

Terry Setch

Terry Setch's reputation, always strongest among fellow artists, has been built on work that is large in scale. It is also often composed of two or more panels of polypropylene or unstretched canvas tarpaulin, like a polyptych, animated by a physical surface of recycled beach detritus set in glistening pools of plastic and a moonscape of polychromatic waxborne marks. So his latest paintings in oil and encaustic on coarse hessian or textured art paper might appear unexpectedly modest, tame, even a dalliance. For one thing, these images of youthful skateboarders are small-sized; some are mounted on board and many have conventionally framed edges. For another, they do not display the seemingly global implications harboured by the dramatic, shifting narratives that marked out Setch's monumental *Once upon a time there was OIL III* (1981-2), now in the Tate, or *Towards Lavernock, Winter/Spring 1993-4* in the Welsh national collection, as baroque masterpieces.

That momentary uncertainty is understandable, but it should not linger. This work is quintessentially Setch's. His greatest strength is an unfettered passion for painting, the stuff of its materials, the process of making and its ability to transform pigment into imagery. That vigour can take many forms, but each is connected to the next and ultimately to a tradition where Setch's deepest inspirations are found: Goya, for example, and Munch. In fact, as well as being resonant of modern, everyday experience, these new paintings link intimately with concerns in Setch's art that stretch back almost fifty years. What's more, testing an audience's aesthetic sensibilities at the point of entry – that first impression – is almost a Setch hallmark. It introduces his utterly perspicacious painterly sense, a strategy to expose his medium's vulnerability and potential, and reward a spectator willing to transgress with him boundaries that separate high from low, or the Sunday painter from the ardent professional, in order to release the fullest expression.

Which is why play has been a powerful motif for Setch throughout his career. Ludic properties have informed his approach since a wartime childhood among the bombed sites fed his artistic vision, to his antics on the shore at Penarth with stones, jetsam and abandoned vehicles that was integral in making some of his greatest beachscapes. In these new paintings we encounter a theatre of display, energy and audacity that emanates equally from the painter and his subject. Setch's delight at the skateboarders' own risky improvised acrobatic choreography transfers into the nature of his drawing and mark-making. As a landscape painter, Setch has always treated the human environment, but these are his first specifically figure compositions for almost fifteen years. His rejuvenated interest takes flight in acute angles of knees and shoulders, ballooning trousers and prized trainers, jutting elbows and gleeful faces. The raucous assemblies of youth behind stations or in dingy subways that older bypassers skirt Setch observes. The scene invades his imagination which, because he never sketches on the spot, generates the street-wise tonalities and urban grittiness of the paintings themselves. Memory powers the streaks of loose pigment in *Puppets on strings*, and the way pliable wax is rubbed into the rough tooth of the red-hued hessian by the palm pivoting on the artist's own wrist like mud pushed into an adobe wall. Effects are sensed more than seen, more noted than defined.

That is not to say that these pictures are allegories of painting: they are principally about skateboarding, its fashions and camaraderie. But painting can also simultaneously address other issues, just as the seashore can be experienced as a microcosm of larger events in the world or in the artist's state of mind - perhaps the very essence of the romantic expressionism with which Setch associates himself, alongside Graham Sutherland and Samuel Palmer. Indeed, one notion can live powerfully in the shadow of its opposite. Learning through play is an idea that is regaining currency at a time when children spend hours in front of computer screens; but there is widespread anxiety about their safety from perceived malevolent forces. Skateboarders themselves are provoke critics who view their play as destructive of place and a liability ("Shopping centre stunts prompt calls for skate park" barks my local paper this weekend). And what of deadly

play? Setch made these images against the background of his own advancing years – an ageing refuted by his constant creativity - and of young servicemen caught up in the Iraq war. Military planners have a word for their preparations – wargames.

As eloquently as anything in Setch's own back-catalogue, these paintings can remind us of the great interconnectedness of the world beyond the gallery.

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The author co-wrote, with Michael Tooby, *Terry Setch: A Retrospective*, the 96-page illustrated monograph published by Howard Gardens Gallery, Cardiff, in 2001
