

JOHN HOYLAND

Morgan Falconer, John Hoyland: The Last Paintings, The World of Interiors, August 2021

EXHIBITION *diary*



John Hoyland: The Last Paintings **MILLENNIUM GALLERY** Arundel Gate, Sheffield

Death will come for us all. Maybe with pathos, possibly bathos, but probably just with banality. If you're an artist, however, you had better make it grand. There are Titian's late works to consider, Rembrandt's elderly soul-searching. As John Hoyland reached his seventies, the man sometimes described as Britain's best abstract painter saw many of his old friends pass – Patrick Caulfield, Terry Frost, curator Bryan Robertson. So, feeling it was time to put affairs in order, he painted a series of 'Elegies' dedicated to friends, and 'Mysteries' for what lay beyond.

An exhibition of those last works opens at Sheffield's Millennium Gallery this month, and it's accompanied by a fine publication that captures the gamut of thoughts about artists in later years. Mel Gooding writes a somewhat official script, saying how serious it all is ('he created a uniquely radiant poetic mythos of darkness'). And in a compellingly honest reflection, Matthew Collings remarks on Hoyland's uneven fortunes (pinnacles in the 1960s, then sliding) and how these intersect with your own changing feelings about an artist's work as they age and evolve. He also points out the inescapable fact that these late paintings aren't so grave. He calls them 'lurid', 'kitschy'; says they have 'nasty sweetness, shininess, bauble vulgarity'. And that's not exactly criticism: in an age of juice cleanses and wellness, maybe requiem gravitas just feels wrong.

Hoyland was raised in working-class Sheffield and emerged an unlikely star of Color Field painting. Sombre post-war accents and gestural expressionism were out, and Hoyland turned heads with expansive, citrusy, zippy abstractions. And he did delicious things with the newly invented

medium of acrylic, staining it into the fibres of his canvases to create emphatically flat, dry surfaces that contrast with ambiguous, luminously coloured spaces. He showed in the landmark London shows of the 1960s – *Situation* at the RBA Galleries, and the agenda-setting Whitechapel exhibition *The New Generation* – and even decamped to New York for a time and mixed with Rothko, Frankenthaler, Motherwell and Newman. When he returned, the winds turned against him, yet when Damien Hirst opened his Newport Street Gallery in 2016, Hoyland's was the first show. Hirst recognised his kin: a fellow working-class Yorkshireman, a blokish romantic.

The late works on view in Sheffield don't have the kooky geometries of the earlier ones but instead feature blooms and eruptions of colour, suns and moons and voids. The form-language is appropriately mystical, cosmological, yet the colours that illuminate the darkness are tropical, electric. Van Gogh is one recurrent focus, and in *Letter to Vincent* (2006) Hoyland seems to pluck an orb from the Dutchman's *Starry Night*, a notably optimistic vision of afterlife, and refashion it in scarlet and blue.

And in the painter's very last work, *Moon in the Water* (*Mysteries*), 2011, a blood-red planet lights up turbulent, inky waters. It's something you might glimpse while strolling late at night, daiquiri in hand on the edge of an island paradise, and it turns your blood to ice. **JOHN HOYLAND: THE LAST PAINTINGS** runs 3 July-10 Oct, Tues-Fri 10-4, Sun 11-4. A monograph of the same title is published by Ridinghouse, rrp £35 ■ **MORGAN FALCONER** is a critic and art historian who teaches at Sotheby's Institute of Art in New York

Top left: *River of Bliss*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 1.52 x 1.4m. Top right: the artist in his Charterhouse Square studio, London, 1998