

# CROSS

The son of a civil engineer, Graham Crowley was born in Romford in 1950, and grew up there and in Ilford and Southend. He is, in a very real sense, an Essex lad, a child of Eastern England, whose first painting acquired by Christchurch Mansion was purchased from the Tolly Cobbol Eastern Arts Exhibition in 1997. This picture, entitled Curl, is a typical example of Crowley's early style, a feisty abstraction full of impossible but dynamic shapes and acute colours. But as his work developed and his thought matured, Crowley began to realize that abstraction was 'less engaging' than figuration for someone of his temperament; it was actually 'less demanding'. Crowley is a painter of restless intelligence and tremendous energy, and it soon became apparent that these qualities, combined with a rather unfashionable social conscience, would propel him into exploring the world about him through an intensely focused realism quite unlike anything else to be found on the contemporary art scene.

In early 1980s Crowley began to be recognised as a painter who placed a strong emphasis on content, much of it to do with domestic life portrayed with a Pop Art twist. The household familiar would suddenly switch tracks to the surreal, as Crowley painted your fears with gallows humour. The brightly-lit interiors turned into claustrophobic urban psychodramas redolent of decay and destruction. What doom lurks in corridor or cellar? The disjunctions of scale – huge mundane objects in cramped settings amid vast perspectives – created vertigo and deep unease. From flat decorative colour and stylized drawing Crowley graduated to tonal modeling with glazes of colour tinting grisaille grounds. The social conscience of Dickens or Orwell now seemed to be married to the moralistic tradition of Hogarth. This was painterly satire which took no prisoners.

These were psychological paintings – mindscapes as much as depictions of urban sprawl and overcrowded housing. A wildly out-of-control mincer or giant can-opener signify our underlying anxieties at human aggression, sexuality and death. Crowley, unlike most artists, is not only willing but able to identify the rot beneath the floor boards.

By 1991, in an exhibition titled Somewhere Else, landscape has become a principal focus of the work, no doubt in part due to the Crowleys' move to the Forest of Dean. But the interest in urban

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decay lingered, and the real theme of these paintings was the meeting point of indoors and outdoors – group of houses set within their natural context.

The Flower Show of 1998 concentrated on the beautiful grisaille still-lives Crowley had begun to paint ten years before, a tribute to floral tributes which had become an increasingly noticeable indicator of public grief, and which reached their apogee with the tragic death of Princess Diana. These paintings, in which Crowley sets up a formal dialogue between lucidity and blur, specifics and atmospheric, near and far, and uses the paint surface at once to confirm and to interrupt the painted image, are a particularly poignant instance of the artist in his role as a cultural observer. His moral conscience however, demands that he frustrate rather than fulfil our expectations, so that there is no bright joyful colour in these pictures, though they are filled with light.

More recently, Crowley has devoted his considerable energies to a thoughtful revitalisation of the landscape tradition in western art. His paintings, which have lost none of their graphic vitality and obscure feelings of foreboding, are mostly about reinterpreted landscape – how we remember a place, as against how it really looks. He is interested in patterns of settlement and dispersal: how houses are spread out through a landscape, or how the bare patches of faded grass on campsites appear as the tents are packed away. Colour floods and saturates these images, giving tone to the time of day. Again we see how figure and ground are deliberately confused, with the strategic use of blips of white as signifiers of surface which also represent flies and moths. Whether built up in heavy impasto or glazed over compressed charcoal, it is the assured handling of the materials that is so compelling. Graham Crowley, the sophisticated style historian who can make telling allusions to 1930s book illustration, Festival of Britain textiles or Rembrandt's etchings, is in the end an artist with a profound love of paint.