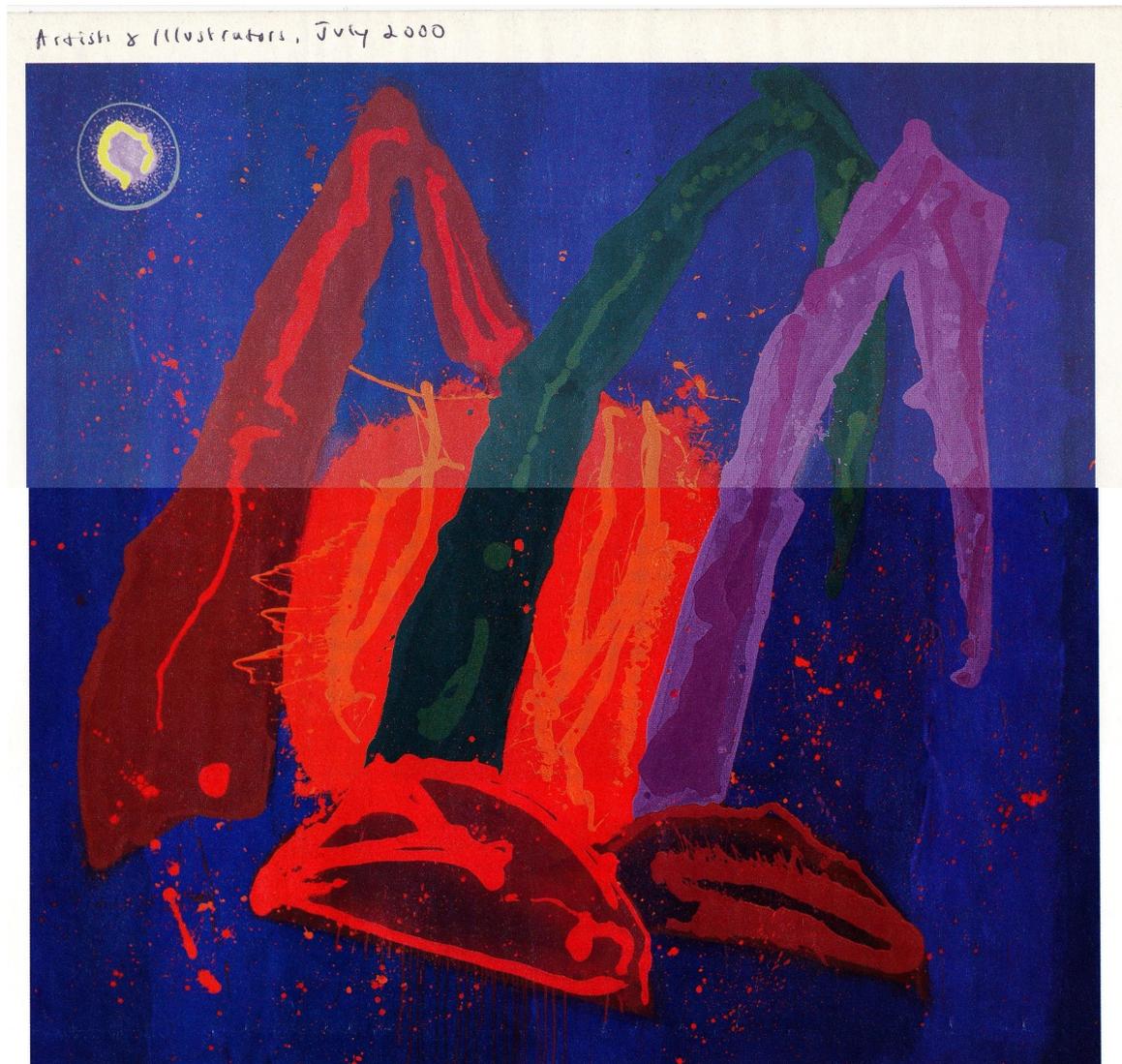


JOHN HOYLAND

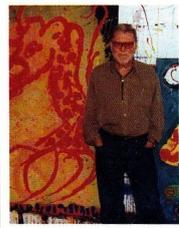
Virginia Boston, Getting Metaphysical, Artists & Illustrations, July 2000



GETTING METAPHYSICAL

PROFILE OF JOHN HOYLAND RA

John Hoyland was born in Sheffield in 1934 and attended Sheffield College of Art and the Royal Academy Schools. He taught at Hornsey, Croydon, St Martin's, Royal Academy, Slade and Chelsea colleges of art. He won the John Moores in 1982 and curated the Tate's Hans Hofmann show in 1988. His work is included in many major collections, including the Tate Gallery and British Council. He was elected RA in 1991.



Top: John Hoyland, *New Born Sun*, acrylic on canvas, 229x234cm.

John Hoyland has been busy. He began millennium year by lunching with the Queen. In search of inspiration he then set off for Haiti where he slept fully dressed in freezing air-conditioning to avoid mosquitoes and dengue fever. In perilously iced-up planes he flew on to Canada for his university exhibition, with visits to Miami in between.

He'd suggested meeting in a pub but when I arrive it's Sunday lunch and he's fragile from the previous night's Desperate Dan dinner of cow's tongue and lamb's tails, washed down with wine. So instead we sit in his flat surrounded by his colourful paintings, ceramics and glass sculptures.

Hoyland drew a lot at night as a child. He

Paintings are like imaginary beings, says **John Hoyland**. He explains why to *Virginia Boston*

could delay his bedtime by three hours drawing Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck. It was wartime, there were few toys and he remembers always wanting to make things. "I'd make Plasticine cowboys and divers and lower them down the side of the settee on string."

Hoyland's imagination wasn't fed by his surroundings in industrial Sheffield. "I didn't even notice there were seasons until I was 18. Sheffield was such a black place, always cold ►►

JOHN HOYLAND INTERVIEWED

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and grey; Sheffield and Pittsburgh were regarded as the two most polluted steel cities in the world."

His first exposure to art came when he attended Sheffield's junior art school aged 11 and visited a local gallery to see Turner's watercolours. The art school was a risky choice but his mother supported him. "The pressure on working class people to get a job was enormous; friends doing science were almost guaranteed a job," he says. "With art you could study all you liked and end up with nothing."

He went on to study at the Royal Academy School where he changed direction from working figuratively to overt abstraction. It proved too much for the School's president, Sir Charles Wheeler. "He saw my work and blew his top. There were other abstracts but mine seemed more objectionable, probably more extreme, the colour more violent, discordant."

He eventually received his diploma but was not permitted to exhibit his work in the end-of-year show, a blow to a penniless graduate trying to find work and establish his name. It was a stroke of good luck that the head of fine art at Hornsey College of Art had been looking around the RA School when he came across some of Hoyland's paintings. On the strength of what he saw he gave Hoyland a day's teaching.

Hoyland's love for colour was undoubtedly a

reaction to the grey environment that he had been brought up in. He describes a seminal moment in 1954 when his eyes were opened to the incredible possibilities that an acute awareness of colour creates. A fellow student had been invited to visit the South of France and Hoyland hitchhiked down with him. They arrived at the coast in the early hours of the morning and fell asleep on the beach. "When we woke it was like being in Tahiti. There were brown-skinned girls diving, palm trees, bananas,

"In Bali it was like seeing in nature what I had been trying to imagine"

grapes. I'd never seen anything like it in my life – a 17-year-old skinny white boy from Sheffield. It put me on the Gauguin syndrome for the rest of my life."



Above left: John Hoyland, *The Ark*, 16.2.85, acrylic on canvas, 244x244cm. Above: John Hoyland, *4.2.70*, acrylic on canvas, 183x76cm. Below: John Hoyland, *Sheffield* 1954.

Hoyland sees his early transition from the figurative to abstraction as similar to the paths taken by Matisse and Mondrian. "When you're young, you look and you paint. Next you look, think and paint. Then more and more the painting becomes autonomous, a parallel to nature. The more liberties you take, and the more you go back into your own imaginative responses to a subject, the more free it becomes. It's a process of simplification and reduction, sorting out what is important."

The move to abstraction was consolidated by meeting Victor Pasmore who was running a course on colour and form in Scarborough. "I had half an hour with him explaining to me the difference between Renaissance space and the contemporary idea of space. Half an hour with him was all I needed."

Hoyland's growing interest in American painting was fuelled by the artist William Turnbull, who taught an evening class at the Central School. "He didn't realise I lived on the same bus route. I'd lurk after class and grab him for any shred of information. He had to go on teaching until I got off the bus."

In 1956 the Tate's exhibition *Modern American Painting* was the first major showcase for the work of the foremost exponents of American abstract expressionism and colour field painting. Rothko, Newman and de Kooning were present in a show which was to have a huge impact on many British painters.

"It was awesome; we didn't understand it, where it came from. I didn't know how much Motherwell owed to Miró, or Rothko to Matisse. I didn't know how much Newman took Surrealism and Constructivism and made it into something new. We were all very ignorant."

Hoyland became increasingly interested in visual perception and this led to his optical paintings of 1960-62. "If you look at the dates of my so-called 'striped paintings' you'll see they predate Op Art by two years. In those days two years was a long time. I rejected it, because it didn't suit me temperamentally."

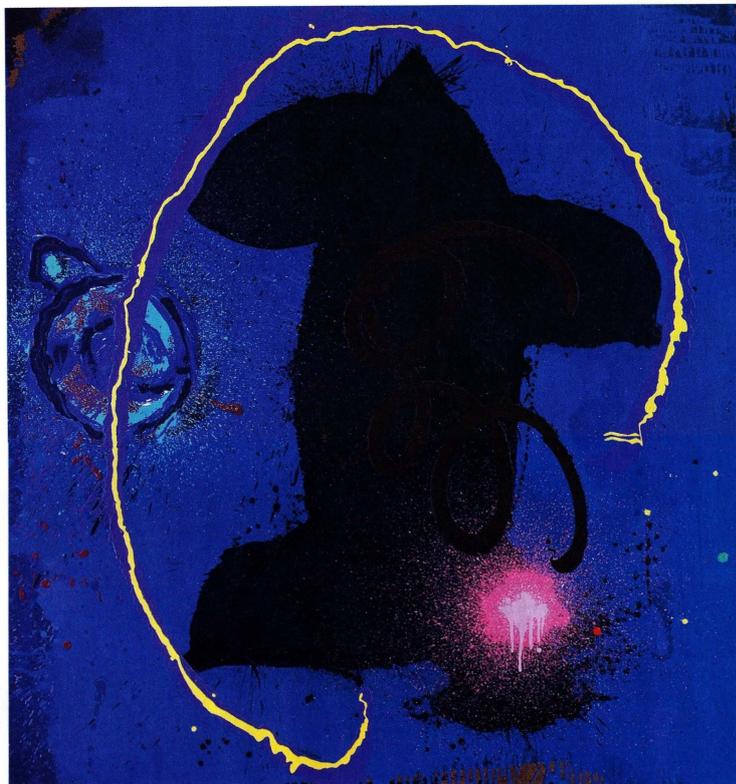
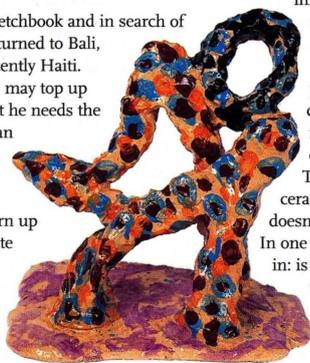
After an exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in London, Hoyland received a letter of congratulations from an admirer who described his work as 'exquisite'. He reacted with indignation. "I'm not exquisite. If I am painting exquisite then I am not painting me," he told himself. He needed to break out but didn't really hit his stride until 1964 when he got into a rhythm of work that fulfilled all his needs.

The honeymoon with Marlborough over – they couldn't sell his work, saying it was too big – he was nonetheless climbing the teaching ladder despite his lack of formal education. "Coming from a non-verbal background you had to learn to talk to people who were better educated than you, and somehow explain ideas to them that they didn't understand."

Fifteen years ago Hoyland was beginning to feel he was running out of steam when he was given a book on Miró. "Here was a man who had the greatest imagination of the 20th Century, yet who went to the beach every day and picked up a shell, a rock, or piece of string to kick him off. I thought, if Miró had to do that who am I to think I don't have to? I had turned my back on nature because I didn't want to copy nature. When I went to Bali in 1990 it was like seeing in nature what I had been trying to imagine. It blew my mind."

Armed with a sketchbook and in search of a creative fix, he returned to Bali, Cuba and more recently Haiti. These tropical trips may top up his imagination but he needs the grey of London as an incentive to paint. "I come back, look at the railway line, close the blinds, turn up the music to recreate an emotional intensity and paint

John Hoyland,
Sorcerer, 1994,
46x43x27cm.



John Hoyland, *Black Something*, 8.2.90, 254x236cm.

to compensate myself for that loss of colour."

So where is he going with colour now? "I've no idea, colour chooses you. It's like love or lust. Drawing is more in the head, it has to be thought out because it has to do with structure. Colour sweeps over you, overwhelms you, because it's the closest thing to emotion."

His retrospective at the RA last year prompted reassessment. "It's a great learning process: when you see your work there you can't look at it through rose-tinted spectacles, like you do in the studio to keep your confidence up and keep yourself going." And his reaction to his early work? "The paintings are more original than I realised at the time, because despite the influences they are not a Hoffman or Rothko; they are quite original statements."

Hoyland isn't just painting now. He points to a collection of primitive ceramic creatures he's made. "Painting is like a killer sport, it's about life and death. Failing is like dying. It's lonely. That's why I like doing prints and ceramics. It's fun, because if you fail it doesn't matter."

In one of his prints a spindly figure has crept in: is he returning to figuration after all these years? "Some recent paintings have a figure in them – I call it a new element. It's inspired by an African grave sculpture I bought."

Some of his unusual titles are angels' names from *The Book of Angels*, given to him by his dealer to encourage him to name his work. This led him to read Borges's *Book of Imaginary Being*, inspiring more paintings. "Paintings are like imaginary beings, creatures, presences," he says. "And there are a number of presences that co-exist in this painting. They are almost about to break out into the real world but are held behind the mirror."

I can quite believe these abstract shapes to be the creatures from Hoyland's inner, imaginary world. Yet I am surprised this rather gruff man believes in another dimension. "When you are in Bali and it's night-time and you are away from civilisation, it is quite easy to start believing in these spirits. I believe in a metaphysical dimension and I think painting is metaphysical. It is not something you can build in. If you don't think of it, it won't happen. I think all the greatest paintings have a metaphysical dimension – there is much more to them than a sum of their parts."

The faint smell of blood hangs in the air around an empty Smithfield Market as I leave. Somehow it reminds me of Hoyland, a mixture of unreconstructed man and sensitive soul who sustains his inner life with "poetry, ideas, dreams and imagination". **AM**