

# Graham Dean: Light Sweet Crude

The title of this exhibition (gleaned from the Press) describes a particular grade of petroleum oil, so why would Graham Dean apply it to his latest paintings and prints? (Try saying it out loud, slowly – it sounds good). Each word has its own resonance, strikes its own note; it carries too, more than one meaning, more than a single implication. Put together, their individual meanings cross-relate, expanding (sometimes contradicting) the resonance of the others. Dean likes this play, enjoys the ambiguity, multiplicity, and the possibility of double entendre. If this is true of his titling, it is, more crucially, also true of his paintings. Apparently accessible as they are, immediately attractive in both colour and energy, Dean's images are as multi-layered in meaning as they are in technical execution. Like good friends, they repay close and prolonged attention. Form, colour and the particular qualities of the watercolour medium, all resonate in our reading of them. Inherent shifts in meaning allow individual interpretation and referencing to remain open, rather than closed. These are expansive, universal images because Dean deals with the experience of being human, with the complexities of our emotional relationships with each other, and with the world. Our individuality is formed through this interaction; our interior lives are constantly penetrated and altered by the external world. Dean explores the apparent opposites of interior / exterior, inside / outside, surface and what lies beneath – declaring them to be, ultimately, different facets of the same thing.

This primary theme of exterior / interior informs all the work in this exhibition. Although the paintings deal predominantly with the human form, Dean's simultaneous engagement with the urban environment is evident too. In *Tuo Edisni / Inside Out* and *Tuo Edisni / Inside Out II*, Dean's interest in high-rise facades is as a 'skin', that peeled away, exposes their interior world (buildings, like people, are most interesting for what goes on inside). Exploiting the fluid nature of his medium to the full, Dean creates stains of colour that grow like a spore-carried organism across the concrete facades: the consequent sensation of flux and movement, of form glimpsed and then lost again, transforms these solid structures – they dissolve before our eyes. In the flicker of form of *Inside Out I*, the blood red rays of a dying sun, against a rich green, conjure the image of fire, its licking flames contributing to the organic destruction of the man-made. Dean's interest in such structures stems from his first encounter with Las Vegas, where the experience was predominantly one of being bombarded with colour and synthetic colliding images. There is nothing solid and constructed about the buildings of *Tuo Edisni* (inside out, reversed) series: Dean's intention may be to expose the interior of these buildings to our gaze, but he has also created a visual metaphor for the essential transience of the urban, and for the built, environment.

Dean's colour washes read uncannily like skin, the contours created where they meet, like the edges of blistering sunburn. The formation of tissue layers, muscle and bone beneath the epidermis has engaged him in the past: in images where peeling skin is a metaphor for vulnerability and the thin line that divides the interior self from the exterior world; or where the musculature of a dog's head, rendered in an entirely green palette, reads as the contours of an unknown landscape. More recently he has used a technical drawing of the interior of a baby's head as a starting point for a large painting, and has become interested in the ghostly imagery produced by X-rays. The delicate tracery of *Handmade* (the title a pun not only on the subject, but also on the nature of the image and of the paper that supports it) reveals the vulnerability of the human frame, of the structure of the body hidden beneath the skin.

In his tough, uncompromising paintings, Graham Dean is revealed as a sensualist. He is intoxicated by colour and by his pleasure in the sense of touch. He is engaged too, by the textural qualities and the technical potentials of his materials: he loves the thick Indian paper he paints on, the transparency and opacity his medium is capable of delivering. We, in turn, respond to the seductiveness of both his palette and of the surfaces he achieves. His visual and tactile delight is translated into a finely tuned application of colour, and a sophisticated manipulation of his medium: the range of textural qualities he achieves is astonishing, he can make pigment suspended in water do almost anything he wants. Dean describes his current work as 'colour led', where colour is the subject, as well as the expressive vehicle for emotion. He exploits to the full the fact that the function and character of an individual colour is changed by relationship: he is particularly engaged by tones 'hitting off against each other' (creating what I call a 'zing'), when complementaries – like yellow and violet that appear opposite each other in the artists' colour wheel – meet.

Dean's use of dramatic colour contrasts is accompanied by the layering of opposites on top of each other. His combining of red with green echoes the practice of that quintessentially English landscape painter, John Constable, who employed a red ground, in order to make his greens sing. The application of paint in a series of glazes (transparent layers which together create intensity and depth, or 'body', of hue) further marks Dean's practice, however contemporary and innovative his imagery, as solidly founded in traditional technique: the use of colour glazes has been employed throughout art's history, by painters as diverse as Titian and Rothko.

Dean's approach to colour, as both his central theme and his primary means of expression – in particular the freedom and confidence with which he handles bright, glowing hues (still a rarity in British art) – marks him out as, essentially, a colourist. The intense, high key vocabulary of colour in these new paintings is deeply indebted to his recent residency in Trivandrum, Kerala, at the southernmost tip of India, where 'the colours are on the very edge of the chromatic scale bordering on ultra violet'. He remembers vividly the impact of bright sari silks against a predominantly verdant green landscape. That experience of startling contrasts is evident here in Dean's combination of colours, as well as in their individual tonal intensity, in particular, in his placing of figures against a rich red ground. In *Lotus Trader* and *Rhythm Trader* the red/violet and blue/violet of the female figures embody the sequential relationship

between red and blue, two of the three primary colours: suffice it to say that Dean is well versed in colour theory. A direct reference to India is made also in the titles of these two paintings – shop names seen in passing that resonate with a mysterious poetry.

The small intensely drawn, *Carnal Desire* offers the most direct example of the impact upon Dean of traditional Indian Hindu temple sculpture, where the depiction of intertwined figures locked in passion is a central theme. The influence of this uninhibited celebration of human sexuality is subtler, but none the less evident, in *Second Skin II*, where the conjoining of the female and male body is achieved through Dean's collage technique. The intimacy of human relationships, in which individuality is relinquished and transcended in the experience of duality, is a recurring refrain in the new paintings, powerfully expressed through the convergence and interpenetration of fragmented forms cut from earlier paintings. In their vitality and humanity these images transcend the private and personal to take on a significance which touches us all. In some paintings the interplay of figures is explicitly stated, whilst in others it is conjured from the (partly random, partly controlled) coalescence of flowing colour washes that characterise Dean's use of his medium. The central figures in *Second Skin* and *Rhythm Trader* clearly contain, and are constructed from, other human figures; elsewhere hidden heads and bodies emerge, as we study the image – at times we are unsure whether these are actual, or are a conceit of the eye that suggests intention where there is none.

Unexpected angles, odd foreshortenings, and awkward poses (sometimes bordering on the physically impossible), render the human body a strange, even unsettling object, in Dean's work: the intimately known, revealed as exotic. The disposition of his figures is likewise unconventional, the odd angle of their bodies given further emphasis by their relationship with the painting's edge: heads are cropped, shoulders and knees crammed into the picture space, and limbs disappear over the edge. As in *Ember II* the figure's posture is often accentuated by the drama of light and shade created by the use of contrasting colour washes. Dean's habitual juxtaposition of complementary colours lends his work a strong theatricality. He 'spot-lights' his figures like a filmmaker might, and like a filmmaker he emphasises individual features or areas of the body as a dramatic device. While this has much to do with his engagement with the power of colour to articulate emotion as well as form, Dean's experience in the making of film and video must stand him in good stead. The moving image, where time and change are depicted frame by frame, may also inform Dean's working procedure, in which the final painting rests upon a prolonged sequence of activity, of over-layering, of change, of eradication and resurgence.

In *Second Skin II*, and *Yellowhammer*, the severe tilt of the head presents the torso as vulnerable and exposed, while the denial of eye contact between figure and observer, maximises the object-ness of the human form. Dean takes this pose to its extreme in *Amber*, where the head and face have slipped from view, and the arms too are gone: without identity, the female body becomes a truncated and stretched canvas, a vehicle for the artist's imaginings. Dean calls his figures 'holding

pens' for emotion: the medium through which he explores a range of concerns and ideas. Many of these poses have their origin in his practical process of bringing together fragments of earlier paintings, while others evolve during a dialogue between the artist and his model (the latter contributing to the discovery of what is of interest, and what not).

Dean is also well versed in the history of art, and over the years has accrued an extensive and eclectic hoard of mental images. (His witty appropriation of art's iconic images helped make his name: *Leo and Mona* (1974), has Leonardo in bed with the Mona Lisa, a landscape in the style of the maestro seen through the bedroom window). The tilted head of *Second Skin II*, and *Yellowhammer* (that has also appeared in his latest prints, *Blue Decoy* and *Decoy*), haunted my imagination. Where had I seen this strange pose before? Then it came to me: the two flanking figures in Mondrian's triptych, *Evolution of 1910-11*. I am not suggesting for a minute that these three nude female figures, their colour and faceted forms explicitly influenced by theosophical doctrine, have a direct relationship with Dean's image. (But he, like me, might have had this uncharacteristic Mondrian locked in his memory). When we discussed this, Dean thought that possibly a painting by Toulouse-Lautrec, with a female figure to one side and lit from below, might have been at the back of his mind – but he is going to check the Mondrian.

Graham Dean has been a close observer of the world since he was a child. In consequence he has a rich storehouse of memories that re-emerge, often unbidden, as he works: the association of past and present plays an important role in the evolution of his imagery. The implicit themes of fragmentation and of time passing are strongly echoed in his practice of assembling current work from fragments of previous paintings. His process is cyclical and organic, in which painting leads to apparent destruction in the tearing of, often fully-fledged, works into sections, and then to 're-birth' in the formation of a new work. (The backs of many of the completed paintings give an indication of the quality of the work Dean 'sacrifices' in this process of deconstruction, for it is his habit to use both sides of his paper). He has, tantalisingly, drawers full of pre-painted segments awaiting their role in the conjuring of a final image. Frequently these elements contain a specific component of the human body (hence the high probability of an earlier leg appearing in the torso of a later figure): when they come together, and body part meets body part, an act of creative alchemy takes place and they become one. Dean's working process would undoubtedly endear him to the ancient Egyptian god Osiris, who having been dismembered by his brother Set, was reassembled by his sister/wife, Isis – the goddess, appropriately enough, of fecundity.

Invented by Picasso and Braque during the development of Analytical Cubism, the technique of collage (from the French *coller*, 'to stick') was initially a means of introducing fragments of the real world (newspapers, etc.,) into their compositions. Later Dada and Surrealism used it to create irrational conjunctions of 'found' imagery. In each case collaged elements deliberately broke compositional unity, and created spatial disharmonies or incongruities of scale. Dean's use of collage is different, and yet has something in common with its historical use. Apart from the

fact that his whole 'canvas' is constructed from assembled, almost invariably pre-painted, elements (that are then worked over), his intention is harmony and integration, not their opposite. In Dean's art, collage is a metaphor for the diversity of his imaginative sources and for the kaleidoscopic nature of experience. (Our experience of the world is less as a seamless moving picture show, than as a synthesis of images and ideas: in which the past mingles with the current, and memory overlays, informs and subverts the present). On a technical level, collage is also a means of plastically constructing his image, rather than directly painting it (this is presumably why Dean describes his work as being 'at one remove'). The serendipity of encounter and chance are therefore, by definition, central to the evolution of his imagery, as his own torn fragments take on the character of 'found' elements, which in juxtaposition create unexpected conjunctions. This process allows Dean to 'discover', rather than dictate form and contour. This is true even when he is working from the model: in paintings like *The Diver*, he persistently moved and refined the body's contour until he had what he wanted – his personal, constructed line, rather than the outline of the model.

Dean's procedure as a painter is highly complex and multi-faceted. His habit of deconstructing images in order to reassemble new ones produces a complexity of form that might otherwise be impossible to attain – and to control. While an extra limb appearing within the torso of a figure may at first strike one as odd, if not actually macabre, scanning the image in its entirety reveals the complexity of structure that goes into the composition as a whole. The surfaces of these paintings, if not the images, are entirely abstract arenas where form, colour and line are in a constant state of flux. As the eye moves across Dean's paintings, it is arrested by first one juxtaposition of colour with colour, form with form, line against line, and then another – it is like looking through one of those wonderful children's kaleidoscopes where chips of coloured light come into focus as jewelled forms, only to melt away and then meld together once more.

However direct these paintings may appear, they are hard won; apparent simplicity belies what the artist calls the 'edginess' of their making. Dean creates a cohesive whole from his patchwork of paper fragments, only after a prolonged period of working over and into the initial assembled image. Cross-fertilisation between images plays an important role, as he works on perhaps as many as seven paintings simultaneously – the development of each, feeding the progress of the others. It is clear too that an individual pose or elevation can haunt Dean's imagination for a long time: recapitulation and reiteration allowing him to fully explore the capacity of the image to carry the meaning he intends. In holding to it, he may wring from that image the last drop of tension and emotion – to arrive at the essence of it, the better to deliver its truth.

Speed of execution, intuitive and instant decision making are central to Dean's working method, in which risk is high on the agenda. In terms of technique anything goes: a water-based medium allows him to, literally, wash away (under the shower!) areas of form / colour, in order to redefine a contour, or refine a tonal range. The resultant pentimento and soft-edged pooling of colour enhance the textural quality

of the work. Dean's painted figures have 'skins' with all the subtleties and variations of our own. As he works, the artist pushes himself and his media to the limit. He needs and enjoys the adrenalin buzz that comes with the fear of knowing that at any moment he might take (push) a painting too far, and lose the image. Success and failure are a move apart. As the image unfolds, he covers his tracks, leaving as much hidden, or merely hinted at (for our own imagination to chew on), as is visible. In a process that has been described (by an archaeologist) as 'reverse archaeology', Dean constructs his imagery, layer by layer. What we see in the finished work is the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Glimpses of the individual painting's history remain, but the nature and extent of the artist's activity is largely lost from view.

There is nothing conventional about Graham Dean's art. He likes to break rules: his use of colour, he says, contradicts everything he learnt in art school. Equally, throughout his career he has never rested upon his success, but rather repeatedly challenged himself to be inventive – to find new ways of manipulating his materials in order to create his images in a new way. His adoption in the 1990s of a medium more usually associated with small scale, intimacy and delicacy was clearly courageous. The association of watercolour with the tasteful and polite can no longer be maintained. Dean disabuses us of these outmoded references. Under his hand the medium has come of age, in toughness and capability it stands against any other media a painter may use.

**Lynne Green**

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