LOUDER THAN WORDS

The uneasy images of James Boswell and Terry Setch

The combination of Terry Setch and James Boswell only appears incongruous if you are familiar with one and not both. Once you have seen their work together, this unexpected coupling is confirmed as appropriate, even inspired. An exhibition composed of a small choice of paintings is not sufficient to illustrate the likeminded-ness of the two men; it really requires a selection from the full run of both artists' prodigious output. It reveals, however, a shared story of commitment – especially to art's ability to connect with the vital concerns that animate the commonplace and relate it, crucially, to the world beyond. Boswell died 35 years ago and was already known for his published drawings when Setch was born, but although their lives never crossed they represent continuity in artistic practice. Their work embodied an immediate and sometimes savage reaction to contemporary events, and the force of their reaction resonates long after those events have passed.

The aspect of Boswell's career that accords most closely with Setch's approach occurred in the period between 1934 and the early 1950s when Boswell created numerous satirical ink drawings reproduced in the pages of Left Review, the Daily Worker and then Lilliput. With personal views matured by observing the hardship endured by working people when the Depression was most severe, Boswell channelled his unease with the prevailing social order into an incisive linear style that owed much to the graphic example from the previous decade of German expressionists like Otto Dix and George Grosz whose social criticism was directed against the horrors of war and the injustices of the post-war world.

Boswell's drawings revealed two sides to his personality. One comprised his satire on the ruling class of the political, military, media, commercial and religious hierarchy. It was bitingly effective because it was measured and objective, and its highpoint was perhaps reached during war service as a radiographer in the RAMC in images that are richer for being private and angry; they existed beyond the grasp of the army censors. He filled the pages of three small notebooks with vigorous and fervent drawings, coruscating with brilliant allegorical allusions, aimed at the military conduct of officers who, bulllike, presided over the ordure of battle in which soldiers floundered. Depicted as animals, these figures of authority are shown displaying a callous unconcern for helpless troops.

The other side came through in gentler scenes of ordinary life, some produced as relatively inexpensive lithographic prints by the anti-war, anti-fascist agit prop group, the Artists' International, of which Boswell was a founding member in 1934. While their sanguine mood is almost

tangible, these subjects are not traditionally elevating; they are, in fact, banal – and truthful of how the average citizen led his (Boswell's characters were mostly male) life. They captured what Boswell wanted to achieve, namely to help redefine the material considered appropriate for a 'fine artist' (and, in his case, a former student of the Royal College of Art). By turning away from painting towards illustration and caricature when he felt impelled to do so by greater circumstances than his own, he was prepared to take up the means and methods of 'low art' and disregard the difference. He generally drew groups of townspeople gathered in everyday activities, like shopping from stalls in Leather Lane, talking in a pub and just standing around, or at a demonstration. After the war this interest appears uppermost in his art, demonstrated by some spare, subdued images in mixed media of places around north London – deserted streets at night, bomb sites in rain or people milling about – made remarkable by a dun-coloured support in which rich watercolour or pastel tones fitfully bloom behind his active, wiry drawn line. They were the prelude to his return to painting, to the muted abstracts and landscape views that, after a preoccupation with chaos and catastrophe, marked his preference for making tranquil and undisturbed objects in the last twenty years of his life.

For his part, Setch has never failed during a 50-year career to convey his wonder in the transformation of matter, like colour and medium into imagery with a mark, gesture or action that can invoke a strong sensation in a spectator of an experience wider than the image itself. One senses that Boswell was propelled by a similar inspiration. Both artists convey their enjoyment in what they making, a desire to experiment – with materials, subject matter, applications – in order to move their pictorial voice forward. Like most serious artists, their images reflect an informed conversation with the art of the recent and distant past. By referring to models as disparate as Dürer, Goya, Daumier, Turner and Jackson Pollock, Boswell and Setch show the history of their craft as a continuum unconstrained by age and era, but as an immense context in which their own efforts can extend their meaning.

In the early 1980s, for instance, people were as aware of the possibility of global conflagration as their parents had been in the 1930s. The Cold War was approaching a period of deep frostiness, and war in the Middle East had chosen Lebanon as its battleground. By 1983 traditional British industries were in turmoil and few other places had competed with the Falkland Islands for news coverage. Images of men at war, devastated landscapes – natural and ideological, the pomposity and self-deception of politicians and the media re-emerged, especially in Germany and north America, as part of the currency of art as they had done a half-century earlier. Acknowledging that world events were informing the pictorial strategies of British artists, the British Art Show of 1984-5 – the latest in a series of group shows of cutting-edge contemporary art organised every five years by the Arts Council and toured to leading public venues – included a section titled 'Critical

Attitudes'.

In this catch-all category for artists with an insistent critical social dimension in their work was People – stand together Greenham. A huge painting predominantly in oil paint on the kind of canvas used for the sails of fishing boats, it was tethered precariously through eyelets around its edge to a stark, simple wooden frame. In the view of the selectors, this painting highlighted an almost palpable sense of social and perhaps even moral decay, conveyed more through metaphor than representation; that is, how it was made was as expressive as what it depicted. Indeed, the legibility of the screen of figures was impaired by the molten quality of the surface of paint; although fixed by an oily wax medium that preserved the appearance of fluidity, the pigment looked liable to shift out of place with the next change of air or light. The helter-skelter bursts of bright colour against eerie dark tones and the unnerving inconsistency of scale, viewpoint and space were reminiscent of a Picasso collage and added to its aura of instability.

It had been made by Setch with the scale, expressive volatility and broad figurative invention with which he had become increasingly associated. In the previous decade, and particularly since 1980, his canvases were regular inclusions in important group shows in Britain, Europe and Australia, and solo exhibitions in London and Bristol had been critically well received. Writing about one of these that featured paintings that troubled memorably over the aftermath of the Falklands War in 1982, the critic of the Spectator, John McEwen, commented that '… his canvases are battlegrounds of meaning and form, depth and surface, these conflicts themselves acting as metaphors of elemental and personal turmoil.' In 1992 a show of Setch's new work at Camden Arts Centre, McEwen returned to the subject for the Sunday Telegraph, adding that 'He is an original. He updates Turner; politicises Jackson Pollock; ruralises Rauschenberg.' Similar enthusiasm, especially among fellow painters, accompanied a retrospective in Bristol in 2001, and in 2003 Tate Britain displayed in its one-gallery exhibition about artists' response to the endangered environment Setch's monumental painting Once upon a Time there was OIL III, Panel 1 (1981-2), the first painting by Setch that the Tate had bought in 1983. Measuring over two metres by four, its weather-beaten surface included oil, wax, scrim and chalk among its components.

What we see in this painting is a system in flux; it is equally present in People – stand together Greenham. It is partly painterly and partly political; and the two are integrated more surely than the paint holds on to the tarpaulin and the canvas stays on the wall. The title of the British Art Show piece alerted the onlooker to current happenings, specifically the peaceful protest that had begun in 1981 and continued for two decades by women against the siting by the US military of cruise missiles at the RAF base at Greenham Common in Berkshire. Setch identified with the objectives of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

(CND), just as Boswell's outlook drew him to Communist party membership in the 1930s. He regarded the women's gesture as powerful – standing, sitting and sheltering in all weathers, occasionally harassed and, as each year passed, becoming part of the colour, texture and life of the landscape. Also implied by the title's call to solidarity was the strike by miners that began two months before Setch started the painting. It was to become a highly contentious national issue, in many cases dividing families, and was epitomised by news coverage of battles across open ground between ranks of strikers and policemen reminiscent of medieval contests or the decline into civil anarchy portrayed by Goya.

Setch's wife Dianne was involved with the Greenham protest from its start, a commitment that literally brought the issue into the home. Identification at this domestic level has become the touchstone for Setch's most memorable work. This artist's awareness of the interconnectedness of his wellbeing and his family's with the good management of the planet became explicit in paintings around 1971. But his is also the outlook of a survivor of the era that Boswell commented on. A child of working-class parents whose home in inner-city London was rendered untenable by wartime bombing, Setch and his family endured years of temporary accommodation and resettlement in alien Surrey suburbs that stretched into peacetime and austerity. With this history of disruption and transplantation, home is a cherished entity for Setch that, once realised, needs celebrating and defending, and also teasing. All these treatments have appeared in his work, from installations in the early 1960s that parodied exquisitely the revolving door around which advanced art styles like abstraction influenced popular designs for suburban interiors that filtered back into art, to the near-classical authority of his beachscapes on the theme of pollution that began in 1973.

Setch has never been allowed to become complacent, either as a painter or as a citizen. His vigilance might be expressed in different forms, some of which appear light-hearted, playful and convivial because they are these things. But they tend also to share a consistent anxiety, at times manifested in a figure or object into which the artist projects his presence symbolically. The injection of personal memories or the re-enactment of experience ensure integrity in a world view that fans out from the intimate. The beach is his most common but not exclusive location, itself a fought-over frontier between the knowable, habitable land and the unpredictable, trackless sea. And Setch lives close to the shore, in Penarth in south Wales, near cliffs prone to erosion and below a horizon crossed all the 33 years he has lived there by vessels either carrying coal out of Cardiff Bay or transporting oil for the refineries in the Severn estuary. As a cordon, the beach changes ceaselessly, washing in detritus, keeping some and flushing out the rest. If it were a canvas, its impressions would alter daily, its stains multiply repeatedly and its surface be abused incessantly – by

spillages, pollutants, altered weather patterns, and by a veritable Sargasso Sea of discarded rubbish. As its ability to renew itself becomes impaired, the beach is for Setch the enduring double metaphor for the fortunes of the world around him and the transformative nature of painting. By analogy, concern for both is a political act.

Perhaps like Boswell, whose drawings of calm, everyday activity continued alongside cartoons reproaching privilege, Setch searches for the structure upon which chaos occurs in order better to observe the chaos. His artistic practice, his primary professional concern, underwent the formative upheaval of the discovery by advanced British artists of American abstract expressionism. The impact of two exhibitions in London in 1956 and 1959 on two generations of British artists cannot be overestimated. The first deeply impressed Boswell whose painting adopted an abstract, all-over quality derived from Jackson Pollock; and it was Pollock's shallow pictorial space and fluid gesture in work in the later show that had a lasting effect on Setch, then in his postgraduate year at the Slade. Both drew on these American examples to push their ways of working forward, borrowing ideas on surface texture, for instance, to materialise imagery closer to physical experience, and on gesture to 'speed' the passage of the eye. Each, in ways that now appear curiously complementary, attempted to resolve these lessons with their own evolving motifs in the landscape. That the process was open-ended, and augmented by fresh inspirations, is clear from the work both artists produced in succeeding years. It was still felt by Boswell in the late sixties in the Golden Estuary paintings. Related to pen and ink drawings made in Yarmouth – Isle of White and Venice, panels like Lagoon interpret the visual sensation of a certain light on a mobile pellucid surface in terms of line, texture and a single colour supplied by metallic pigment imparting a subtle reflective sheen. And it informed the organisation of his last major piece, The Golden Day, a polyptych completed shortly before his death in 1971.

One enduring lesson for Setch was the ineluctability of the picture plane, the flat surface on which the painterly act of transformation takes place. Like the beach, it is the frontline over which different forces battle in order for something to come into existence through the agency of the artist's committed energies. The fact of the painting's surface is never denied by Setch who comes to terms with it in direct and physical ways, marking it arbitrarily, teasing its grain or fibre, breaking into it and fusing it. The act, which can get an image going, has a parallel in the lives of the Greenham women. Separated from the air base by fences, they instinctively set about this boundary by decorating it with items of their own. Recollections of this type work on the imagination and fuse the process of art making with the tactics that extend out of lives at moments that matter to us.
All of which funnels into Setch's latest paintings. Which is not to imply that these animal images can only be enjoyed on top of a prior

knowledge of the artist's career and objectives. For while Setch relates one part to a larger whole like concentric rings that emanate from the central core, his desire to make pictures remains paramount. These representations of bears and foxes reflect that desire pursued through identifying a new subject matter, working through problems of composition and integrating this motif into his existing way of working. Examining each reveals trademark elements, such as a hard textured, ready coloured ground (establishing the blue background in several panels) that can be further roughed up to animate the surface (a practice of Setch's that dates back to his teens); the illusion of very little space within the picture plane so that images seem to project forward into the space we occupy; the lively line that contains form; and the application of pigment in strokes that vary from scrubbed, dragged or blunt gestures to the sculptural manipulation of pliable matter. Above all, the visual contest between the chaos of creativity and the quiescence of structure maintains a ceasefire long enough for us to absorb the game plan. It then offers every expectation that the polemic will be resumed in the next image we encounter.

None the less, Setch's choice of subject has broad ramifications that insert this group of works into the dialogue he has maintained for nearly forty ears between the concerns of the artist and those of his habitat. Although Setch has never used wildlife imagery as extensively as now, it has been the natural concomitant to the landscapes and beachscapes that have illuminated his career. In 1987 sheep grazed perilously on the blasted terrain of Touch the Earth Again, Setch's multi-parted wall-sized painting shown at the Hayward Gallery; the sheep reminded us that the previous year's Chernobyl radiation disaster had touched Wales, affecting its livestock and livelihoods. More significantly, his earliest finished creations as a teenager were drawings and small paintings of plants and of rabbits and other fauna inspired by his solitary walks on the Epsom Downs which he recalls as a magical experience. These pieces were carried out on dampened crumpled paper into which he would rub watercolour before wiping it away with a cloth to leave an atmospheric tonality against which the image would take shape.

One of these pictures, from about 1952 and unquestionably accomplished, hangs in Setch's home. One day this year in his garden he saw a fox and was fascinated by the creature, its bushiness and rich colour, and by its presence within the town. Setting about the painting Foxy Tales, Setch's first move was to capture that colour by laying thin skims of clay. As these were washed off or into the board with pleasurable circular hand movements, lines appeared in the residue that unlocked ideas about the composition that resulted in the dynamic sweep of forms around and within the surface. Into this process were added layers of wax which puckered and wrinkled as heat was applied to them, raw pigments and lines scored directly into the mix with the handle end of a paintbrush.

Just as the artist gets involved in this creative exchange with his materials, he clarifies the relevance of this subject to his concerns, unlocking the archive of memories, anxieties and aspirations that persists like a powerful undertow through most of his work. In this way, Setch moves from the personal to the public, making us think of the habitats exhausted or disrupted for development that bring foxes into urban gardens to forage. The arrival of bears into these pictures chimes with news coverage of environmental damage across the planet, of shrinking icecaps and global warming. Polar white against the earthy detritus and transplanted to an alien territory, a bear fetches up on the beach, the Nevil Shute-emblem of civilisation's final refuge from nuclear catastrophe. It is tempting to see Setch himself as this lone, snowy-haired creature, scouring the rubble for remains of the past that can help plot the direction to the future. As he himself explained, in that James Boswell might have echoed in his own work, 'My thoughts and fear converge on this place.'

The writer and exhibition organiser Martin Holman first wrote about Terry Setch's work in 1983 and, with Michael Tooby, wrote Terry Setch: A Retrospective, the 96-page illustrated monograph published by Howard Gardens Gallery, Cardiff, in 2001
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