

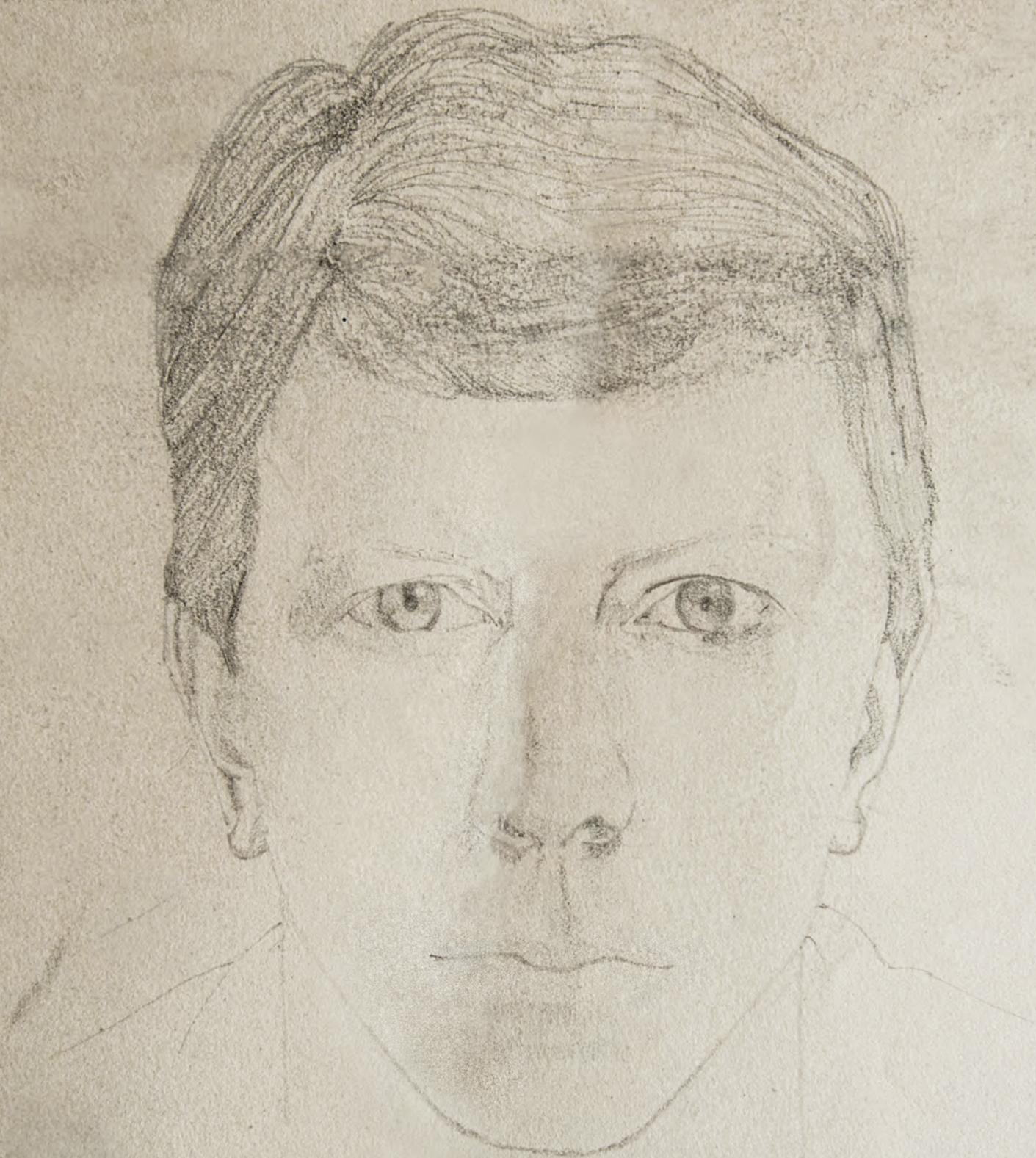
STEPHEN NEWTON



PAINTINGS OF REMEMBRANCE



**Paintings  
of  
Remembrance**



1. *Self-portrait* 1965  
graphite on paper

# **Paintings of Remembrance**

**Stephen Newton**

# Painting: a lost art

Stephen Newton

*...today's painting often amounts to just the illustration of a preconceived idea.*

*Art has always been press-ganged into the service of those with an agenda to promote.*

IN LANGUAGE alone, genuine emotion and truth must be chiselled out of solid granite, whereas painting can offer an immediate access. It is therefore all the more tragic that painting has become a lost art.

The title of the exhibition *Paintings of Remembrance*<sup>(1)</sup> doesn't have anything to do with real memories or past narratives, recalled dreams or any sort of memorial. In later life memories of past events are usually far too painful to recall: betrayal; cowardice; guilt and shame. I once wrote that if a finished painting didn't elicit an immediate, involuntary *ouch!* from me then it had failed to touch that raw nerve always lurking beneath the surface of things. Ouch! – a momentary exhortation mirroring the *exorcism* at the core of a painting.

'Remembrance' here is rather a reconstituted, distilled emotion trapped in paint as in amber. There are infinite varied emotions within us. A painting can evolve and isolate extended un-experienced nuances of emotion, long forgotten and hidden. For this to be accomplished the painter must relinquish conscious control in the creative act – not an easy thing to do. I always feel that my best paintings painted themselves, like the broom of the sorcerer's apprentice. Unfortunately today's painting often amounts to just the illustration of a preconceived idea. These might be ideas about political propaganda, cultural propaganda, climactic argument, historical analysis – but dealing with a perceived reality. But it ends as rational, conscious realism, devoid of the one indispensable key element of the painterly creative process – the elimination of conscious control.

The great Oscar Wilde saw this clearly of course. In *The Decay of Lying* he cogently and convincingly argued that facts make art sterile in 'noisy assertions of realism', by which he means those aforementioned categories. Art has always been press-ganged into the service of those with an agenda to promote. But perhaps today this is more crassly espoused than ever. In Wilde's opinion we should be more or less indifferent to art's subject matter: 'reality drives art out into the wilderness' – true decadence. Wilde is very much a forerunner of that marvellous essay *Abstraction and Empathy* by William Worringer. Both argue that a great abstract art, such as the Oriental, really determined reality and formed the essential template through which we could shape and view it. Again Wilde stresses that 'a great artist invents a type and Life tries to copy it'. For him life imitates art, not the other way round, but only if it breaks from the 'prison-house of realism'. As another illustrious forerunner put it: 'The purpose of art is to embody the secret essence of things, not copying their appearance' – Aristotle, 384-322 BC.

The elements and objects in my painting are personalised icons that are used over and over again. In the original icon painting, the elements represented in the iconography barely altered over the centuries. In their theatrical stage-sets, the stylised

tokens representing leaves, flowers, trees, stairs, interiors and buildings – for example – evolved slowly over time and then remained constant. They function as counters to engender an emotional tension – a spiritual tension.

Why should this be so? As in my own painting, the elements are never drawn from an external reality. There is no concern with natural appearance or scientific accuracy. In such a setting emotion breaks free from the conscious grip of reality; from the imperative to analyse a rational and scientific perspective, colour tone, hue, shadow and naturalism – the stock in trade of the Renaissance. This overriding compulsion for a conscious logic of representation expunged the fundamental role of painting: to reconnect with unconscious emotion, an unconscious emotion which is ultimately the driver of all secondary narratives and imagery, as the dream process reveals. Free from the necessity to deal with any factors dependent upon conscious deliberation, emotion and the creative spirit of the painting can be released.

The New York critic, Donald Kuspit, in a recent profile article (*State* magazine no.27, pp 30-33) suggests that Newton is ‘not a realist, but a new kind of *surrealist*. The old kind of surrealism was informed by drive theory; the new kind of surrealism is informed by object relational theory. Psychoanalytic theory has moved away from drive theory towards relational theory, and so has the most subtle and sophisticated surreal art, Newton’s paintings being exemplary’ (p.32). It has been noted by Kuspit – and others – that the dislocated stage sets and tension existing between the objects set within them, evoke *uncanniness*.

It is this uncanniness which inadvertently exposes the correspondence between my painterly process and the abstract process of the dream. This is not a correspondence to any dream imagery, representation or narrative. Rather the correspondence rests in the inner structure and innate process of both; that is in the essential mechanisms of generating any imagery, iconography or narrative. It should be stressed that the representatives of objects in my painting are not ‘plucked from the air’, but are generated through an unconscious abstract creative process. The dream is able to provoke powerful feelings of uncanniness. This is fundamentally to be encountered when there is a momentary and fleeting recollection of a dream as if it were an actual memory of something that really happened. This displacement can be transiently unnerving and engender a sensation of the uncanny.

Many have commented that they find my work *disturbing*, all the more so as there is no obvious reason for them to be so. After all there is only an emptiness. But perhaps emptiness can be far more disturbing than monsters and hobgoblins. But to feel disturbed without obvious cause is itself uncanny – as

*... the fundamental role of painting: to reconnect with unconscious emotion*

*...emptiness can be far more disturbing than monsters and hobgoblins.*



Stephen Newton London 2018

those unconscious factors resonate instinctively within the mind of the spectator. It is interesting to recognise within this correlation that the dream, like the icon painting, also tends to evolve *motifs* to be used and re-used. It may be recalled that often an object encountered in a dream – a mansion or a railway station for example – might well reappear in subsequent dreams generating a narrative requiring such props. In other words the railway station in a dream will rarely, if ever, be one that actually exists or could be located somewhere. Rather it is a construct that, as in icon painting, will not interfere with the constitutional objective of the dream process – an *emotional exorcism*. The transformation of emotion is not compromised by clouding the issue with aspects of reality which can only be a distraction. Thus my painting functions in exactly the same way.

Many years ago a tutor<sup>(2)</sup> told me that I talk as if everything I say is going to be the last thing I ever say. At the time I took it as a criticism – but a friend remarked: ‘I wish somebody would say that about me’. Now of course I have a very different perspective. If anything, I can see that such a comment should really be directed to my art, for in each painting I do hope that what I say is going to be the last thing I ever say.

*... unconscious factors resonate instinctively within the mind of the spectator.*



*Stephen Newton 2021*

1) Bermondsey Project Space, London. *Paintings of Remembrance* October 2021

2) David Horn, Nottingham Trent University.

*Two Chairs and a Table 2002*

Oil on canvas



PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE

**PAINTINGS**  
**1988 - 2021**

*Oil on Canvas*

STEPHEN NEWTON

1. *Self-portrait* 1965 graphite on paper [*frontispiece*]
2. *Woman Bathing* 1988 (36 x 39in) oil on canvas
3. *Room with a Chair* 1990 (18 x 20in) oil on canvas
4. *Pulpit* 1996 (36 x 50in) oil on canvas
5. *Yellow Flowers* 1997 (18 x 20in) oil on canvas
6. *Room with Open Door* 1997 (36 x 50in) oil on canvas
7. *Doorway and Staircase* 1998 (10 x 12in) oil on canvas
8. *Vase of Flowers on a Table* 2002 (38 x 40in) oil on canvas
9. *Time Passing* 2002 (38 x 40in) oil on canvas
10. *Still Life under a Lamp* 2012 (20 x 18in) oil on canvas
11. *House with a White Fence* 2012 (30 x 25in) oil on canvas
12. *House with a Tiled Path* 2017 (72 x 72in) oil on canvas
13. *Frosty Morning in the Park* 2018 (11 x 15in) oil on canvas
14. *The Wake* 2018 (26 x 24in) oil on canvas
15. *Hallway with a Staircase* 2018 (15 x 15in) oil on canvas
16. *Courtroom* 2018 (76 x 82in) oil on canvas
17. *Table Laid for a Meal* 2018 (30 x 34in) oil on canvas
18. *Hallway with a Chest of Drawers* 2018 (10 x 10in) oil on canvas
19. *Deconsecrated Church* 2018 (76x82in) oil on canvas
20. *Watching TV* 2018 (26 x 30in) oil on canvas
21. *Room with White Walls* 2018 (26 x 30in) oil on canvas
22. *The Cinema* 2018 (34 x 40in) oil on canvas
23. *Vase on a Table* 2018 (12 x 12in) oil on canvas
24. *Room with a Painting on the Wall* 2018 (8 x 8in) oil on canvas
25. *House on the Beach Edge* 2018 (10 x 12in) oil on canvas
26. *Basement* 2020 (74 x 76in) oil on canvas
27. *Garden Path* 2020 (15 x 15in) oil on canvas
28. *Closet* 2020 (34 x 40in) oil on canvas
29. *Asylum No.2* 2020 (76 x 110in) oil on canvas
30. *Sunlit Room* 2020 (8 x 8in) oil on canvas
31. *Bedroom with a Painting of a Vase of Flowers* 2020 (24 x 36in) oil on canvas
32. *Hallway Door* 2020 (24 x 30in) oil on canvas
33. *Table with a Vase* 2020 (15 x 18in) oil on canvas
34. *Distant Hills through a Window* 2020 (30 x 26in) oil on canvas
35. *Table with a Bowl of Fruit* 2020 (18 x 20in) oil on canvas
36. *Room with a Hunting Scene* 2020 (32 x 28in) oil on canvas
37. *Cactus on a Table* 2021 (76 x 110in) oil on canvas
38. *Yellow Flowers Reflected in a Mirror* 2021 (24 x 26in) oil on canvas
39. *Room with a View of the Seafront* 2021 (24 x 26in) oil on canvas
- 40 – 73. DRAWINGS 2018 – 2021 oil wax crayon on paper

PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



2. *Woman Bathing* 1988

(36 x 39in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



3. *Room with a Chair* 1990

(18 x 20in) oil on canvas

PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



4. *Pulpit* 1996

(36 x 50in) oil on canvas

5. *Yellow Flowers* 1997

DETAIL



STEPHEN NEWTON



5. *Yellow Flowers* 1997

(18 x 20in) oil on canvas

PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



6. *Room with Open Door* 1997

(36 x 50in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



7. *Doorway and Staircase* 1998

(10 x 12in) oil on canvas

PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



8. *Vase of Flowers on a Table* 2002

(38 x 40in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



9. *Time Passing* 2002

(38 x 40in) oil on canvas



10. *Still Life under a Lamp* 2012

(20 x 18in) oil on canvas

12. *House with a Tiled Path* 2017

DETAIL



STEPHEN NEWTON



11. *House with a White Fence* 2012

(30 x 25in) oil on canvas

PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



12. *House with a Tiled Path* 2017

(72 x 72in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



13. *Frosty Morning in the Park* 2018

(11 x 15in) oil on canvas

PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



14. *The Wake* 2018

(26 x 24in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



15. *Hallway with a Staircase* 2018

(15 x 15in) oil on canvas

PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



16. *Courtroom* 2018

(76 x 82in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



17. *Table Laid for a Meal* 2018

(30 x 34in) oil on canvas

PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



18. *Hallway with a Chest of Drawers* 2018

(10 x 10in) oil on canvas

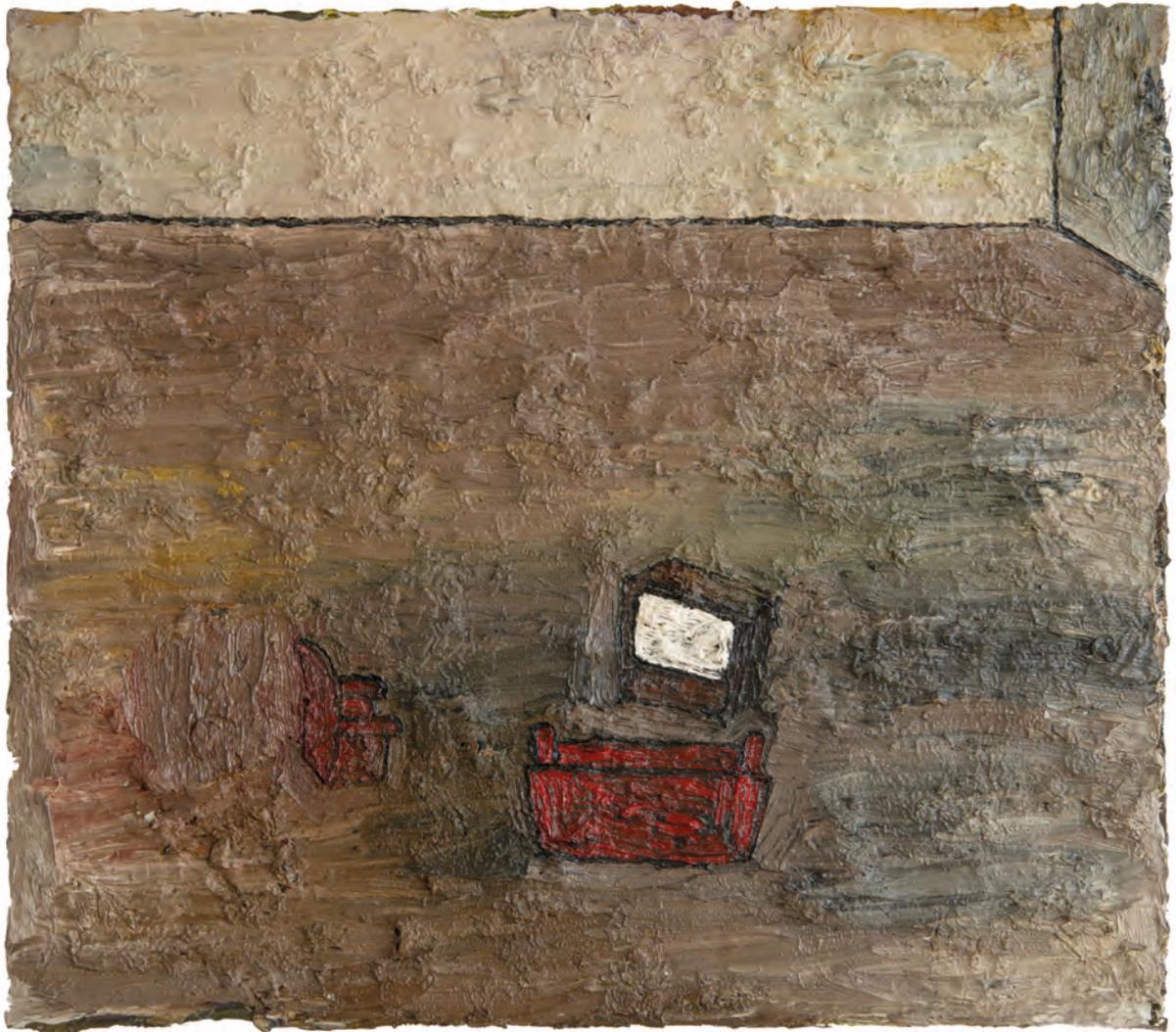
STEPHEN NEWTON



19. *Deconsecrated Church* 2018

(76 x 82in) oil on canvas

PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



20. *Watching TV* 2018

(26 x 30in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



21. *Room with White Walls* 2018

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PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



22. *The Cinema* 2018

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STEPHEN NEWTON



23. *Vase on a Table* 2018

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25. *House on the Beach Edge* 2018

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PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



26. *Basement* 2020

(74 x 76in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



27. *Garden Path* 2020

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PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



28. *Closet* 2020

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STEPHEN NEWTON



29. *Asylum No.2* 2020

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30. *Sunlit Room* 2020

(8 x 8in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



31. *Bedroom with a Painting of a Vase of Flowers* 2020

(24 x 36in) oil on canvas



32. *Hallway Door* 2020

(24 x 30in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



33. *Table with a Vase* 2020

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PAINTINGS of REMEMBRANCE



34. *Distant Hills through a Window* 2020

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36. *Room with a Hunting Scene* 2020

DETAIL



STEPHEN NEWTON



35. *Table with a Bowl of Fruit* 2020

(18 x 20in) oil on canvas



36. *Room with a Hunting Scene* 2020

(32 x 28in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



37. *Cactus on a Table* 2021

(76 x 110in) oil on canvas



38. *Yellow Flowers Reflected in a Mirror* 2021

(24 x 26in) oil on canvas

STEPHEN NEWTON



39. *Room with a View of the Seafront* 2021

(24 x 26in) oil on canvas

**DRAWINGS**  
**2018 - 2021**

*Oil Wax Crayon on Paper*

2018



14.4.2018



24.4.2018



28.4.2018



1.5.2018

opposite  
6.7.2018  
detail



16.5.2018



11.6.2018





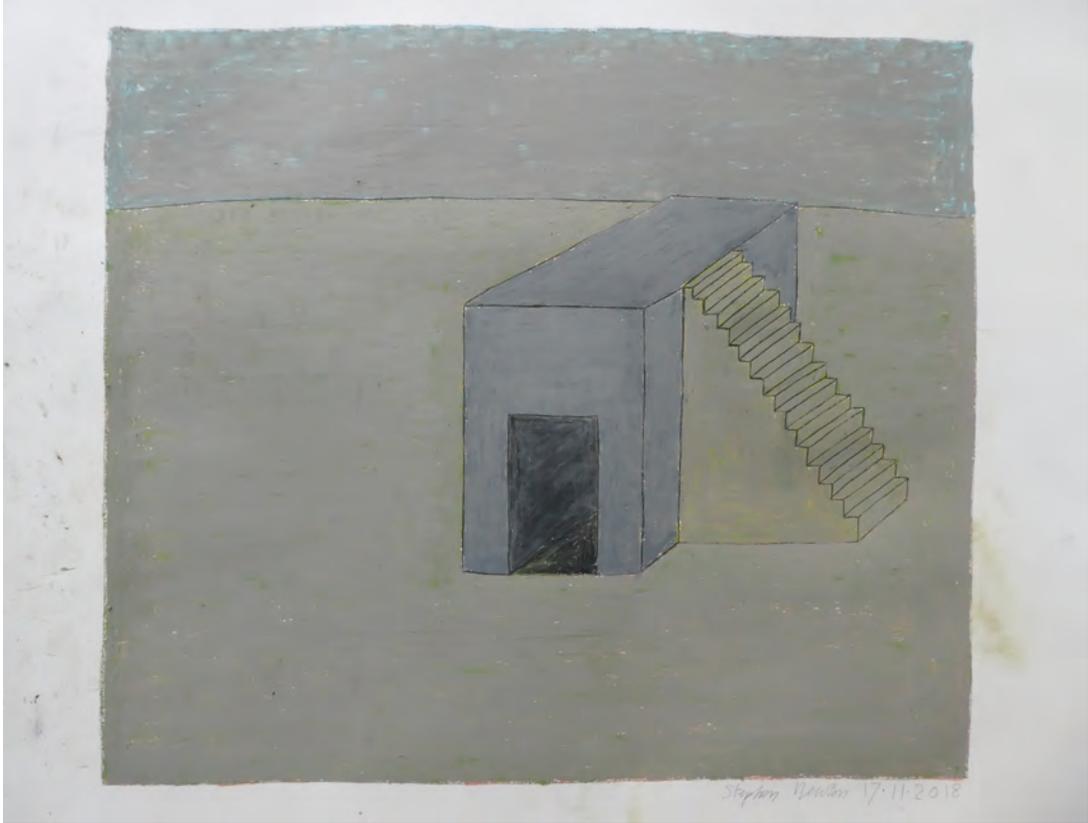
*opposite*  
3.11.2018  
*detail*



16.11.2018



7.12.2018



17.11.2018



19.11.2018



26.11.2018



28.11.2018

2020



1.4.2020



2.4.2020



3.4.2020



7.4.2020



Stephen Newton 9.4.2020

9.4.2020



Stephen Newton 10.5.2020

10.5.2020



16.6.2020



18.6.2020

2021

opposite  
20.3.21  
detail



4.2.2021



7.2.2021



opposite  
20.4.21  
detail



13.2.2021



26.3.2021



8.4.2021



13.4.2021



## **ESSAYS**

*Extracts from  
published texts on the  
art of Stephen Newton*

**DONALD KUSPIT**

**MIKE VON JOEL**

# The Room Paintings

Donald Kuspit

LOOKING AT Stephen Newton's new pictures – paintings from 2017 – one notices the concreteness of the paint, a 'heavy impasto paint' insistently worked and reworked into a rich texture. Forceful and intense, as in *Room with a Yellow Mirror*, if also at times soothing and more smoothly applied, as in *Seagulls Flying Past a Window* (2017). It as though the pictures are more about the paint – are meant to dramatise the paint – than the rooms they depict.

Is Newton a Greenbergian modernist despite himself? Is his emphasis on the medium, giving it a remarkable 'presentational immediacy', to use the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's term? Thus, implicitly, a kind of abstract expressionism. Or is the *passionateness* of his painterliness a means of expressing the passion that seems missing from the rooms? The human forms in them are few and far between, and those that appear seem rather passionless, as Newton himself seems in his *Self-Portrait by a Mirror* (2011). The man in depressing black,

and the woman in luminous white, in *A Married Couple* (2013) sit far apart on – at opposite ends of – a nature-green couch. No passionate embrace here, no happily married loving couple – no intimacy – but loneliness compounded. The figures seem oddly lifeless – devitalised wraiths.



The sense of isolation in these two rooms – in all of Newton's rooms – is palpable. The emotional void is filled with passionate paint – fulsome, visceral, full-bodied paint is compensation for the absence of warm-blooded human bodies. One might say the body-less room is given body by the paint, the paint being embodied passion – desire concentrated and sometimes on the verge of expressionistic wildness – even as it remains body-less and uninhabited. However homey it may be, and however comfortable the

chair in it may be, it is not exactly a home, a room that Newton can call his own – even as he takes possession of it by way of his vigorous, at times vehement painterliness. It is a projection of his impulses, for it seems instinctively driven, even when it is calm rather than turbulent. Indeed, a projection of his libido into a peculiarly dead space, bringing it to artistic life, personalising what is impersonally given. One is tempted to say, based on the evidence of his paintings, that Newton prefers emotionally charged paint – and colour – to emotionally dead, and colorless, people. Like his black and white couple.

*A Married Couple* 2013

oil on canvas

Coll: Mr & Mrs Robert Machin

No one seriously lives or can emotionally survive in Newton's rooms, subliminally as claustrophobic as prison cells. *Cell* (2014) makes the point clearly. He is in effect in solitary confinement, at best a guest in his own home, visiting himself in the mirror, and then leaving, the narcissistic moment a passing fancy. The self seen in the mirror is an illusion, the self-knowledge gained as constricted as the uptight self in the mirror. It is an ingenious self-portrait, showing Newton from the back and front – in the room and in the mirror – but in both views he is a mere sliver in the empty room. Indeed, we see only a slice of his face – a narrow profile. He is a small presence in an enormous room with only one piece of furniture, the small chair he sits in.

Comparing it to traditional self-portraits of artists (for example, the elaborate one Albrecht Dürer painted in 1496, dressed in the silken clothes of royalty, and the even more grandiose one he painted in 1500, an *imitatio Christi* in which he plays the Saviour) Newton's self-portrait is strikingly minimal. It is ruthlessly schematic, in style, reductively abstract and expressively restrained, underscoring Newton's unpretentious appearance. Perhaps most importantly, Dürer boldly looks us in the face – it fills the canvas in the 1500 work, confronting us with his proud, sacred presence – while Newton shows us his back, as though indifferent to us, and, in the mirror view, averts his eyes from our gaze, indeed, glances sideways as though we're beside the point of his art. More an act of self-reflection than an appeal for attention, as Dürer's self-portraits surely are. Newton doesn't fill the space of the picture, as Dürer does in the 1500 self-presentation, but sits in a corner like a child being punished, reduced to inconsequence for some misdeed. He's mute and tense, soberly dressed in black suit, black tie, and white shirt, suggesting that he's conventional, a conformist, a solid (stolid?) citizen, emotionally reserved not to say self-restrained – hardly what romanticism has led us to think an artist should be and look like. One can't imagine that Newton is as creative and vital as he is.

He seems as lifeless and proper as the married couple, but what to me is most startling about both pictures – what brings them to life and undermines the propriety of the scene – is the colour and the painterliness, both subliminally conveying *joie de vivre*, however fatalistically sober the scene. The red of the wall in the self-portrait is the colour of passion<sup>(1)</sup>, the green of the floor is the colour of nature, and the yellow of the chair is the colour of the sun. They are all life-giving colours – indeed, the colours of life. The wall is a broad plane, the floor is a slightly smaller broad plane, and the back of the chair is a small plane. Newton sits in it, implicitly a royal – a sun king, as it were, his pure white head making him all the more luminous – even a sacred presence, as the icon-like work suggests. The bit of blue visible through the window in the married couple evokes the wide open sky of heaven beyond the emotionally stifling confines of

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*The emotional void is filled with passionate paint – fulsome, visceral, full-bodied paint is compensation for the absence of warm-blooded human bodies.*



*Birthday Party* 2015

oil on canvas

Coll: Damian & Tanja Wilkinson

*opposite:*

*Empty Street* 2016

oil on canvas

Private Collection

the room. The hint of red in the pink house glimpsed through the window suggests that the embers of passion still glows in them, even as the fertile green of the couch on which they sit suggests that they remain children of nature despite their emotional sterility.

Again and again we see an empty room with an object or two in it and a 'picture window' – a picture and a window that is like a picture on the wall. Both afford an opening – a sort of escape hatch – to the world outside the room. The world of nature and the world of feelings. In *Seagulls Flying Past a Window* a small chest stands against a wall, on which a painting of a young woman appears, almost like a mirage, like the seagulls visible through the window. They are expressive symbols: she represents the world of feelings, for her appearance is affectionately preserved in art;

and the seagulls represent the world of nature that art tends to. They fly freely and symbolise angels, and her picture has a halo-like white frame, suggesting she also is sacred – heavenly, more pointedly, pure spirits in material form. The whiteness of her dress and of the seagulls confirms their 'transcendental' character – they both 'transcend' the room, point beyond it. Absurd as it may sound, I suggest that she symbolises the Virgin Mary – her youthfulness and golden hair suggest as much – and thus the Queen of Heaven, and that the seagulls symbolise the angels who attend her, each perhaps even a reminder of the Angel of the Annunciation. Is the chest an altar? *Altar Table* (2013) suggests it can function as one.

The work is in effect a disguised icon, and the symbolic figures – young girl and seagulls – are displaced: not in the place in which they would appear in a traditional icon. And displaced from otherworldly space to this-worldly space. Noteworthy, the floor and the ceiling of the room are grass green and the wall is earth brown, suggesting that the spiritual figures are embedded in nature, however out of place they seem in the room, and however barren and sterile the room seems.

Are the *Sheep in the Snow* (2016) also spiritual beings, the white field in which they peacefully graze heaven in earthly disguise? 'The symbolism of the sheep differs little from that of the Lamb, the latter closely linked to values given to the symbol by Christianity: white sheep which turned black symbolised souls

descending from Heaven to Earth; while the black sheep that turned white symbolised the opposite – souls ascending from Earth to Heaven.’<sup>(2)</sup> Newton’s sheep cast a black shadow, suggesting that they are between Heaven and Earth, which is where we are in Newton’s pictures.

But that is not the whole story about them. However much they are disguised sacred icons, they convey a deeply unhappy state of mind, a profound sense of loss. Newton’s rooms are empty, lonely spaces, the few objects in them underscoring their emptiness: however prominent and central, as in *Doorway* (1999), *Stairway to a Door* (2001), and *Confessional* (2016), they are dwarfed by the space, reduced to insignificance, no more than gestures in the void, deceptive mirages in an endless desert: the door opens on to the empty space, the confessional booth stands empty. The mood is one of despair: *Discarded Chair* (2002) *Winter with a Derelict House* (2014) and *Empty Street* (2016), make the point explicitly: there is nothing more miserable than to be abandoned in an empty house, abandoned in the dead and cold of winter, abandoned on a dark empty street. *Birthday Party* (2015) seems to be the exception that proves the rule, but the bright white birthday cake, with its yellow candles and red and blue ornament, has a black rim, and there are no gifts on the table on which it rests, and no guests at the party. All of which makes the emptiness of the room more poignant and resonant, despite the grid-like array of nature-green lozenges on the background wall. What the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott calls ‘depressive “death inside”’<sup>(3)</sup> informs Newton’s rooms, suggesting they are symbols of his inner world – the inner space inhabited by what psychoanalysts call internal objects.<sup>(4)</sup>



*Confessional* 2016  
oil on canvas  
Private Collection



One might say Newton's room is the unconscious – it is as timeless as the unconscious, day and night often existing simultaneously in it. Thus the daylight coming through the window of the dark *Room with a Rural View* (2017) and the few mortified objects that haunt it, are Hadean symbols of himself, hence the dream-like character of his pictures and the uncanny character of their emptiness.

Newton is not a realist, but a new kind of surrealist. The old kind of surrealism was informed by drive theory; the new kind of surrealism is informed by object relational theory. Psychoanalytic theory has moved away from drive theory towards relational theory, and so has the most subtle and sophisticated surreal art, Newton's paintings being exemplary. All the more so because they incorporate drive, as their excited painterliness indicates, into their realism. That is, their rendering of objects – the desolate and isolated objects – in his empty space,

sometimes cosmically and threateningly empty. The stark geometry of the space – the confrontal planarity of the rooms – makes its emptiness more intimidating.



There's no *horror vacui* in Newton's pictures, his small objects hardly begin to fill his large rooms. Clearly they are a kind of wasteland – but emptiness for its own enigmatic sake. One way of unraveling its mystery – its inner meaning – is by way of the psychoanalyst John Bowlby's object relational attachment theory. However attached Newton may be to the few objects on display in his rooms, there's an air of detachment to the room as a whole. It's all but overwhelming emptiness

implies that Newton's attachment to the objects is incidental, even accidental, however colourful – and sacred – they may be. The room is consummately empty, and the emptiness consumes the objects, reducing them to what Freud called mnemonic traces, some flashing in the darkness. Like the yellow couch with its purple circles rimmed with black in *Full Moon through a Window* and the blue vase in *Armchair by a Window with a Blue Vase*, both 2017.

*Full Moon Through a Window* 2017  
oil on canvas  
Private Collection

There are no human forms in the space, apart from Newton in his self-portrait and the married couple. As though in compensation, there are a few animals, the birds in *To the Sea* and *Park in Winter*, both 2013, and the sheep previously mentioned. But one can't relate to them as one can to human beings – have the same intimacy with them as one can have with another human being. Without

intimacy with another human being, there is solitude. If, as William James said, 'the greatest source of terror in infancy is solitude,'<sup>(5)</sup> then Newton's empty room suggests that he suffered from solitude in infancy, suggesting also that his room is in effect his studio, where he makes art in solitude, indicating that he suffers from solitude in adulthood, perhaps because painting is a solitary activity and friends are few and far between in a competitive world.

The lack of human objects in the room confirms the sense of solitude – bringing with it a feeling of emptiness – that informs it. People are missing from his pictures – they are the missing objects, and they seem not to be missed, suggesting they are lost forever, or he's given up on them – that there's no point in wasting good feeling on them: better to spend it on making art. Bowlby argues that 'protest, despair, detachment' are 'the most common and successive responses to loss.'<sup>(6)</sup> Newton's empty room – a void with a few souvenirs of lived experience, once 'moving' objects now statically suspended in space – suggest that he has endured serious loss in his life. The detached, oddly mournful tone and subliminal pessimism about human relationships evident in Newton's pictures suggests that he is no longer protesting his loss and beyond despair, but has settled into defensive detachment and accepted the void in his life, that is, come to terms with the emptiness he feels.

It has given him the courage and ability to address the larger 'void,' as the historian Daniel Bell calls it, left in the wake of what he calls the 'spiritual crisis of modernity'. A time when: 'the new anchorages have proved illusory and the old ones have become submerged... a situation which brings us back to nihilism'. Bell argues that art, which he regards as a 'substitute for religion'<sup>(7)</sup> can transcend the crisis by addressing it – articulating the moral void it left in its nihilistic wake. It seems no accident that some of Newton's empty rooms contain some reminders – remainders – of Christianity, not only the confessional and altar table, but, in *Asylum* (2015), a picture of Christ Crucified, suggesting that art as well as religion remains an asylum – a safe space – in a morally hollow, spiritless world.

Donald Kuspit is one of the leading analytical critics and art theorists of his generation; distinguished Professor Emeritus of art history and philosophy at the State University of New York; and former contributing editor to *Artforum* and *Art in America*; and co-founder of the journal *Art Criticism*.

## NOTES

1) The red is particularly striking; there is more of it in the picture than green. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols* (London and New York: Penguin, 1996), 792 remind us that red is 'the color of fire and of blood and regarded universally as the basic symbol of the life principle, with its dazzling strength and power.'

2) *Ibid.*, pp 870-871

3) D. W. Winnicott, *The Manic Defence, Through Pediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), p13.

4) Melanie Klein proposed that the infant, under the pressure of his drives, 'creates' and 'discovers' objects in external reality that correspond to his needs. Thus, hateful feelings create persecutory objects and loving feelings create idealized objects. These structures are then brought inside the psyche by the processes of 'incorporation' and 'introjection' and become 'internal objects'. Salman Akhtar, *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 2009), p149

5) Quoted in Victoria Hamilton, 'John Bowlby: An Ethological Basis for Psychoanalysis,' *Beyond Freud: A Study of Modern Psychoanalytic Theorists*, ed. Joseph Reppen (Hillsdale, NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1985), p19.

6) *Ibid.*, p20

7) Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), pp 28-29

# Darkend Realms of the Mind

Mike von Joel

*...the sense of human  
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*Newton is not a participant  
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STEPHEN NEWTON'S YEARS of contemplation and engagement with painting and drawing (his art is supported by a highly reasoned theoretical position, so articulate that it has provoked numerous academic papers, lectures and publications) has resulted in a distillation of that fusion between the physical and intellectual in the creative process – the essence being a reduction to primitive, almost primeval, images of immense power. In the same way a simplistic icon on a computer screen is actually the access portal to a complex hidden programme, so Newton has refined his images to a set of recognisable (within his personal vocabulary) icons – totems even – which act as gateways to more complex philosophical positions. In much of his work the sense of human isolation, ignorance, inadequacy and fragility is offered in the 'present' of an image, whilst the suggestion of an undefined 'redemption' lurks off stage (through a door or window; over the horizon; beyond a wall, in a mirror's reflection). In Newton's painting, this reduction to a language of the icon is supported by a symbolic use of paint. A heavy gestural and highly charged – physical, in fact – technique that results in any pictorial *motif*, say a building, disintegrating into an abstraction when viewed up close.

Newton has never been weighed down by the formal tradition that precedes his work as a figurative painter. The skills the Old Masters; the exploratory studies of Da Vinci and his followers; the topographical and narrative pictures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the intellectual and conceptual epoch-making innovations of the twentieth century; these are most likely less relevant to Newton than the arcane manifestation of automatic writing, of Art Brut with stream of conscious metaphor; and the exultant, dynamic spontaneity of the Futurists (for example). Although it must be made clear that in his painting Newton '...disclaims the communicative efficacy of pure psychic automatism and works with acute critical self consciousness.'<sup>(1)</sup> Additionally, Newton is not a participant in the complex polarisation between tradition and the avant-garde, a concept brought to debate in the early 1980's by Bonito Oliva's premise of the *Trans-Avant-Garde*. Nor does Newton's position specifically embrace a Post Modern doctrine that allows : '...the dialectical principle, the reconciliation of extremes ... [and which] ... in its free relation with the past, the Post-modern work acknowledges the evocative impact of history rather than an absolute respect for historic tradition.'<sup>(2)</sup> Rather it is Newton's quite independent philosophical *mien*, from which his paintings, drawings and prints emanate, that makes him an artist of preternatural interest and originality.

By considering the ancient *motifs* and visual texts of – say – cave painting, one can begin to approach and understand Newton's work. It is interesting to note when considering wall painting and pre-historic drawings that, contrary to common appreciation, individual pictures were repeatedly 'added to'. Pictorial elements were superimposed – one on top of another – with impunity, often over

tremendous periods of time. The Giant Horse Cave at Cape York Peninsular, Australia (20th millennium BC) would be a good example of this. Here, as in many other works from pre-history, there is a total absence of the tenet of a 'unique' work of art, or a 'finished' work of art – barely conceivable today. Pre-historic peoples did not quest for *vanitas*, for beauty, but rather aimed to document and evoke the complex social and spiritual framework within which they existed. For Newton, the paramount consideration is this authenticity of an image by which it reconciles its meaning with a deeper, almost subliminal, spirituality – it is with this that the artist attempts to imbue each individual painting, to generate a relevance and a universal resonance.

Newton has, through a twenty year examination of psychoanalysis and psychometry of Art,<sup>(3)</sup> – evolved a sophisticated series of visual 'situations' related to primitive manic states; isolation; disassociation; loss; fear; loneliness; supplication; etc., with which to introduce an engagement with subconscious spirituality. These 'situations' have taken on totemic (or iconic) status and are at once familiar to those with experience of Newton's *oeuvre*. The Empty Room; the Empty Chair; the Doorway; the Mirror; the Flight of Stairs; and the ever present possibility of transference between one pictorial space – one area of consciousness – and another, via a half open door or window. Or even, Alice-like, via a reflection. These two spaces, these two realities, are often divided by a line which could represent a horizon, might possibly represent the traditional yin/yang dichotomy of good/evil; conscious/subconscious; light/dark. A perpetual Manichaeian conflict.

What is apparently always suggested however, is the inherent possibility of

Installation: London 2016  
*Two Chairs* 1997  
 oil on canvas  
 Coll: Jeremy Levison



Etchings (*Newcastle Series*) and  
*Staircase* 1997  
 oil on canvas  
 Coll: State Magazine

a redemption – undefined, but certainly reminiscent of that spiritual essence proposed within traditional icon painting, or Byzantine and Coptic art, by its hidden protocols. Excess elements in a picture are eliminated in favour of the

central *motif*, reduced to the bare essential – the local point – by which the meaning of the work can be deciphered, Newton’s works are not decorative, nor are they narrative; they function more as a stimulant to contemplation and self examination. In this way they may be regarded as ‘religious’ or ‘iconic’ in so far as they ‘reconstitute the icon – the traditional artistic means of embodying spirituality’.<sup>(4)</sup>



*Doorway in a Wall* 1999  
pen/ink on paper  
(Courtesy: Newton Archive)

The painted image disturbs. It disturbs because it is suggesting an idea which resonates somewhere in the psyche of the spectator, appealing directly to ancient – inherited – memories that can seemingly be triggered by the correct application of certain visual stimuli and sensation. If a ‘door’ has any vernacular connotations then Newton’s interpretation undermines them. If one considers the spiritual

metaphor of ‘the door’ – passage to another reality? doors of perception? – then the subversion of this is another matter altogether. As with all Newton’s works, the title of an individual piece is fundamental to the understanding of it, a consistent formalised metonymy. They are a first clue to the understanding of this other world which Newton attempts to reveal and which, on closer inspection, appears to contain sinister elements common to – and within – us all.

2.8.16 (*Enclosed Church*) 2016  
wax oil crayon/pencil on paper  
detail  
(Courtesy: Newton Archive)

## NOTES

- 1) Mel Gooding: *Reveries, Intimations, Ironies: The Recent Painting of Stephen Newton* (essay) *The Spiritual Unconscious (Paintings & Drawings 1975-1996)* essays by Mel Gooding; Keith Patrick; David Maclagan. Ziggurat Books 1996.
- 2) Erich Steingraber: *What is Art Today?* (essay) Dorling Kindersley
- 3) Stephen Newton awarded PhD (Psychoanalysis & Creativity) University of Sheffield.
- 4) Donald Kuspit: *The Post-Modern Icon: Stephen Newton’s Post-Abstract Paintings* (essay)



## SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Ms. Lucinda Acland  
Abbot Hall Gallery, Cumbria  
Snr. Andrea Amadesi  
Mr. Anthony Anderson  
Mr & Mrs. Bonn  
Ms. Day Bowman  
Mr & Mrs. T. Creasey  
East Contemporary Arts Collection  
Mr Andrew Etherington  
Mr. Gonzalo Ferdenez  
Mr. S .A. Firth  
Mr. Jeb Haward  
Mr. A. Ludlam  
Mr. Jeremy Levison  
Mr. Richard Lumsden  
Madison Museum of Fine Art, USA  
Mr. Hamish McAlpine  
Mr. R. Moller  
Mrs M. Nash  
Mr. Colin Norton  
Mr. Charles Prest  
Priseman-Seabrook Collection  
Rugby Art Gallery & Museum  
Mr. Steve Spencer  
Swindon Museum & Art Gallery  
Ms. Felicity Waley-Cohen  
Mr & Mrs. Waller  
Damian and Tanja Wilkinson  
Mr & Mrs. H. Williams  
Ms Mara-Helen Wood  
Mr. Ayse Umur  
Mr & Mrs. M. von Joel

## PHOTOGRAPHY

MSG Photography

## DESIGN

State Media



*" ... the emptiness of the psychic space in today's society, and of the fragility of the sacred ... special works – true masterpieces "*

**Donald Kuspit** New York



*" These are images of refuge, seen as from a deep solitude, the solitude of the individual consciousness... in looking at these we are looking at ourselves "*

**Mel Gooding** London