

JOHN HOYLAND

Bryan Robertson, John Hoyland, Modern Painters, 1994

JOHN HOYLAND

Bryan Robertson argues for a retrospective exhibition for John Hoyland, whose recent paintings are among the finest made by a British artist in his lifetime.



John Hoyland, *Street Scene, Sheffield, 1954*, 45.7 x 66 cm

When a senior British painter of proven visual power and eloquence is moving through a lengthy phase of work from which occasional great spectacles of disconcerting originality emerge but which are attended by other paintings that seem more awkward in manner, raw in execution, or uncertain in tone, then it seems the right time – with so much on the move – to assess past and present. John Hoyland has established himself securely inside British painting since the early '60s. For three decades, his solo exhibitions have provided a focal point for younger artists, for whom he has always been an unstuffy and sympathetic presence with inspiring bouts of new work from time to time. And Hoyland has not lacked general recognition in the past 30 years among collectors and critics – although apart from the odd review very little has appeared in print since the '70s.

Like other good abstract painters, he more or less disappeared from critical sight during the '80s when figurative art dominated the scene. But I believe that we have now entered a more balanced time when good work of all kinds can be more accurately perceived. I also believe, in Hoyland's case, that his work deserves more of a spin than it's had lately because at 58 he is painting with what I can only term a heightened awareness – and he's right in the centre of that time in an artist's life which Vaughan Williams had in mind when he grumbled about the English only paying

attention to precocious or promising young people or to grand old masters, ignoring the real struggle in between.

Although none of us wants to hear any more of the hyperbole that so persistently undermined criticism in the past two decades, I must here declare a special alignment with Hoyland's work. In my view, he is among the first half dozen or so artists in this country; very unevenly so, but at his best, Hoyland has painted some of the strongest abstract paintings in British art since Nicholson. For what it's worth, my taste is not confined to abstract painting: I enjoy the best work of Bacon, Auerbach, Kitaj, or Hockney as much as the paintings of Clough, Jack Smith, Riley, or Hoyland. Art is a big house, and I like to feel free to wander from room to room and not be confined to the ghettos created by dogma.

A recent conversation with Hoyland allowed the artist to set down a few thoughts about origins and current work. My commitment to Hoyland's painting really covers his professional career so far. In the first place, I was persuaded by Paul Huxley to visit Hoyland's studio in Chalk Farm in 1963, to consider his work for inclusion in the first 'New Generation' show at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1964. Hoyland's work in that show won him a bursary from the sponsoring Stuyvesant Foundation to visit the United States. In 1967, he filled the Whitechapel Gallery with great distinction in his first major one-man show. In 1979, I selected and catalogued another

large show for the Serpentine Gallery. I refer to these connections only to stress that any few reservations that I may express here about recent work – which is essentially the strongest of all his work so far – spring from an extremely positive viewpoint. The main concern of Hoyland's work from the beginning is the use of colour as an expressive vehicle: ways and means of saturating each canvas with colour to a maximum degree while keeping the actual vehicle for colour, the mark or shape, as simple as possible. At first, he explored interchangeable figure-ground relationships in different ways, and entered into a prolonged encounter, often on a heroic scale, with the colour-field painting explored in the US by Frankenthaler, Noland and Louis. But Hoyland's approach to form as well as his response to feeling springs from basic sympathy with a tempered, refined version of expressionism, so that a phase of work in the later '60s appeared to bounce off a synthesis between aspects of Rothko, Lewis and Hans Hofmann, for whom Hoyland has always had great admiration. (The small Hofmann show at the Tate in 1988 was selected by Hoyland.)

But you cannot reduce a good artist's work to a recital of influences, and Hoyland's best painting, from the beginning, has extended a dialogue with certain issues in the air but always gone far beyond any verifiable influence in paintings which blaze with an independent authority. And most importantly of all, Hoyland's work has gradually contained and projected a *subject*, not just an abstract style, that is unique to Hoyland and owes nothing to any transatlantic dialogue. The question is: What is the subject, and what are Hoyland's paintings about?

Very briefly, in the '70s, Hoyland painted a number of canvases which at one level continued and extended the preoccupation with format, the games with formal procedures that had so exercised his mind in the '60s – but which were given a fresh twist through increasingly associative or referential connections. Some paintings in the early '70s in a kind of abstract expressionism in slow motion, using pale pinks and madders, soft lilac and yellow, touched on something in spirit like Monet's garden paintings but underpinned by a grave formality which set the swelling, burgeoning, blossom-like clutches and spatters of paint in a calmly abstract, dream-like composure.

The paintings continued to explore format abstractly – edges, the centre, diagonals, centripetal and centrifugal structures – but with an increasing richness and grandeur in the handling of pigment. And increasingly, the paintings took on a non-

HOYLAND

specific but very real identity, replete with implications of place and time. I've never seen any sexual imagery in Hoyland's work, but without joining the ranks of those who see images, meanings and associations in what is really abstract work with no intended content, it becomes more and more evident that Hoyland was loading these abstract paintings with an extra dimension. The paintings work as abstract structures, but they sometimes also look like a huge mountain, or hills and a distant plain, or mountains and sea, just as it was always hard not to see a wall of blazing fire, or the converging flat walls in the corner of a mysteriously empty room in some of the earlier variations on abstract themes. The paintings have always offered us celebrations, a spectacle, more than is required by the formalist terms of reference. Most recently, Hoyland has worked his way out of what had begun to him to feel like too improvisatory a process – although he will always, like any artist, allow for chance – and to work from notations of shape and colour. To a certain extent, he has often made preliminary notations, hardly drawings; but he now photographs marks and daubs on walls which seem to touch on his present concern for ideograms and calligraphy, and paints over or accentuates odd parts of the photo, then executes a study or sequence of studies in colour and line which may or may not be used as a basis for large paintings.

Some of the new paintings are among the finest made by any British artist in my lifetime. As spectacular affirmations of the human spirit, tracteries of action and strong feeling, they sustain their grand scale. Others, often smaller works (there is a consistent swing between very large and



John Hoyland, *Coffee Bar, Sheffield, 1955*, 59.7 x 38.1 cm

quite small canvases), seem over-heated, or over-loaded, or to confront the eye with raw pigment that hasn't been consumed by an image. Hoyland works in intensive bouts of activity for weeks on end and then switches off, as it were. What is needed very soon is a fair-sized, but compact retrospective exhibition to trace Hoyland's evolution as an artist and to set these recent paintings in the right context. The show would catch him at a crucial shift in his development and in full, quite magnificent flight.

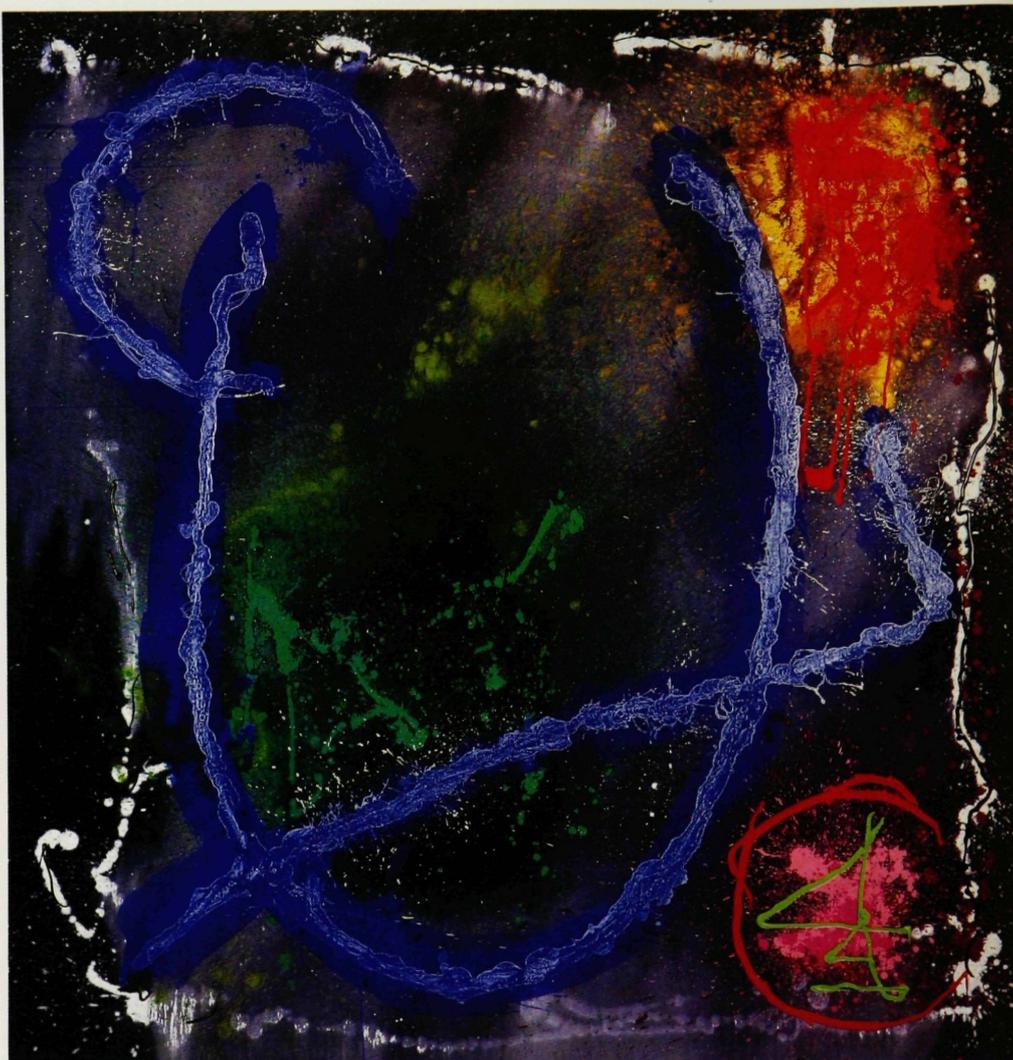
Bryan Robertson: I've always understood, maybe over-simplistically, that the great abstract art of this century came about by a process of working through reality or some aspect of the physical world – the nude, landscape, the interior or still life obsessively perceived and analysed – in stages toward simplification, and then, like a sort of exorcism, a casting away of what Rothko called 'crutches', venturing into some form of abstraction without any obvious references to the physical world, but maybe with some distilled, remembered vestiges of its appearance – like Mondrian's sequence of trees. But you seem to have begun, back in the '50s, straight off, as a fully-fledged abstract painter. I know that you made drawings of figures and street scenes at art school, but it soon stopped. This has always bothered me, rather, because some aspects of the basic design course introduced into art schools in England in the '50s appeared to reduce to neat formulae a lot of Klee's teachings at the Bauhaus and thus to offer the possibility of a sort of 'instant' abstraction, design jobs without roots.

John Hoyland: I was a figurative painter for about eight years before I even dreamed of moving into abstraction. I'd already been a student in Sheffield for four or five years before, as a student at the Royal Academy Schools, I saw a Mondrian for the first time. Nothing could convince me that it meant anything more than a tablecloth design. You'll recall that the problem in art at that time, as everyone saw it, was how to make a painting that was both figurative and abstract. De Stael



John Hoyland, *Untitled, 7.8.1969*, acrylic on canvas, 198.1 x 365.8 cm. Collection: Sir Alastair McAlpine

HOYLAND



John Hoyland, Nagas, 28.9.1991, 254 x 236.2 cm

is the best example of what I mean; Robert Medley was simplifying form and moving in and out of abstraction – he loved Guston's still-life paintings; Nicholson and Scott were also concerned with that particular balancing act.

Where I came from, Sheffield, nobody had ever explained the content of modern art to us. When fellow students who had been on courses at Newcastle – where Tom Hudson, Harry Thubron, Victor Pasmore and Richard Hamilton were among their mentors – began to explain the evolution of Mondrian's work to me, the metamorphosis of his drawings of trees, for instance, towards making an autonomous painting,

or Matisse working directly from the nude model but ending with an independent image – then it seemed an exciting possibility, to make a painting that was independent of local colour or illustrative form.

At art school in Sheffield, we were taught to draw in a kind of Renaissance tradition of line drawing. Hockney continued in this tradition and even developed it, but we all began with it. I learned to fake it, reasonably well, but I never felt comfortable with it. It didn't seem natural to me to draw a triangle between the eyes, the nose and the mouth, or to try and render the curve of a cheek bone purely in line.

At the Royal Academy Schools, you

faced a three months probationary period when you were only allowed to draw. I felt that drawing was the weakest element in my work and I knew earlier that I was fudging it – however persuasively, but not to me – and I decided to go along with the RA discipline and confront it in the incessant work of the life class. Rejecting line and contour, I began to draw with charcoal and coloured crayon, looking for plane and volume and arriving at the form from inside rather than outside. If you draw with line you hope to suggest form with line, but I was blocking it in with almost the equivalent in charcoal or crayon of paint marks. You arrive at the contour through volume.

MODERN PAINTERS

HOYLAND



John Hoyland, Kings Seal, 22.9.1993, 254 x 236.2 cm

This seems almost a sculptor's approach.

Perhaps. It's also a more painterly way of drawing. I wasn't trying to short-cut anything or deliberately go against the precepts of drawing on offer at the RA, it was just the direction in which I was naturally, instinctively impelled. There's nothing particularly original about it, either, as a way of drawing.

Your best paintings have always seemed to be in overdrive or filled with a romantic excess, a blaze of light or fire like a tropical sunset or forest fire, or a heat-drenched Mediterranean coast scene. And yet you've always been

a self-proclaimed abstract painter and seen as an abstract artist. In the early '80s, still life seemed to appear, however wildly and loosely, the nearest you've got to something explicit, from reality.

Art is about making ethical and poetical judgements; with discerning taste, bringing together a group of generalities to a concrete, formal conclusion to make a bridge between the artist and his audience. From the beginning I've always been excited by what I saw as the challenge of formal ideas, abstract precepts if you like. This has always seemed the most radical extension of visual language in my lifetime.

I feel that the best non-figurative painting has a greater potential for meaning than figurative art. You can think of some big exceptions, but I find the best of it more profound. It has the mystery of the finally inexplicable. Of course I want it all – though I understand only too well the limitations of painting.

When and why did you begin to feel the need to begin a painting from a more consciously perceived or planned approach? Or to make more obvious reference to the visual world? Did you make drawings or preparatory studies for paintings?

Whether I would wish to or not, I find it

HOYLAND

◁ impossible to paint the same problems over and over again. I find it difficult even to paint another version of the same image. I have to change the image, formally, with each picture, even though I habitually work in series. I've always thought of my work as being dialectical, in the sense of being aware of contemporary art as well as the art of the past. Also, there's been an unconscious but widening interest in the possibility of finding models from outside my own culture.

In twentieth-century art, there are so many precedents for artists finding role models outside their own culture; or being radically influenced by another culture. It's paradoxical that at the end of the twentieth century with travel and communication as they are, and after so much cultural openness, people should be looking inwardly, culturally and politically. What I hope to do is to make cross-cultural hybrids. I'd love to make paintings that could cross social, linguistic and cultural barriers in the way that music does. It's a dream, but an enjoyable one. It may be doomed – like Esperanto!

I don't accept the dominance of European culture, or the centrality of the Renaissance. From my point of view, the world is open, culturally speaking. From the reverse viewpoint, culturally speaking, from the point of view of so-called Third World artists, they've also been exposed to world culture and equally cannot go back to tribal or folk art. They will also have to create new hybrids from within their own open culture.

You asked about making studies for painting, about outside references. I've always made working drawings, which are often only diagrams of great simplicity. They've never been exhibited because they are of no real interest as drawings in their own right.

After years of a fairly tight formal approach, I feel the need to broaden out. I've retained the habit and instinct of working through themes, serially; but I realised that artists with the greatest imagination and invention need to be stimulated not only intellectually but through the external world. Miró went on the beach every day and collected shells, bric-a-brac, whatever had washed up. Moore picked up stones, flints and shards. The great cerebral painters of our time had run into a cul-de-sac – Rothko, for instance, and Mondrian. They hadn't exactly switched off, Rothko ending in illness and depression, Mondrian still extending his ideas through the late *Broadway Boogie Woogie* paintings, and only cut off by poverty, illness and early death in New York. Then their followers had merely recycled and degenerated their achievements into minimalism. This didn't seem a fruitful path. These things only



John Hoyland, Sketchbook Studies, 68.6 x 48.9 cm

dawn on you gradually; it's not as if you sit down and think, I'll take this path or that.

Equally negatively, I didn't feel that the so-called new figurative painting, with its illustrational aspect, could satisfy me plastically. By plastically, I mean what Matisse said: 'Colour must not clothe art, it must constitute it'.

I think that I started during trips abroad, mainly to the Caribbean, to make simple drawings and to take rough polaroid photographs of the vegetation, fruit, underwater scenes when snorkelling for the first time. This was around 1985. From this quite scrappy material, I'd make more composed, diagrammatic drawings, still small in scale. Then I'd push these drawings through a number of variations, sometimes at this stage beginning to draw with coloured crayons. I play around on the surface of the photo and impose colour here and there even before I make the diagrammatic drawings or use crayons.

In *Renoir, My Father* Renoir was asked at some point why he wasn't using more colour, and he replied: 'I'm from the South', meaning that he had no need of colour. Living in this country, pleasurably and equally I may say, I don't really feel any sense of poetry that I can empathise with or which can serve as a stimulant. I like black and white, but I can't stand grey. As a child in Sheffield in the war years, everything seemed drab and drained of colour. It's to do with light, of course; the quality of light

in England is visually muted, filtered and low-key. As a student, I loved van Gogh, Matthew Smith, de Stael, Dufy, Matisse, Picasso and Mantegna.

My friend Robert Motherwell was the editor of *The Documents of Modern Art* and this great series included the *Selected Writings and Interviews of Joan Miró*, edited by Bob Motherwell and Jack Flamm. More and more as I grow older, painting becomes a distillation of what one reads, what one hears – music – what one sees, dance, the whole spectrum of audio-visual material stored in one's memory. Even food and drink can be part of painting.

I've been trying more and more to take on things that aren't my strongest point, to confront my weaknesses. For instance, I was never very good with line, but I've always loved calligraphy. And calligraphy has led me to an interest in the ideogram. Pictograms have their origin in the representation, as a pictorial symbol, of things like a bird, or water, or an ear of corn. Ideograms symbolise a broader *idea* of a thing without expressing a sequence of sounds in its name, as in Chinese characters. Reading Miró, I saw that he was so open to all kinds of visual stimulation. In the USA, what he loved was not only the gladiatorial character of sport, but the *colour* of sport – American football is very colourful. This would also tie in with the violence in a lot of his work. Miró said: 'I'm putting my money on violence'.

The distilled energy of violence or extreme passion is in the way that Pollock or Motherwell used paint. It's all controlled, of course, as in Miró. It's to do with the way in which speed, energy, immediacy, total spontaneity were embodied in a mark. But that mark isn't mindless: the mark comes from meditation, and then action.

In my most recent gathering in of sounds and information, I realise that I'm not living in the Caribbean and I've been looking for archetypal images or starting points from within my own environment. That is, graffiti, cracked pavements, stained walls, broken windows, and so on, looking out at the ancient trees in Charterhouse Square. If I see something memorable, I'll return and photograph it. Occasionally, I'll go out early on a photographic reccy, or I'll use a small notebook and make direct drawings. But these drawings are always beyond direct transcription. The polaroid photos are of poor quality and of no interest on their own. They have meaning and potential only in my imagination. The other day I made a drawing in a notebook of a mark on the side of a skip seen on my way to the funeral of a father-in-law – more precisely, my son's wife's father. And here's the variation with colour I made later in the studio. Its a possible beginning, or maybe not. □