Painting as a Repository: the Remains of our Days in the Paintings of Nigel Cooke

In any city, town or urban space, certain places become repositories for their immediate environments. A junk shop would be an obvious example, gathering as it does random objects from its surrounding area. A museum could be another, although its reach would be undoubtedly more widespread and hierarchical. In both cases, the repository acts as a staging post for the objects and curiosities of modern life. In its inclusiveness and eclectic allusiveness, this conceptualisation of the repository finds a pertinent analogy in Nigel Cooke's paintings. In their heterogeneous content and formal diversity, these paintings collate and re-present an increasingly varied series of ideas and pictorial quotations that encompass the legacy of modernism; the tradition of landscape painting; surrealist whimsy; the genre of miniature paintings; Breughelesque allegory; and the demotic syntax of cartoons and doodles. However, these paintings

are not merely rehashing a somewhat jaded, so-called 'postmodern', penchant for excavating styles or periods in art history; rather, they methodically explore the weight that each image, style and way of thinking carries and whether or not these incongruities of content, form and tone can be accommodated within the pictorial plane.

In noting the incongruities in Cooke's paintings, on the level of content at least, we simultaneously posit a relatively straightforward question: what is the rationale that subsidizes the co-existence of a severed head, anthropomorphic fruits, a bruised Santa Claus, a modernist sculpture, a lush Romantic landscape, graffiti, an ethereal skyscraper, and a boozy bee in images such as *Country Club*, 2005–06 and *Fun*, 2005–06? To ask such a question highlights a chain of further questions: can an allusion to modernist architecture, for example, or a Claude Lorrain-like landscape for that matter, find a degree of equilibrium next to a cartoon of a man smoking a carrot? Can formal playfulness, in turn, ameliorate visual gravitas (or can kitsch revivify solemnity); and, in the ultimate gambit, can a painting's *raison d'être* be located in its perverse unreasonableness?

There is a degree of this unreasonableness in *Country Club*, 2005–06, where the residue of modernity would appear to have washed up in the lee of an ethereal high-rise tower that provides, in turn, the location for a maurauding band of medieval serfs. Likewise, in *Fun*, a veritable pagan-like ritualism of fundamental shapes and figures vies with an otherwise abstract picture plane – a plane that carefully 'weights' its allusions along a horizon that is both profoundly traditional in the context of landscape painting, and yet difficult to fathom in any conventional sense. The subjects of these paintings – robed penitents, hooded serfs, and ominous grave-diggers – give an impression of both a medieval pageant and the subconsciousness of modernity: hooded serfs they may be, but they also hint at the 'hoodies' of contemporary urban morality tales. Represented here not so much as marginal subjects existing on the borderline of our historical consciousness, these figures exist in a space where the very notion of the past and present has been collapsed – expunged, that is to say, to the extent that temporal, spatial and formal logic no longer make sense.

In Cooke's most recent work we may indeed be looking at a terra incognita of sorts, but it is one which is rendered plausible in the framework of the picture plane. And this plausibility may have something to do with the recursive logic of the painting itself: the internal structure/logic of the elements within the work, that is, would appear to generate the rules that define the structure itself. This 'logic', however, also works *beyond* the level of ostensible content insofar as the formal components provoke an equally precipitous balancing act. The expanse of a knackered, ineffectual sun in *Morning is Broken*, 2004, for example, would appear to be sustained only because an equally knackered jack-o-lantern balances out its vastness. In *Gifts of the Garden*, 2005, the cosmic scale of a large painted expanse – a mimicry, perhaps, of the modernist penchant for flat-field colour painting – and the painstaking intimacy of a singular blade of grass, suggests a vertiginous and abrupt collision between the so-called broad brushstroke approach and the intimacy of miniature painting. To see the whole picture, so to speak, we need to be coextensively some distance away from the painting and yet up close to its surface. Our scopic desire to see the smallest detail, in sum, is being thwarted by our need to take everything in.

We move here from the heterogeneous inclusivity of subject matter *per se*, and the issue of form, to the topic of how we visually register Cooke's images. In Cooke's mise en scène, cartoon-like whimsy not only flirts with the seriousness of so-called fine art, but the rules of perspective and scale are flouted in a vertiginous play on how we look at paintings. In this space, the sheer propinquity – the nearness or otherwise – of themes, planes, figures, tones, and colours, is both conspicuously allusive and consistently elusive. And yet this is

not just a balancing act, it is also a conceptual tight-rope walk that would appear to be in imminent danger of imploding in on itself by virtue of its own metaphorical weight. In *Studio Infinity*, 2005–06, this weight literally implodes in the symbol for infinity – the so-called lemniscate-worn by one of the crepuscular gravediggers. The self-reflexive sign of infinity – the manner in which it literally turns in on itself – belies the extent to which the concept itself is tautologous: the only proof of infinity is infinity itself. The 'proof' of these paintings is similarly self-referential: they refer to their own inner, equally tautological reality where the hieroglyphic remnants of the past – the remains of our days – can co-exist with the vernacular graffiti of the present.

As the present collapses in on itself, progress seems to have been stunted in these images and the regulated condition of modernity has been usurped by an apparently medieval turmoil of dissipation and atrophy. Even the fruit in these images indulge in an occasional cigarette which, in turn, conjures up the invidious prospect of eating a fruit that has spent its formative years in a debauched state of nonchalant nicotine intake. In *Fun*, the fruits depicted are leaden – perhaps as a result of their smoking – and verdant plentifulness has been replaced with an ossified allotment and an ominous garden shed. What we would appear to be witnessing here is the mythical return to nature, favoured by romantics and pastoralists alike, that is not in the least bit ameliorative; on the contrary, this is vision of nature as both belligerent and caustic. However, this begs a further question: has nature turned against us, or have we literally and metaphorically polluted the very idea of nature itself?

Alongside the interrogative impulse that Cooke's paintings encourage, there exists a tone of earnest seriousness that would appear to be in perpetual contest with a degree of ironic distance. In the inevitably anxious relationship between the two, we also find the time-honoured ideals of artistic creativity and artistic self-destruction. The painting of random graffiti, for one, is not so much painting-as-graffiti as it is the painting of actual graffiti on the canvas. Often seen as an act of vandalism or wanton defacement, graffiti occupies a key role in the modern imagination: the anarchic sign of social breakdown, on the one hand, and the freedom associated with individualist expression on the other. In painting, for example, an image of graffiti in *Brain Party*, 2004–05, Cooke effectively defaces his own painting. This is therefore a destructive act that is simultaneously creative – yet another paradox that defies reductive resolution. The equivalent would be to paint a cigarette burn on a pristine canvas – as would appear to be the case in *Morning is Broken* – inasmuch as it is an act of annihilation and creation at the same time; an entropic gambit that seeks equilibrium not in the moment of verisimilitude – *this image looks like a cigarette burn* – but in the context of defacing the very thing that is being created.

We can take this notion one step further if we consider the moot subject of authorship: if Cooke is painting an image taken from a mural or some graffiti that he has happened across, then he is in effect painting someone else's 'painting'. This is not so much about the co-option of someone else's imagery, as I noted earlier, as it is about the issue of agency: who is painting the graffiti, the knackered Santa Claus, and the wheezing pumpkin – or, more crucially, is the same person painting an oneiric Casper David Friedrich-like landscape and the hyper-realist foreground in which these incongruities exist? This is not about an artist assuming different styles or manners of painting; it is about a degree of 'nearness' to the painting that is disguised, or camouflaged, in the eclecticism of both the content, style and form that the painting takes. The painter is at one with the painting and yet he too is a repository, a staging post for the maturation of form, ideas and content – a bulwark, finally, where recollections and visual ideas consolidate and sediment into the remains of our days.

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Outside: *Studio Infinity*, 2005–06 (detail)
oil on canvas, 183 × 274cm
Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London
and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Inside flaps: *Fun*, 2005–06
oil on canvas, 220 × 370cm
Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London
and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Inside left: *Morning is Broken*, 2004
oil on canvas, 220 × 370cm
ARTIS/François Pinault, France

Inside right: *Brain Party*, 2004
oil on canvas, 60 × 80cm
Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London
and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York