

Structures In Time

ALEX HUDSON interviewed by Paul Carey-Kent

Young British artist Alex Hudson presents two distinct yet related groups of paintings in his first solo show. Both combine figurative and abstract; both examine man's relationship to the landscape, for which Hudson has a genuine love; and both contrast nature with artificial constructions. They question what our primary realities are in a media-driven age, and do so against the backdrops of the classical past and our possible futures.

The first group seems optimistic. Small portrait-format black and white paintings foreground mysterious, possibly transcendental, geometric forms which slice into the image against backgrounds redolent of sixteenth century landscape painting. It's as if Poussin's mythological action had been replaced by a dream of the modernism to come. Perhaps that tempers the optimism, suggesting that it may be in the past.

The second group is larger, landscape-format views incorporating, or sometimes apparently contained within, fragmentary and presumably failing constructions. There is a less spiritual, more dystopic, apocalyptic feel to these paintings, suggestive of science fiction films such as *Bladerunner*. That's emphasised by their colour, which plays off a potentially nostalgic sienna against a toxic, polluted-looking and easily polluted yellow. It's as if we are looking back from the future at what came of our present systems.

The two sets taken together provide a striking aesthetic contrast and a richly ambiguous dialectical chance to consider both where man's relations to nature have come from and where they are headed.

Where did you grow up?

In Beckenham, South London – well-situated to cycle into the Kent countryside or to venture up to the London galleries and museums.

How did you come to be an artist?

My Dad used to be a keen photographer, so there were lots of images around. My teachers showed an interest in my art, and my GCSE work was stolen in its entirety, which I saw as a good omen! Then I studied at Croydon and Kingston and subsequently took my MA at Wimbledon in 2006–07. After the one year MA course I desperately wanted to make paintings, and moving to Dorset enabled me to do this almost immediately. I think being out of London too has helped. Fewer distractions and more time to just get on with being a painter.

Have your main concerns remained similar over that period?

I suppose so. My fundamental interests have always arisen through going out into the landscape and photographing things I found interesting and might want to put into my paintings.

What led to the black and white paintings of objects in landscapes?

I wanted to make paintings which didn't use media-sourced imagery and have nothing to do with the popular ideology and the sales pitch of contemporary life. I just wanted to strip everything out, including colour. The starkness of the black and white image appealed to me conceptually. I wanted to make paintings that offer a way out and a way into somewhere else. They represent some portentous possibility and whatever happens beyond them isn't explained. I like the idea of these structures being discovered at the edge of town, falling or slicing into a classically inspired landscape.

Which could be a slice in the image, not in the landscape at all?

I like that, yes. I mean, there could be a John Stezaker thing going on there – and what I like about his work is the amplification of the narrative by pulling disparate elements together. I think I do a similar thing but any hint of narrative has been emptied out, too.

How do they relate to historic painting?

I'm interested in paintings by Bellini, Tintoretto, Giorgione, Goya and Poussin, to name a few. Paintings that contain religious iconography where you get tracts of landscape in the background and all the action happening in the foreground. The structures in my paintings replace those foreground figures in some respects.

How specific are the sources?

I've imagined the structures, and occasionally make paper maquettes from which to draw them from different angles. I enjoy the contrast between the hard-edged forms redolent of modernist design and the mythical landscapes. The paintings pick over the wreckage of modernism and simultaneously find some aspects that may be of use in constructing the future. The landscapes are not taken literally from older paintings, but combine elements from paintings and from my own photographs and drawings. The more fragmented the landscapes become, the more interesting they are, as paintings. I think that years of looking at paintings, too, has enabled me to sort of automatically paint, or conjure up even, a bit of foliage here, a horizontal plain there etc: it's instinctive.

What is the purpose of the structures we see, or find ourselves within, in the yellow paintings?

The fragmented structures aim to make a generic statement about failed systems without painting volcanoes and grounded aeroplanes, for example! I use architecture as a universal motif to symbolize to some extent natural, social, political and fragile systems

that affect our lives. I'm trying to invest the paintings with a palimpsest of architectural references, so that layers of time are realized and the work becomes more universal and less fixed in time, more open.

'Hanger', in which a structure has broken down completely, is somewhat different?

In 'Hanger' we're presented with a structure gathered up. I wanted to invest this otherwise insignificant jumble of stuff with a value beyond mere appearance by placing it in a hanger / warehouse – as though it were imbued with a greater significance (think of the tangled mess from the Twin Towers... or the wreck of the Titanic). These objects take on an abstract value and become a 'thing' in Lacan's sense, or in other words what Žižek might call the Sublime Object. In some of the works from this series the figure 'X' has been built into the paintings, in structures or landscapes, as a means of referencing some of the ideas of The Real explored in Lacanian psychoanalysis.

As is 'Scene Screen', in which traces of structures are veiled by undergrowth in a forboding landscape?

'Scene Screen' represents an ongoing series of paintings whereby the landscape is littered with the traces of man's presence, where failed architectural structures and natural phenomena collide in a somewhat perverse harmony. I'm interested in the assimilation of these two elements, one hard edged... steel, concrete and glass etc - the other equally aggressive but organic, living.. and ferocious. Again, it's exploring contrasting elements, as in the small paintings, it's just that these are at the other end of the scale.

They don't have the spiritual optimism of the black and white series?

No, not really although there is something sexy about an apocalyptic landscape, right? Optimism, no, it's different and I think it's hard to define. I think there is an innate fascination and beauty in a ruinous landscape, places that once were, that have been drawn back into the landscape, maybe it's our own immortality, I don't know!

The colours are very distinctive...

Yes, and deliberately so, 'Golden Green' and 'Sepia Extra', as though sepia on it's own just isn't enough. I wanted the images to be as open as possible. The sepia veers towards historical painting and the yellow is on one hand like urine, sulphur or jaundice as well as gold or sunlight. It's a slippery colour. There's a curious thing that happens when you paint a landscape. It could veer towards the picturesque and nostalgic or the romanticized and I figured that using this palette with it's built in toxicity, if I veer off towards the latter, that's fine. The yellow is also a reaction against both the Tuymanesque bleached-out grisailles and the Peter Doig saturation of candy shop colours. Both fantastic painters, but so often parodied that it's almost unbearable.

Are there film references?

Yes, of course: the obvious ones like Blade Runner, Apocalypse Now and the Mad Max trilogy, but then there are little gems like Fellini's Roma and 'Stalker' a curious film by Andrei Tarkovsky.

How do you see the differences in mood between the two groups of paintings?

They could be just different states of mind: you can see the potential in things one day and the following day, none at all. Maybe that's painting: one day it's disastrous, the next it's epiphanous and sublime.

Why are the black and white paintings smaller?

I see them as relating to the eye and the mind rather than the body, so I don't want them sized to the body - which is somewhat of a contradiction, inasmuch as what I want these paintings to do is offer up a kind of metaphysical transportation. I have envisaged these structures being realized for real, in three dimensions and placed within the landscape, which would be very exciting.

There's an eerie light in the yellow paintings, isn't there?

I like to use multiple perspectives and multiple light sources - it's beyond naturalism, and becomes more psychological. You've got to use what's in the armory...

Which artists do you particularly admire?

Brueghel blows my mind, along with different artists for different reasons. Generally I find the history of art fascinating, especially the duality between events that take place in the world, and the way in which artists respond to their times and subsequently influence them. I've been looking at Albert Beirstadt and Hubert Robert lately, and continue to admire Rubens, Constable and Courbet. And the late Turners of course: simultaneously emptied out and full of nothing, they're beyond great, they're... Words fail me.