

 CHAMPS HILL

CONFRONTING ILLUSION PIERS OTTEY



Angel's Ladder-Amberley

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CONFRONTING ILLUSION

Piers Ottey at Champs Hill

What can a painter do, after ‘confronting illusion’?

This phrase, title of the monograph published in 2023 (a kind of retrospective of Ottey’s career so far), teases but also offers a recognition of his intention, as a painter of the visual world around us, to ‘acknowledge the nature of representational illusion [while] revelling in the flatness of the painting surface’. This goes a long way to explaining the particular and beguiling character of Ottey’s work, immediately readable and yet simultaneously intriguing.

The extraordinary accumulation of Ottey’s endeavour and output provides a convincing testimonial to an artist’s life lived. It adds up to the world seen through an exploration of conventional painters’ subjects, including landscape, still life, portraiture and the figure, compounded and extended by relentless travels (see the paintings of the Alps, Greece, America, the East, etc.) and by personal obsessions (see the skeletons of architecture, the portraits of Audrey, the motorbikes,

the denizens of the Colony Club, et al.). Throughout there is a rectitude, an evident commitment to observational discipline, that is somehow balanced with striking and radical approaches to composition... and played off with those mysterious references to subsidiary sign systems (like the characteristic patterns bordering the paintings - oblique references to the colour registration marks redolent of the printer’s craft).



It's now 45 years since Ottey emulated Ivon Hitchens' wartime escape from blitz-ravaged London for a painter's haven in West Sussex. Since then his tireless work in creating and running teaching studios, in parallel to his ongoing commitment to his own practice, has seen the coming and going of not only the collaborative Herringbroom Studios but also the individual achievement of The Mill Studio (initially in a renovated mill in West Ashling and subsequently re-established in farm buildings south of Arundel). Ottey has made a lasting mark on the artistic life of the county, with a genuine integrity. But we are now in a new chapter of his career, in which a relocation to the edge of the Downs has seen painting become his sole focus, allowing a renewed exploration of the quirks and charms still discoverable on the chalky tilth of the South Downs.

Moving on from the credentials of a serious and significant painter's career, what makes Ottey's work important? At times, his paintings convey a determined attempt to do that conventional thing, in

adds up to the whole of visual perception seems to resonate here; 'while drawing, an observer can scan things at an arm's length from their everyday claims on attention [...] Things fall away and stop, as far as the eye can see, at an edge. Beyond which is another thing. Beyond which, ultimately, is the sky – the absence of things, infinity' (in *What is Painting?*). And then, at times, they seem to be about something else; subterfuge, misdirection, camouflage... or, at least, the way we miss things.

Whether based on quiet corners of husbanded Down, sun-baked Aegean coastline or iconic views of urban skylines, Ottey's landscapes reveal a constant fascination with the structure of the view. 'Ottey is not a mere recorder of what he sees: his training rooted in careful observation and optical measurement, but also in the need to generalise from the detailed facts in front of him in order to construct a coherent visual object [...] the representation is only part of the offer. The artist transforms, not only choosing his optical and mental points of view but also

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capturing an image of the world, seen in a particular moment of time, from a singular viewpoint. At times, they seem to be essays in differentiation, a painstaking process of sorting out what makes this this and not that. Julian Bell's description of the way our apprehension of the parts

disposing of the motifs before him in order to speak of them personally, poetically and with intensity' (Norbert Lynton in the monograph mentioned above). Architecture, both literal and implied, often features in explicit ways and in the selective transformations of his work,

which seem to make a thesis of the notion that an important correspondence exists between the underlying skeletal armature of the world in view and the layers of mark and colour that build a picture. This correspondence often emerges as a kind of ambivalence in the painting.

Whilst Ottey's grasp of, and perhaps reliance upon, drawing as the underlying

is to embrace the conundrum, to explore the contradictions of continuity and discontinuity, of persistence and change, of uniqueness and multiplicity. Embracing the contrariness of existence requires determination and resilience – for which the positivist exhortation of American philosopher and psychologist William James might serve; "Act as if what you do

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determinant of how the world can become image, provides a stable and ubiquitous underpinning in his work, it is not in the end its definition. His apparently confident competence in throwing a line around the shapes that make up our perception of the world perhaps belies an underlying, intrinsic uncertainty. A fascination with this uncertainty, characterised as anxiety, has been shared by many significant painters, such as Pablo Picasso; 'What forces our interest is Cézanne's anxiety...' or Matisse who felt 'naked [and] embarrassed', on seeing film of himself painting. At core, this anxiety is a product of the kind of looking that informs the painter's relationship with the ever-changing complexity of what it is to be in the world; a recognition of the underlying complexity of vision itself. The world, in truth, is not as we think it appears to be, and the work of a painter such as Piers Ottey insistently draws our attention to this conundrum.

To paint authentic images of the world

makes a difference. It does." This works as a fitting description of Ottey's approach.

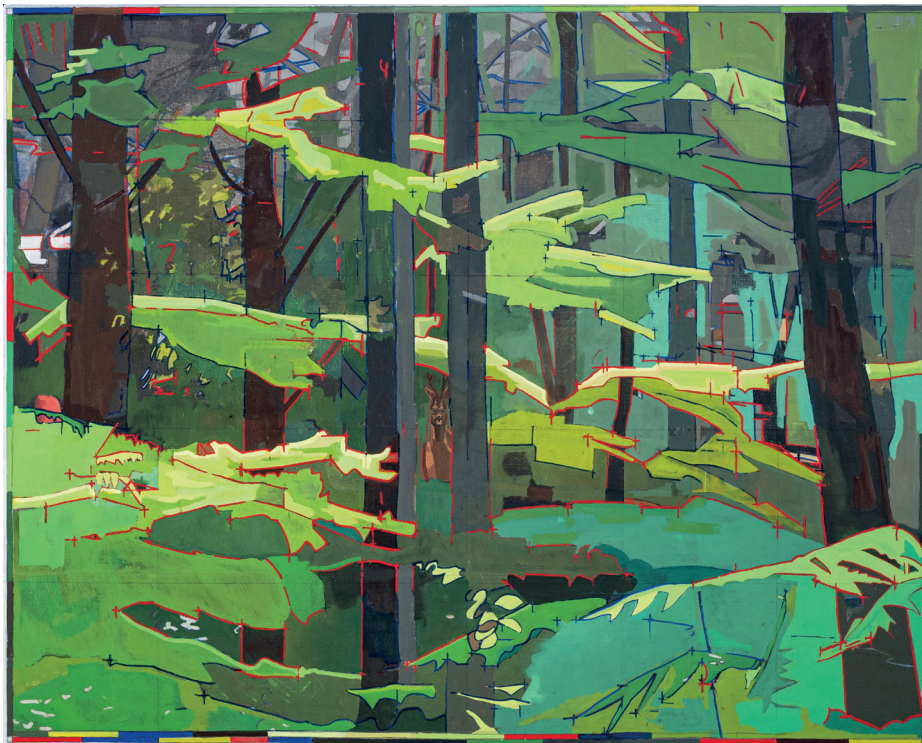
Perhaps those paintings of the skylines of London, San Francisco, Chichester and Tokyo, with structures reaching vertically for the sky, with their implications of looking upwards and downwards simultaneously, signify an aspiration, the search for something. That ambivalence mentioned earlier is more than incidental, it prefigures a larger concern; the search for a way to articulate the relationship between how the world looks and the nature of being. Spending time with these works allows us to sense how the structure of a painting can be a kind of act of faith - something that reaches for meaning or substance beyond the surface and through illusion; nothing less than an attempt at embodying the order of existence.

Christopher McHugh

*Artist and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art,
University of Chichester*



Tokyo Village Worship



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