



A SHORT GRAND TOUR

PROFESSOR SIMON OLDING + JIM HUNTER
text + work

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SHORT
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- I Jim Hunter's recent watercolours, and two significant acrylic paintings that derive their content from the watercolour series, are bold and risky works. They are experimental. They are seemingly casual in their construction; yet they are also highly considered. Indeed, Hunter has used a research sabbatical to reflect intensively both on the practice and the theory of his paintings. That he has chosen watercolour as his preferred medium is notable, certainly today when watercolour painting has seemingly lost any reputation it may have had as a medium for progressive experimentation in the visual arts. It is a choice that is individualistic. It could also have been no more than quirky.
- II Venice is a destination that makes artists – unless they have a particularly tenacious ability to block out art history – pause for thought on what has happened before in the name of the visual arts. This might be for the sake of the past, and the radical, far-reaching way in which Turner transformed watercolour as a medium for the picturesque view into a medium of technical innovation. It might be for the sake of the present, and the expectations aroused by the curatorial extravaganza of the Venice Biennale. It might be for the ineluctable draw of a place where the nature and quality of reflective light, the virtuosity and spectacle of the built environment, and the luminous quality of water, combine to dazzle and inspire all prospective painters.





John Ruskin remarked on the challenge when describing how he set off for a day's painting in Venice in 1876, his concentration at its peak for 'an hour of my very best day's work to painting the school of Mark and vista of Canal to Murano. It's a great Canaletto view, and I'm painting it against him'.ⁱ Ruskin's awareness of the competition here is framed by a sense of the problematic nature of watercolour as a medium – a problem Hunter is fully conscious of. Ruskin writes in *Lectures on Art*:

'The extended practice of water-colour painting, as a separate skill, is in every way harmful to the arts: its pleasant slightness and plausible dexterity divert the genius of the painter from its proper aims and withdraw the attention of the public from excellence of higher claim'.ⁱⁱ

Here, deftly described, is the contemporary challenge too. How is it possible to use watercolour seriously, when it has been, and still is, the medium of a thousand amateur artists with the outcome of that troubling image, the pretty picture? How is it possible to use the speed and efficiency of watercolour, its sense of the instant and unchangeable mark on the paper, in a contemplative way? How can a view of a famously painted city work, not for the sake of representation, but for the sake of an abstracted, deduced and memorised landscape?

III Hunter carefully prepared for innovation by working through a convention: the convention of the preparatory sketch. His large and entirely abstract watercolours owe something, at least, to a meticulous set of preparatory watercolour drawings, made in Venice, quickly done at his chosen spots in the field. The sketch books contain numerous lyrical and sometimes quasi-representational studies often from the same spot. Here is the insistent beat of looking through a subject to find a means of expression, not for the moment, but to be stored for a later reflection.

These books are notes to help the artist draw out the essence of place, to assign certain symbols that might reappear in the larger, later watercolour with a particular value; to help in the consideration of scale and the shape of a mark or line. They are complete in themselves, as well as hidden prompts for the painter, returned from Venice and back in his Dorset studio where the large paintings were made some months after the research sabbatical was concluded.

It seems to me that when Hunter began his significant new watercolour series, he was subliminally thinking not of Venice, certainly not of Dorset,ⁱⁱⁱ but of America. There are exemplars of the modern American watercolour that are close in mood, scale and content to these Venice paintings. One might think of a large watercolour such as *Horizontal Still Life* by Jo Rebert and its 'seemingly effortless structural dominance [and] chromatic energy'.^{iv} Hunter would certainly find accord with John W. McIvor's view that the artist should above all 'be sensitive

to transparency, white space, drawing'.^v He finds in American modern watercolour vigour and expressiveness, certainly more so than in any English equivalent. He identifies with American watercolour since it is untrammelled by history. He likes the notion that the watercolour painting, too, can be a performance. More particularly, he is conscious of the work of the American artist Brice Marden. Hunter admires Marden's intuitions and improvisations, his vigorous abstract line, perhaps best expressed in this context by his works in gouache and ink for the series of paintings entitled *Cold Mountain Studies*.^{vi}

Marden has recorded specific places here with no concern for exactness or completion, rather in response to the freedom of movement, the sense of dance implicit in the quickly drawn line. The openness of the *Cold Mountain Studies*, the rich counterpoint of the rounded, mazy line and the expanse of white paper, offer a clue to the effect that Hunter has aspired to, and met, energetically as well as carefully, in his studio-based watercolours: not of Venice, but about Venice. These works are also means of looking back at a previous body of work: not because he found it wanting, but because of the insistent need to progress. The watercolours are concerned with Hunter's desire to forecast and to set a challenge from what has gone before.

IV Jim Hunter's watercolour paintings are works against the norm. That is, in their sheer scale, their luminous emptiness, their scrupulous (yet seemingly random) placement of marks and blocks of colour set against the contrary roughness of collage, these works defy the tradition of watercolour as a medium for faithfully and poetically recording the accuracy of a landscape. These are evocative, not descriptive, paintings. Hunter chooses his watercolour paper very carefully to create the intended effect. Most works in the series use Arches Aquarelle hot pressed paper, with its smooth surface and less absorbent qualities.^{vii} Some works are on 'not pressed' paper with a rougher surface and higher absorbency, where the brush stroke drags more. This use of professional materials is matched by a more carefree approach to additional papers that are collaged onto the watercolour sheet. Hunter uses mundane scraps of paper, remnants from the studio floor.

The outcome is a body of work with a new-found sense of freedom. Hunter has travelled to Venice determined to use his research time to take his own practice forward, to find uncharted space. Venice is less a destination, more a launching pad for another journey, this time a journey of artistic imagination. The geography of these watercolour paintings is therefore deliberately ambiguous. These are works that have come out of a specific place but they espouse a theory of departure. They bear little resemblance to the content of Hunter's previous acrylic paintings with their flat tonality and straight-edged, angular compositions.



Hunter regards these new paintings (as he does the totality of his practice) as sitting in a modernist tradition. This established a strong tendency to abstraction as a means of responding to landscape, for example, as well as placing importance on the artist's physical performance. Modernism allows Hunter to look at the landscape or built environment and depict it fairly and with conviction without the need to consider the objective reality in front of him. Place is important, but only when it is combined with the ability to place an abstract configuration of shapes and speedy marks on the paper, for their own sake. Hunter's Venice then is as much a place of the imagination as it is of reality. These watercolours could not have been made in the field, firstly because of the physical impossibility of managing huge sheets of paper, secondly because the paintings are arrived at after a period of absence from place. They recall and evoke memories of Venice. Hunter says that 'landscape gives me a freedom to make things up'.^{viii}

These works also fall into the long tail of a modernist tradition because they challenge the status quo, the traditional norms of the watercolourist with the domestic scale, elegance and particularity of frame, the descriptive work of what Sarah Unwin called 'the shoal of amateur artists' in the 19th century.^{ix} But Hunter is not dismissive of tradition. He simply takes from it what he requires to make innovation in his public work. He relies, indeed, on the conventional challenges of watercolour, its spontaneity and its immediacy. He even relishes that it is a material broadly ignored by critical attention. There is no sustained critical or theoretical literature on watercolour. The literature

is fundamentally didactic and instructional. Watercolour books are manuals of technique, not theoretical discourses. Watercolour is the poorest of poor cousins.

Consequently, Hunter has a pretty clear field in which to experiment and innovate. He does so with an eye on other admired and respected contemporary artists. Notably, Hunter has used with due care his sympathy for the intuitive paintings and drawings of Ian McKeever.^x He shares with McKeever an interest in the close relationship between drawing and painting, watercolour and acrylic. McKeever has also deliberately used travel to take him to remote or inhospitable places (Siberia or Greenland). Here he uses the sense of a specific place as a 'metaphor for existential states', to create fluid, rhythmic gouaches in 'a vibrant, improvisational quality', for example in large paintings entitled *Pause* and *Assumption*.^{xi}

Hunter's watercolours are more expressive and less meticulous than his preceding work. They bear only gestural traces of real place: the occasional outline of a room plan or the curve of a roofline or dome. (Physical elements are more apparent in the Venice acrylic paintings that derive from the watercolour series). Venice is seen remotely; observed first in relentless yet poetic detail in the sketch book, and then, in the calm of memory in the studio, transformed.



The Venice watercolours are oppositional works. They challenge a watercolour tradition, finding the act of representation wanting. They have no apparent interest in the accurate history of a place, even if the sketchbooks contain works that are more literal evocations of particular views. But this is not a fractious art. Indeed, Turner and Cozens act as unspoken commentators to this practice.^{xii} Hunter's watercolours are full of hidden and half-hidden shapes. Swathes of colour are marked out sometimes exactly, sometimes with more abandon. The watercolour sheet is freely, gesturally composed, with what Hunter calls 'a certain cackhandedness'.^{xiii} There are bold sweeps of watercolour and ghostly memories of line: scorings, casual layering of paper, and an intense interest and care for the visual qualities of liquidity and openness.

There is also a high respect for a narrative of process. The journey from the sketch to the finished watercolour and the finished acrylic painting in this series is a carefully-thought through and logical narrative. It may also be a journey with an unforeseen ending. Hunter is investigating a project whereby one of his large Venetian watercolours might be strategically placed next to a representational oil painting of St Mark's Square Venice in the permanent collections of the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth. This would enable the direct comparison of the abstract and the realistic view of the city; and add an ironic note to Hunter's own role in Venice as a professional cultural tourist.

VI These Venice paintings, then, deliberately and idiosyncratically use 'the most fluid, responsive and immediate of media'.^{xiv} They are the output of Hunter's own, highly productive, short grand tour.

Professor Simon Olding
December 2006

Footnotes

- i. *Ruskin's letter to Charles Eliot Norton*, 5 October 1876, quoted in Kenneth Clark, *Ruskin Today* Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, 1967, p.73.
- ii. Quoted in Clark pp.176-177
- iii. Hunter has previously produced many watercolour paintings based on his understanding of, and appreciation for, the Dorset coast landscape at Purbeck.
- iv. *Watercolour on paper*, 27 x 40 inches, illustrated in Edward Reep, *The Content of Watercolour* Reinhold Book Corporation, 1969, p. 92.
- v. Quoted in Reep, p. 77.
- vi. See Klaus Kertess, *Brice Marden: paintings and drawings*, Harry N Abrams Inc., New York, 1992.
- vii. The watercolour paper is bought on a large roll 60" wide and 10m long.
- viii. Conversation with the artist, 1 December 2006
- ix. Quoted in James Aynes, *The Artist's Craft: a history of tools, techniques and materials*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1985, p.110.
- x. See www.ianmckeever.com
- xi. Jill Lloyd, Ian McKeever: *recent paintings and ten years of drawing*, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2004 pp. 12-14.
- xii. I am thinking of Alexander Cozens's 'Blot' works. In his *New Methods* Cozens shows how seemingly random marks on paper can be used to create an abstract landscape.
- xiii. Conversation with the artist, 1 December 2006
- xiv. From Hunter's application for a research grant to the Arts Institute at Bournemouth 2005-6.





Jim Hunter is Director of the School of Art at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth. He has held senior posts at the former Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design and Cleveland College of Art and Design, continuing his practice as a painter alongside his career in art education. He was born and grew up in Co Durham, attended Winchester School of Art and graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1976.

In many ways the most significant period of study for him was the time he spent in a studio in the Cite des Arts, Paris. From this period grew his enduring interest in modernism and the potential of abstraction.

Landscape has been the predominant reference in his work and he has remained constant to the practice of drawing directly from the landscape as the source for his ideas. In the work that he has exhibited in recent years intuitive and expressive responses have been complemented by more considered and protracted research in his studio, exploring the interpretation of landscape through an abstract and structured language.

In 2005-06 he undertook a practice-based research project, supported by the Arts Institute, which included a sabbatical period with visits to paint in Venice. The project was to explore the potential of watercolour to carry and articulate meaning in the critical context of contemporary fine art.

Working in watercolour and responding to a location with the historical and cultural heritage of Venice raises a number of questions on the role of the artist and parallels with earlier artists in the landscape 'tradition': questions of pictorial and cultural representation, appropriation, topographical portrayal and Romantic ideals.

PROFESSOR SIMON OLDING

Simon Olding is Director of the Crafts Study Centre, University College for the Creative Arts. He has pursued a career in the arts and museum sectors with senior management posts including Director of Policy and Research, Heritage Lottery Fund and Director of the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth.

He has had extensive lottery experience including roles as project director for the acclaimed refurbishment at the Russell-Cotes and as project champion for the new build and restoration of the Salisbury Arts Centre during his time as Chair of the Board.

He has a particular affinity for Dorset, and is currently president of the Walford Mill Crafts Centre and a trustee of The Study Gallery of Modern Art at Poole.

His recent publications include the first monograph on the designer-maker John Hinchcliffe and he is co-author (with Vivienne Light) of the first monograph on the sculptor and artist Peter Thursby.

Simon holds the position of Professor of Contemporary Craft at the University College for the Creative Arts and is an Honorary Fellow of the Arts Institute at Bournemouth. He is a Fellow of the Museums Association, the Royal Society of Arts and the Tourism Society.



The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth is one of the leading specialist education providers in Europe. It is one of the few higher education university sector institutions that focuses exclusively on contemporary arts, design and media.

The Institute is an academic community that embraces critical reflection derived from research and scholarship as an intrinsic aspect of professional practice.

Research and scholarship activity provides a positive contribution to curriculum currency and students' learning, and contributes to the local, regional, national and international standing of the Arts Institute.

The Institute is proud of the professional practice of the staff and the success of its alumni, which includes Wolfgang Tillmans, winner of the Turner Prize in 2000, Nick Knight, the leading fashion photographer and Simon Beaufoy, who wrote the script for *The Full Monty*.

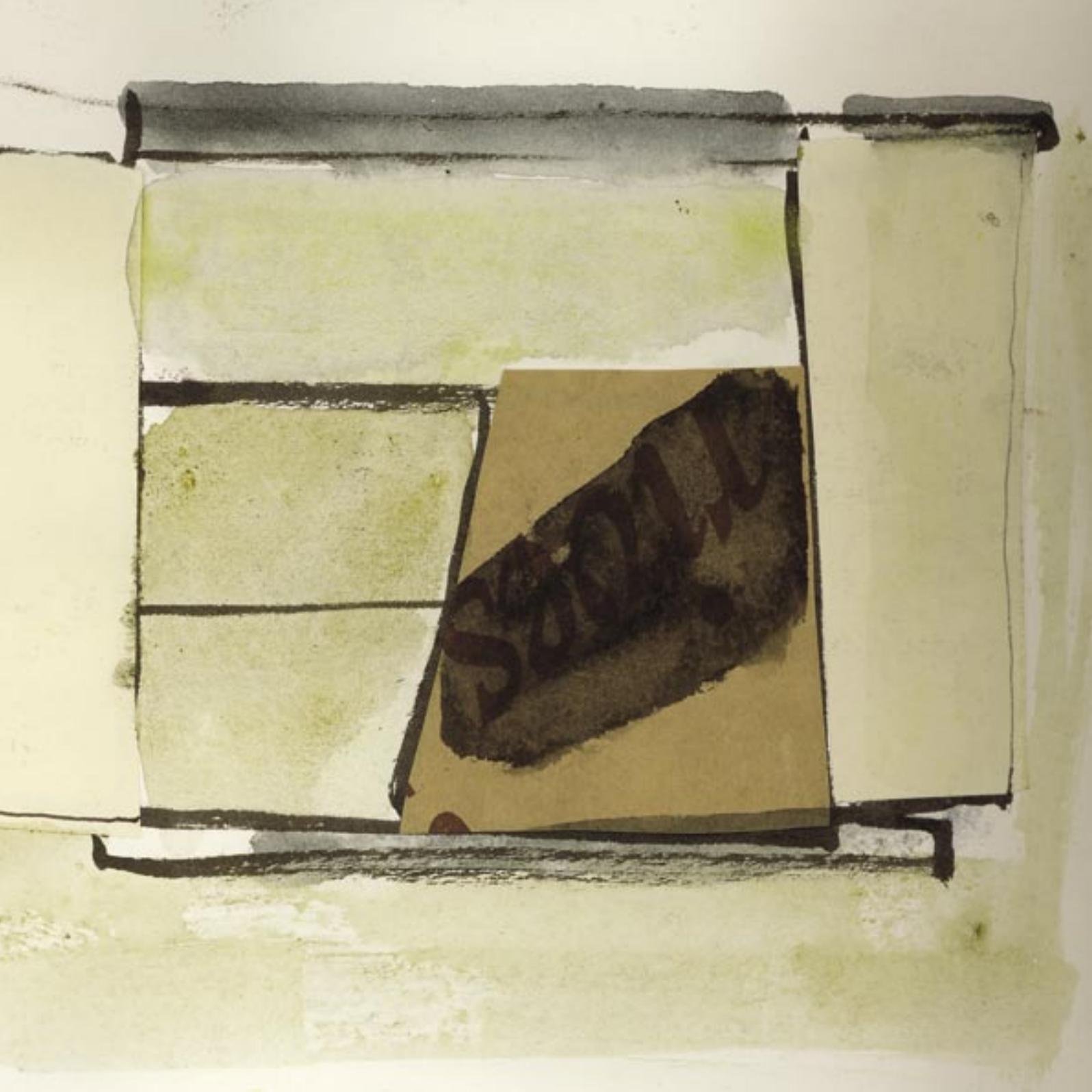
text + work

The Gallery is a major resource for contemporary visual art at the Institute and has received regional and national recognition.

The concept of text+work underpinning the exhibition programme, promotes dialogue between innovative contemporary art and design practice and its theoretical context. It provides a platform for practitioners, writers and curators who wish to examine and extend the boundaries between contemporary practice and critical discourse. There are text+work gallery events, critical texts, shared and networked exhibitions, and a text+work website.

A text (essay) is published by text+work to accompany each exhibition in the text+work programme.

For more information on the text+work programme and supporting events please log on to the website: www.textandwork@org.uk



EVENT

PROFESSOR SIMON OLDING + JIM HUNTER
A SHORT GRAND TOUR

5th February – 9th March 2007

The Gallery invites you and your guests to the text+work event and private view on Thursday 8th February. Details are as follows

Thursday 8th February 2007

from 4.30 to 5.30pm, Lecture Theatre One

Followed by a Private View in the gallery from 5.30 to 6.30pm

Opening Hours:

9.00am – 8.00pm Monday – Thursday (term time)

9.00am – 4.00pm Friday

9.00am – 1.00pm Saturday (term time)

Closed Bank Holidays and Saturdays during non term time

Please check website for dates

For further information and to book a place for the event
please contact:

Violet McClean, Gallery Officer on vmcclean@aib.ac.uk

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text + work



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text+work

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

Wallisdown Poole Dorset BH12 5HH

t 01202 363351

f 01202 537729

e vmcclean@aib.ac.uk

w www.textandwork.org.uk