



Painting: Bay by Patrick Jones

Rainbow of Language

Sandy Brown meets a painter who has truly mastered the art of allowing the work to emerge from within

Patrick Jones is an abstract painter best known for his fluency in colour. He knows it well, understands its nuances, and is not afraid of its strength. And when it comes to colour, here is a craftsman, mixing and blending with great care and understanding the tones and shades he needs. For years he has taught many eager students about 'Colour' (with a capital 'C'): how to blend it, how to understand it, how to balance it and how colours are affected by being next to other colours.

He has sort of claimed the territory and language of colour, and his most recent large paintings are I think the best he has ever done. And that makes me wonder how it is that a painter who has been working for over 30 years, and who has expressed his life and his being in what appears, in many ways,

to be a particular abstract language, can suddenly make what seems like a great leap forward.

His answer is: "Several reasons." There is, he explains, a newly found contentment in his private life, plus the sensational opportunity to travel the world as a workshop leader for Tate Britain on cruise liners, after which he realised he had long been hungry for new light, new visions, new experiences.

Patrick now talks lyrically about being on the top deck of the ship as it sailed majestically down the Grand Canal in Venice, giving him a superb view from high up of the architecture and its extraordinary light – an experience that stayed with him and inspired a painting on his return.

He has cruised in the Pacific and, in the vast openness of both North and South Atlantic, he had the time to savour the massive spaciousness of the endless sea, an experience which provides a sense of space that cannot be had in any other way; an infinite distance giving room to imagine, to breathe, to conjure and wonder. And it is that sense of space that now permeates his paintings. There is more depth now, a three-dimensional distance creating a new space within.

All of us artists are trying to communicate something that cannot be communicated in any other way. Even though we often have to create our own language, or find a dormant existing one, we express something we hope is universal, something which, while we struggle to say it, will be understood by others. Patrick says this too; and that his greatest satisfaction comes when someone stands in front of one of his large canvases and says: "I know what that's like."

He is very clear that we do have to stand in front of the canvas because that is the only way we can "immerse ourselves in the music and allow it to wash over us". I know what he means. It will be felt in the body: a visceral change, a sense of the pulse quickening or the breath sharpening or the eyes opening wider.

As a potter and painter myself I am used to hearing potters wax lyrical about a particular clay. We can talk for hours about this clay or that, comparing the feel of it, its plasticity, contrasting colours and firing qualities. Patrick Jones has that feeling for canvas. He loves canvas. He observes the quality of cotton duck; he cares about the weave, the number of threads per square inch; the colour and unbleached nature of the fabric, and he can talk poetically for as long as you have the time to sit and listen to him.

As a British painter, he had a great deal of recognition from the very start of his 40-year career. He has exhibited at the Hayward and the Serpentine in survey shows of British Abstract Painting; he was appointed to teach at Hunter College in New York, which put him right at the epicentre of the contemporary abstract expressionist energy there, and he became friends with critic Clement Greenberg and artist Helen Frankenthaler. Patrick



Painting: Jean by Patrick Jones

stayed in America for 16 years, returning to the UK in 1994. His work is still heavily collected, especially by other artists such as Sir Anthony Caro, a mentor and friend.

Art is a strange thing. It is a form of magic. And to express what Patrick Jones needs to say requires a particular form of synchronicity. The experience has to be right; the energy levels have to be right; your sense of awareness has to be right; the unstoppable urge to express has to be there; and there has to be an ability to let go of all that you know and have known. Only then can you create something important.

Having the ability to recognise when all these elements of synchronicity come together, Patrick can start a painting and go through to the end in one go. You can do that only if you don't think; if you are so compelled by the forces to communicate that you have no choice but to pick up that brush and put down that great red line, and then dollop some gentle green blobs on top so that they sing.

Obedying these forces, which will take you into a new land where this has never been done before, you have to put down some blue, in layers, behind the big red line: and then you know you have to add more layers gently using colours which blend and contrast and jump slightly; you go on into the creamy space, and on into the unknown, always with a relaxed certainty that this is how it must be.

And then somehow you know you have finished; that you have said it.

To be in that state, 'in the zone', is the best feeling in the world. It is why we artists do what we do.

It is why Patrick Jones does his art and it is what he is looking for: to find that state so that he can communicate that which he can do only in that way.

I asked him what he is aware of when he is painting well; to my surprise he said if he is aware of anything it is of the structure of the painting, of building up layers. So: not colour at all, but form.

Of course it does not always go well. Sometimes you think you can do another one like that, and start again. But you cannot; the only reason it works is because you have let go of all attachment to an

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outcome, to wanting it to be a certain way. It is not an easy state to be in: to just 'be' when synergy, energy and colour all blend with the artist into a rainbow of language.

And between the magical times, the artist builds up a bank of resources; Patrick Jones builds up knowledge about colour, and it is this that is his practical vocabulary. Like all of us who work in this strange state, in order to really have something to say with those practical artistic skills we acquire, we must live, experience, feel, think and have the courage to just 'be'. R

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“ Happy
are those
who see
beauty
in modest places
where
others
see
nothing ”

– Camille Pissarro, 1870