territory or finding a mate (functional explanations), but simply for the sake of singing, for sheer display. Is this frivolous? Not at all – it is the basic motivation for any art form. Beauty does not need to be explained, appreciation always comes before explanation.

Sam Bleakley
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