

jessica cooper essays

catalogue introduction by elizabeth knowles

the certainty of uncertainty

the hart gallery 2009

This exhibition of Jessica Cooper's new work includes still lifes and landscapes painted with her characteristic brevity and bravado. There is a strong flavour of poetry about her images, where outward simplicity presents intense significance. The ambiguity of language is also called to mind and the paintings are wide open for anyone to read and interpret as they wish. Inferences might be drawn from their titles, always quite specific aides-memoir for the artist but generally telling us more about her ways of thinking about her work, than about any particular subject.

Firmly rooted on the furthest wind-swept western edge of Cornwall, Cooper is spiritually, socially and artistically at home there. Stepping out into the exhilarating power of the Atlantic, she surfs for that next perfect wave but at home in the studio her attention is on formal and painterly concerns. Her imagery is close at hand – the fruit on the table, or her memory from something she glimpsed in passing. A building's gable end or a tree nearby might have that certain quality that chimes with her poetic tone and voice.

These new paintings have followed after a four-month break from painting, occasioned by a period of disruption and inevitable stress as the family moved house. They endured an uncomfortable time between houses and then took a trip to Spain, driving from Santander to Galizia along the coast. As soon as they got back to their newly renovated house, Cooper began work in her new studio and having been cut off from her usual domesticity, she turned to four bowls of fruit as starting points, 'to work out my life'.

She also worked from the tiny ink sketches she had made from the moving car in Spain. Incidents and perspectives among the steep cliffs, hidden bays and mountains clothed in eucalyptus trees were caught in the briefest of notes of buildings, trees and hillsides, to be remembered and worked as paintings

in the studio. Things catch her eye, like a tree that stands companionably beside a house, or three abutting buildings nestling together like a family. Although Cooper says she is usually 'determined to do x and always does y', her paintings have a strong sense of deliberate and concentrated focus. In the process of painting the fleeting poignancy, or the poignant idea, that turned her head as she passed, is made manifest. 'It's not the panorama or the detail', she says 'it's the untouchable bit inside your head'.

In the paintings of fruit, more warm colour has been introduced though black and white and grey still dominate. Earthy reds and purples on full round fruit shapes are set in crisply drawn bowls against a clear ground of white or grey. There has now more often been a break with former techniques of hosing down her canvases to distress the surface and a move towards leaving her many-layered paint surface un-scoured. Cooper is allowing the paint to work on its own terms, working with slower, more considered layers. When she distresses the painted surface, it has been to seek unpredictability - 'the certainty of uncertainty', to make something 'untouchable', counteracting the easy slip of the brushed mark. Now it seems she is finding a more confident painterliness – though the washed surfaces are still used sometimes, as in 'Frosted White'.

These paintings speak of home and of a loving life. Jessica Cooper's is an art of the every-day and of every day's engagement with our inexpressible and aspirational inner life. Her painterly language communicates the evanescent but essential. She does not deny or cover up the turmoil and pain of life – or the difficulties of making serious art – but her paintings simply affirm, through their formal completeness, the best, the truest aspect of ourselves.