

DAVID
HEATHCOTE

Beyond Horizons

David Heathcote at GV Art London, 8 February - 21 April, 2011

Remembering, Feeling, Responding, Dreaming: A Conversation with David Heathcote

I met David Heathcote several times while he was preparing for the exhibition *Beyond Horizons* to talk about his life and his work — usually in the presence of paintings, drawings, sculptures and sketchbooks. I was grateful for this opportunity to look ‘backstage’, and scan the more private work that usually goes on out of sight of public view. Sitting down together one day to look through his sketchbooks, I hoped to glean some clues that might reveal, in particular, something of the reasons behind the apparent (and, to some, bewildering) variety in Heathcote’s publicly seen work. I recorded this conversation; this text is an edited version of that recording. My own contributions to the conversation are shown in italics.

David Reason

You have said that there were three ways in which you were self-critical as an artist.

Yes, I was thinking of three ways. One is to do with pictorial structure, which became very important to me as a result of discovering Cubism when I was at the Slade. I was very unsure of myself then, and Cubism appeared to give me a really clear path for the future. I became a committed Cubist for a while, and Cubism had a really beneficial, lasting effect on me.

Another is something to do with the opposite: of resisting tidiness. In a way, I relate this to my childhood, and my upbringing. My father was strict. He kept the house in immaculate order — he was meticulously clean and so on. He was a good man, but he was quite difficult to live with. And although I was very diligent over my drawing at Canterbury, I wrote in a deliberately untidy way. I suppose it was a gesture of independence from home. I remember a tutor holding up something of mine and saying, ‘Look at this drawing. Now look at this writing that he’s got underneath his drawing.’ It was very embarrassing. But it is that kind of untidiness that I now value as an entry into a way of expression, deliberately avoiding the straight line, as it were. It’s there in these drawings. I don’t think you’ll find a straight line in these at all.

Then there’s colour. Looking again at these old photographs of paintings I made in 2000, they’ve really struck me. I see that they have a bearing on the direction I’m trying to go at present with colour. I might pick up something useful from seeing these again.

Do you remember that little landscape (Algerian Journey, 2006, p.3) you have in your front room? Isn’t that of the same kind? It has that same sense of authenticity, as though it has to be as it is. And what you said is very interesting about this tension between the tightly controlled and, well, it’s the much looser — it’s like drawing with the left hand for the right-handed person — it’s a very good way of trying not to invest too much in the line.

Yes, I’ve tried painting with my left hand. You feel in a way as if you’ve never painted before; it’s a fascinating experience. I remember standing in my studio looking at a painting, and I needed my right hand to pick up something. I moved my brush from my right hand to my left, and I had a sense, which I would admit I may have been imagining, that the colour was suddenly stronger in the picture. I put the brush back into my right hand and something seemed to shift again, to change slightly. I was very intrigued. That’s why I painted some pictures with my left hand, to see, for one thing, whether it would affect my colour in some way.

Did you then, as it were, try not to use your skill, your touch, to adjust the depth of colour?

Well, there was a lack of skill during the whole process. I was fascinated by that, because children’s drawings and paintings fascinate me, partly because of the same thing. They are so good in a way that one can’t imagine one’s own being good. But one knows that at the same time as they’re so successful the child is struggling with the medium, and somehow it’s the fact that they can’t do it and yet they can do it that I was experiencing. It was a lovely sensation.

Cover Image: **Shaft of Celebration**, 2003, oil on board, 31 x 41 cm

*Another aspect seems to me to concern not so much what I think of as the looseness of the line, but the question of the presence of the line at all. In terms of what you've just said, some of your earlier pieces differ from more recent ones in that the unformedness of them is so spread across the whole picture plane that it's almost hidden. It's disguised through repetition – like with sand, which you don't see as being composed of lots of different shapes of granule, more as a texture. For example, in *Awakening, 2000*, (p.5) the loose line itself plays against the use of colour and form. One neither mimics the other nor does it simply complement it, but it still exists in a kind of tension. And I think what I find in these is that there is not an assimilation, of one part into the other, of one kind of image making into another. On the contrary, each tolerates the other – but there's a kind of tension. You see what I mean? It's a very difficult thing to express. And that may be why it's a very difficult thing to make, as well. It's like an unstable equilibrium, you feel as though just a little bit more and it would go over. The result is not that it is balanced, but that there is a willingness to let each other be, a tolerance that none the less relates to the presence of the other.*

Well, balance of a certain kind is something that I also fear in painting. I think there may be a tendency in everyone to try to balance things, possibly because you have to stay upright when you're standing. I don't know, perhaps everything one does relates to making sure that things don't fall down. But I do tend to feel that if I put anything on one side then I have to put something on the other side for balance, and I am constantly watching for a levelling kind of balance that might occur as a result, and reduce the tension I need in a picture.

And is that, again, partly an urge to tidiness?

Something ingrained perhaps, yes. I certainly never do forget what we might call the balance snare. Somebody once said to me, 'I don't particularly like that painting. It's too balanced.' I shall never forget that remark.

There is a sense in which you can so arrange things that they will seem self-sufficiently composed.

Yes, that could be. I certainly want a painting of mine to have tension in it. And something of the tightrope.

I mentioned that memory of what someone said about my work. I do remember such things very clearly. I used to worry that my colour sense wasn't discerning enough, so when someone said I was using too many colours in a crayon drawing I felt rather put out. And then after I'd left Canterbury art school I showed a tutor a painting of mine, and he said, 'Yes, you know, it's good, and I feel that it will last, your drawing's good, but perhaps your colour's not so good.' It was such a slight comment about the colour, but I've never forgotten it, even though I've moved on so far since then. And the one about balance stuck very firmly.

Why was that? Why did you find that one particularly memorable?

Because I feared that it might be an inherent weakness. In a way, you can say about the drawings you commented on that they're a bit too balanced, and could do with more tension. I shall have to see now if they're worth keeping.

There isn't that sense of productive tension. But it's interesting that it should be a comment about balance that touches you – what's the opposite of balance, I wonder?

A compositional tension.

It could be wildness.

It might be, but if I made a successful non-wild Cubist picture it would still avoid the kind of bland balance I detest.

Do you find you ever make an angry painting, for example?

Oh, yes. I've made angry drawings. In fact I've got some here [*Heathcote sifts through a couple of sketchbooks in search of one from 1987, which contains a series of boldly sketched birds, profiles, boats and other subjects. First, though, he finds he has picked up a sketchbook which accompanied him on a cycle trip to Holland, which has some lively, freely executed notations of landscape*] though to be honest these are actually not so much angry drawings, they're just furiously rapid. They're of landscapes that I loved in Holland. We were on a cycling holiday, and I would stop and say to Janet, 'I want to make a drawing, carry on, and I'll catch you up'. So I only had about a minute! Oh, I certainly enjoyed making those.



Algerian Journey, 2006, oil on board, 20 x 27 cm

But these others really are angry drawings, and I remember sometimes filling a sketchbook with drawings like this. Just letting things burst out. Yes, these were angry. And I have done paintings like this as well.



Dutch Landscape, 1989, pencil, 15 x 20 cm

When you look at these, do you feel them as angry now?

I feel the energy in them, rather more than the anger. But I can still feel some of the anger because I can remember how they would have been done. It was anger arising out of a sense of desperation.

So this is a response to a sense of some kind of impasse in art? Not a sense of some extraneous situation?

It was a sense of — what can I call it — inability? What's the word? Insufficiency, perhaps. I wanted to make a big painting, and I felt I couldn't do it. I was probably painting and the paintings were all going wrong. And the best way then was to let rip, and do something like writing swear words on public walls, even though I'd never actually do that. It was out of sheer frustration that I couldn't express myself properly.

What intrigues me about this is that from your description these were done one after the other, so all of those that are dated 10.7.87 are all done on 10th July; but then, what relates one to the next? Here we've got, I don't know, someone looking on at a railway line leading off to The Big Rock Candy Mountain, and suddenly there's a little flock of birds — startled birds, birds that have been feeding on the ground and, as it were, scattered. And then there's this strange fellow, and then there's somebody yelling or talking to another, a male and a female, and they're continuing, he's still going on, then suddenly a foot! Oh, and then there's glumness! With moon! And then suddenly we get a night-time scene by the sea, with a boat. Then four little moons...



A Foot, 1987, pencil, 15 x 20 cm

I wouldn't try to explain them myself.

No, you don't have to; but it's intriguing to me how one follows another.

Well, I haven't really studied this book, I must say. I just did it.

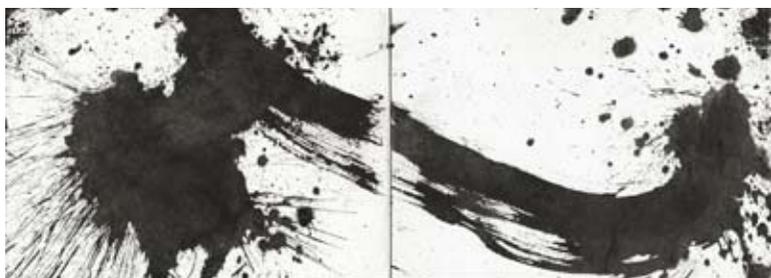
The feeling that comes across to me in the sequence there is that it moves in an arc almost, of starting out, then getting angry, then tightening down again. That's how I feel that. I have to say I love these little pictures.



Awakening, 2000, oil on canvas, 61 x 76 cm

Well, I'm very fond of them myself. I like them because they are, for me, so full-blooded, like a good piece of music. But they were done with a certain degree of desperation.

I would like to come up with some ideas as to how we can include the sketchbooks in the show in a constructive way. I like these as well [I have turned to another sketchbook, one which is filled with sweeping brush gestures, resulting in abstract inventions reminiscent of Japanese brush-and-ink calligraphy] and what I like about them is that there is no attempt at control beyond controlling the direction of the brush.



Poem Without Words, 1995, ink, 15 x 41 cm

They're not totally unlike the other sketchbooks, but they're painted rather than drawn. There is no attempt to make anything which is a recognisable image. I was given six of these sketchbooks, filled with lovely thick paper. I made an unsuccessful start, and then put them aside. Then one day I felt I wanted to make poems out of brushstrokes. I knelt on the floor and went through all six books, with black ink and a large brush. I really felt I was making poetry with brushstrokes and splatters of ink. I gave the books a title: *Poems without Words*. That was in 1995. I still value them.

I also like very much what happens at the join. Here for example, if that were continuous across the two pages it would be trivial, but because of that little break as you go skipping across – you make a little leap – it actually makes this so dynamic. It's a willingness to let the paper play [its part]. Over here, though, this is much more controlled, more careful, so there's no break and this line seems to just flop – there's no sense of the

speed of the stroke. Breaks, for me, often signal tension – you know, two things which are almost but not quite touching. Looking at these sketches of musical performances, I think you would enjoy some of Milein Cosman's pictures of musicians. Do you know her? She was married to Hans Keller, the musician and critic.

I think I knew of the relationship but, no, the name is not familiar to me.

Some of your drawings of musicians capture the energy of music making in a very congenial way. Ah, I see you have a little series of musicians.



Cellist 1, 2007, ink, 15 x 10 cm



Cellist 2, 2007, ink, 15 x 10 cm

Yes, my friend Frank Johnson is a cellist, and I went to his house and made some drawings of him playing. Most of those are him. And there was a time when I was at Christ Church, teaching, and I'd go to lunchtime concerts put on by the marvellous Music Department there, and make drawings. In fact, I find that whenever I see a musician playing, especially a string player or a pianist, I want to draw. Automatically, I must draw.

How do you find teaching? You enjoyed teaching?

Oh yes. I loved it.



Watching the Ship Go By, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 76 cm

What did you find that you enjoyed about teaching?

Well, I taught various things. Studio work and art history. Art History ran through the whole of my teaching career in the universities in Nigeria and here in Canterbury. One very important course I introduced in Nigeria was on African art: about things from Ife, Igbo-Ukwu, Esie, Kano, Zimbabwe, applied art, and so on. It was bizarre that I was the first lecturer to establish African art on the syllabus, because we had students who lived in places with wonderful traditions of art. I'd talk to them about the implications of an archaeological dig that was going on while I was talking, and a student would come to me excitedly after the lecture and say, 'Those archaeologists are just down the road from where my house is! Now I know what they're doing.' It was all so enjoyable, doing that. One of my students was a son of the Oba of Benin, and he invited me and my wife to visit the Palace, and meet his father, who entertained us. A great treat. I also initiated the university's first museum, with a display of Nigerian art, and commissioned Musa Yola, a brilliant local wall painter, to make a big mural in the room where the artefacts were being shown. I never stressed dates or too much in terms of history in my teaching, but concentrated more on the imagery and cultural significance of the art, because that's how I absorbed art in my own youth.

So it's about cultivating a response? And allowing them to know what it is to respond?

Yes, absolutely. I would hope my Canterbury students have remembered whether something was roughly medieval or 19th century, prehistoric or ancient Egyptian, and so on. But beyond that does one need a lot of dates? I don't really think so.

They were Fine Art students, were they?

Yes, they were. I remember going to Nigeria and having been told nothing about the syllabus beforehand. When I arrived I was just told, 'You can start lecturing tomorrow morning.' The tutor who had been doing the art history said, 'You might find these useful in your teaching.' And he gave me some sheets with the dates of the Egyptian pharaohs on them. I thought, 'My goodness, I'm going to give this to these Nigerian students, and ask them to learn the dates? I don't think so!'

How far did the courses develop in relation to what the students were doing, or what the students were interested in? Did you ever 'improvise' in that way?

Well, in Nigeria there was drawing and painting, sculpture, and ceramics, printmaking and textile design. So I would show them relevant pieces of ceramics and textiles and so on. Relating the history of art in an illuminating way to what they are actually doing in the studio can be very valuable to them. And I think it's really nourishing for them if they experience something of art in a broad geographical sense. I have a friend who taught art students in East Africa. He told me that his Head of Department said to him, 'Show them anything. They'll be interested in anything you've got to show them. If you're enthusiastic, show it, yes, don't worry too much about structure.' I think that's a bit wild, but in a way there's something in it. I remember from my Canterbury art school days, when we didn't have any formal art history lectures, seeing certain things that have stayed with me from visiting the public library and bookshops. There weren't so many art books in those days, and the Principal at Canterbury kept all the College books in his office. Only the staff could borrow a book, just to show us. Students weren't allowed direct access to them at all. Imagine that! But we managed, after a fashion. That makes my learning about art look like a very haphazard business but, at the same time, I'm not sure that it was so haphazard, because in one's own mind one comes to organise what one does see in some way according to one's preferences and natural inclination.

I think that's right, and I think that there's two kinds of danger. One of them is continually getting people to say, 'Oh, that's like X' or 'I think you will be interested in looking at Y, because I can see affinities between Y and what you're doing in your work'... Because what I've often found is that students will often look at X or Y or whoever and then think, 'Oh, my gosh, I could never do something like that, I've got to do something different now'. So, in a sense, they are not seeing what it is that is themselves in what they are doing. The other thing is the sense of not getting students to, or allowing students to, over-intellectualise or over-rationalise what they are doing too early.



Head, Michelle, 1996, bronze, h. 48 cm

No, quite. You see the most dreadful nonsense written up in exhibitions by students against their work. What are their tutors teaching them? The loveliest presentation I've seen from a student who's been required to write about their work went something like this: 'I was brought up in Wales and I came to Canterbury, and I was very unhappy to be away from my family and the country that I love. So I decided to paint things as memories of my home.' And she had painted a series of Welsh quarries that were absolutely marvellous. And I thought: you've said it! 'This is what I really wanted to do, and I've tried to do it.' Basically, that's it.

It's surprising how many artists, when they write about why they started to paint at all, if they started to paint when they were older, if they thought of themselves as starting to paint when they were older, it was very often because they want to fill a hole somewhere. They couldn't find what they wanted to see around them, so they painted something to fill that hole, that 'empty space', as one artist puts it, on the wall. And I think that's a very interesting motivation.

Well, I must say, that I was a little bit distressed by one person, an elderly man, retired from teaching, who painted from slides, and he just put everything in. I sometimes wanted to say, if you just take took out that telephone box you'd have quite a nice picture. I never did that, but I did say, 'Well, you seem to be enjoying painting, try going to an art class, you might see other people's work, and you might be stimulated by that to develop further.' And he said, 'Well, no, I really just paint to pass the time.' And I thought, 'Oh, my God, is that why we are alive, just to pass time until we die?' I thought that was really very depressing. A very depressing thing to say. Just to pass time!

By the way, I thought that the list of questions that you prepared, suggestions for what I might want to ask you, was very interesting. One of the questions that struck me – I think you said it was a question that a little girl had asked you – is: 'Why make so many paintings?'

Yes! Well, it floors you, doesn't it?!

Yes! What did you reply?

Actually, the comment wasn't made to me; it was made to my wife. I thought it was very funny. That question is like a child's drawing, it takes you totally by surprise, because it's so complete, it says everything. I once

made an abstract sculpture in the country, where I'd rented a space. Two small children would come and look at what I was working on. And on the last day the little girl, Victoria I think it was, came, and I said, 'Where's your brother? You said he had bought a new tracksuit'. And she said, 'Well, he cut the label off and made a hole and now he can't show it to anybody. He doesn't want to come.' And I said, 'Look, I've finished, Victoria.' And she stood and looked at my abstract sculpture for a while, and then she said, 'Well, it doesn't look like anything, does it? But they're nice shapes.' And I thought, 'Oh, that's wonderful!'

Sometimes they do, don't they — they strike absolutely to the quick!

Yes. I had an exhibition of sketchbooks and abstracts in the foyer of Christ Church, and there was a group of young children that I suppose had been brought in for one of the trainee teachers. They stood around and started looking into a showcase where I had put some sketchbooks. They were not quite like the 'angry' one but with that sort of treatment, drastically simplified things. A little boy was standing next to me, looking at them, and I said: 'Well, what do you think of these drawings?' I don't think he had realised that I had done them. 'Oh,' he said, 'well I call these scribbles, actually!' What a punchline to come out with!

Surprisingly, I think that we've covered many of the other questions you proposed, although you may not have realised it! For example, this one about exhibitions and criticism: I think that what you would say — and this is your opportunity to contradict me, and to say: 'No, Dave, I wouldn't say that at all!' — you quite enjoy the desperate pressure of preparing for an exhibition.

Yes, but there were only some half-dozen times when I painted specifically for an exhibition. I might do it again one day. I don't know. Usually I prefer to be able to select from work I've had finished for a while. I like to have time to live with it and have the chance to make alterations, to rework something completely, or even destroy it. I've very often done that, though I've destroyed more paintings than sculpture. Somehow sculpture always seems to be a more straightforward process with me than painting. I think it has something to do with the fact that the initial subject of a sculpture is less complex and doesn't change. I may radically alter the nature of the forms



Head with Cast-Down Eyes, 1992, plaster, h. 20 cm

I'm employing, but the initial concept of a head, or a mother and child, or whatever, isn't abandoned. And with sculpture I find I don't have quite the same reluctance to exhibit something that's been recently completed.

You quite enjoy having the exhibition on the wall...

Yes, I do. I don't have a large studio, so for me an exhibition is a welcome chance to see my work displayed in a larger space. And when it's installed in the gallery I'm often surprised to see relationships that I had been totally unaware of between separate works. That can be reassuring. And an exhibition is an opportunity of summing up what one's achieved. Choosing work for a show demands severely critical judgement and is a very useful exercise. An exhibition also creates a kind of punctuation mark in one's own mind about a period of work. And it stimulates one to start thinking about how the next creative journey might develop.

And you do also quite enjoy hearing what other people have got to say about it.

Oh yes. I listen to what anyone has to say. I remember when a woman came to me at my exhibition in Keynes College, at the University of Kent, and she said, with a big smile, 'Oh, but this is what my little boy, my little son, does!' And I said, 'Well you couldn't have paid me a nicer compliment!' I think she thought that I might be a bit taken aback, with a comment that it was child art, but she seemed pleased enough with what I said.

We keep coming back to the idea that the child both sees and can do without seeing quite what they do. And that produces something which has a vividness and the rightness, a truth, to it.

Yes. For me, the word is 'genuine', which signifies what is uncontrived and inevitable, and I guess that's the same as your 'true'. There is an interesting thing about arriving at something creatively 'genuine' in one's work. It is that you really don't quite know how you got there. You can't help wishing that you did know, because there's always a sneaking desire, an ambitious desire, to be able to repeat the process, to be able to maintain the standard. You're looking for a clue as to how you can arrange things so that you can do the best you're capable of. But you

can never find that clue. You could make an artificial formula, which would produce something like, but that won't be it. In the end I always know that whatever is really good will only be found when I have been working very hard, and strayed into that world over which one no longer has complete conscious control.

If I find that something has been successful, it's not that I want to do something like that again, so much as to find the space, or the mood, or the framework within which it was possible for me to do that. It's not about doing the same thing again, it's about being in the right place, the place where it is possible to do something.

It's a secret kind of country that you want to go back to, isn't it, something of a dream country. You look back and remember a dream, and think, 'I wish I could go back there'. You might get back and meet those interesting people again. But you can't manage it.

So do you find that that sequence of producing something, then standing back to look at it before in some way changing them — you find that that process is almost always there, and is a slow process? Or does it sometimes happen very quickly? Because the way that you've just been talking suggests that sometimes the picture comes very quickly, much like the sketchbooks, the angry sketches, came very quickly, and then once they're done, they are done.

Well, I think a complex picture can't be done that quickly. It's smaller things that may be done in that way. With the larger projects it's like a long conversation. But you may have to wait a long time before the picture says something to you and you can see how to go on. And I often find the end process, getting a thing finished, is very frustrating. You work and work for it but something eludes you. And then you suddenly see there's a patch you've been avoiding, and you attend to that, and it may be done quite rapidly. And then everything's suddenly fallen into place.

You have to work yourself round to being able to recognise it.

That's right. Some things, after hard work, eventually come to you in a flash. The whole thing has to become red!



Lament for a Lost Comrade, 2004, terracotta, 34 x 30 cm

Beyond Horizons: Landscapes of Longing in the Art of David Heathcote

I. The idea for *Deliberate Holiday* (1958) was David Heathcote's somewhat rebellious response to being set an uncongenial academic task as a trainee teacher: required to write a form of thesis, he produced this work instead. Subtitled '(landscapes of childhood)', it is prefaced by a short quotation of five lines from Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, the poet's reflection from the vantage point of his maturity on the years of his childhood growing up in the Lake District:

*Ah! better far than this, to stray about
Voluptuously through fields and rural walks,
And ask no record of the hours, resigned
To vacant musing, unreprieved neglect
Of all things, and deliberate holiday¹.*

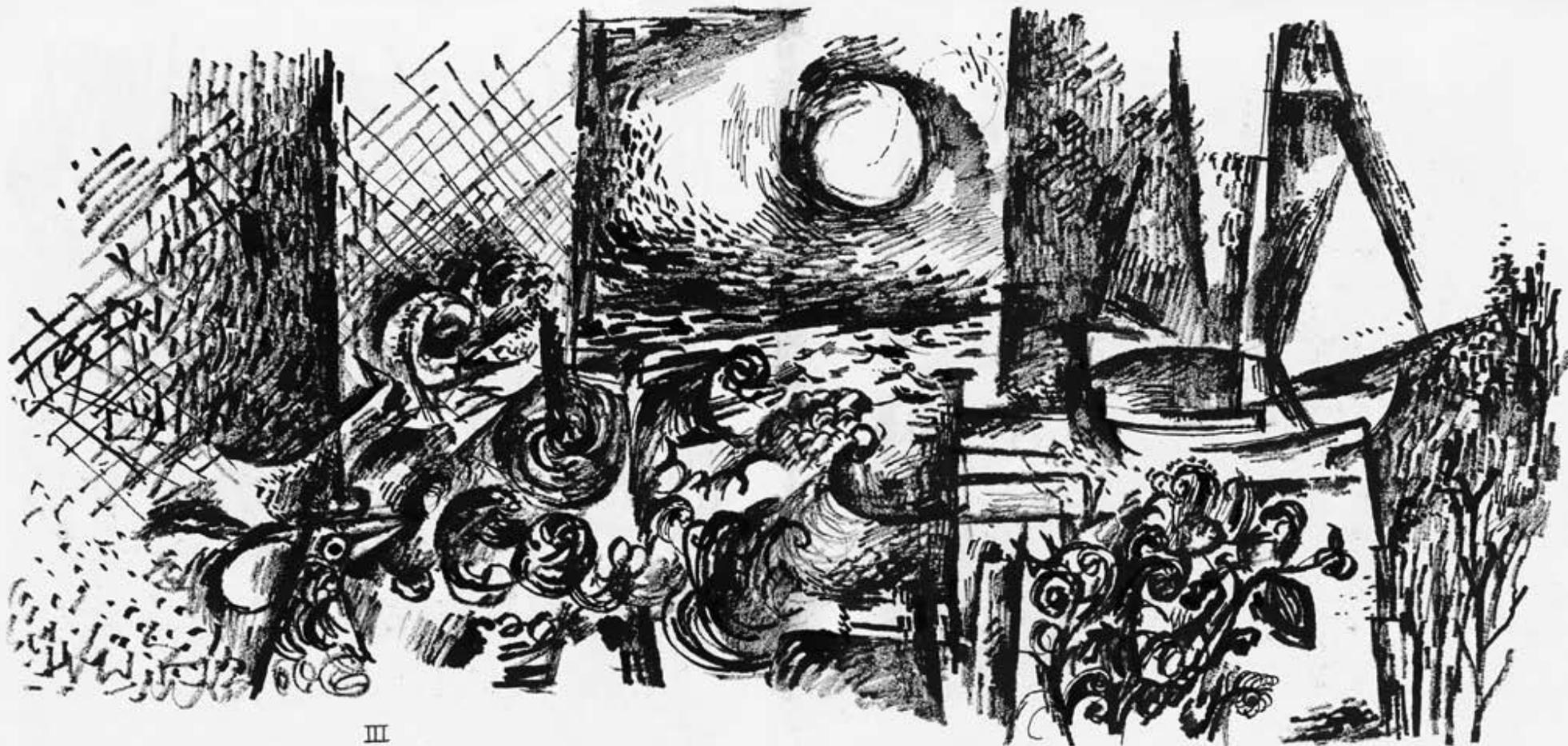
These lines introduce a sequence of bold ink drawings, images which represent moments from his own not-so-distant childhood in north Kent, close to the wider stretches of the Thames estuary. He supplements these with some of his own words, amplifying, explaining and enriching with associations the images that he has produced.

The subjects he chooses to include are not haphazardly arranged, but steadily progress further and further afield from his childhood house and garden. The organisation of this slim volume mimics not only the growing child's staged discovery of an ever-widening world, but also the gradual separation of the child from its family. Heathcote's evident pleasure in this life of carefree pottering and roaming seems to be associated with almost maternal warmth. His father was often working away from home during this period and, when he was at home with his family, he seems to have been a loving man but of volatile temperament, who nonetheless tried to impose a sense of order and discipline on the household which, unsurprisingly, was resented by David and his older brother, Graham. As we are allowed successive glimpses of the growing Heathcote in *Deliberate Holiday*, we become aware that the glow of hearth and kitchen is yielding to a less carefree existence — one shaded by intimations of indecipherable significance and hints of a free-floating sense of apprehension. It is as if adulthood is to be regarded as a time infused by the anxious anticipation of father's return at any moment.

The topics which Heathcote writes about are, in order: the garden of his house in rural Kent; the woods and streams beyond, and the wildlife found there; the sea beyond the marshes, and the remote island beyond the sea and, in contrast, the creeks and ditches of the marshland itself; an old hay barn, seemingly removed from the world, with its filtered light and soft sounds of solitude; an old man's talk of a shell-crushing factory, and the child's discovery of the reality of its existence; the greenhouse and its inhabitants; cloud watching; the aquarium contrived in a discarded sink outdoors; the poplar trees; and then a blank page, with no writing, but on the facing page a drawing of woodlands seen with some outbuildings or a beehive; another blank page, and opposite an image showing the leaves of irises, perhaps; the lane that led to the hill from which one could overlook the countryside; the countryside under moonlight; a pagoda by a lake; and, last of all, a child's eye view of the Battle of Britain and intimations of a different sort of future.

There are 15 entries in all — black and white images alongside words handwritten in black ink. The writing is tidy, a legible hand, pleasant to see and easy to read. There is no tell-tale sign of any second thoughts, no evidence of editing or revising the text — nothing is 'under erasure', visible but not to be attended to. It all puts me in mind of the romantic evocation of childhood in the post-war years by a poet such as Dylan Thomas, whose rhapsodic memoir *A Child's Christmas in Wales* (1955) and radio play *Under Milk Wood* (1954) seized the imagination of a generation when they were broadcast — a generation which then felt, as Heathcote clearly did, that a certain innocence had been lost after World War II.

In some ways, the style of the images is very much of its time. They are clearly influenced by familiarity with Cubist experiment, but are also touched by the kind of whimsical graphical hyperbole or exaggeration, not quite caricature, that provided the idiom of those engravers and illustrators who had fallen under the spell of the spiritually-elevated romantic landscapes of Samuel Palmer. Together, text and image neither mimic or mirror or contradict each other: Heathcote is playing no arch game with the reader. There is a clear expressive intention here, though, one which is designed or enacted to produce a certain feeling in the reader — a feeling which, one suspects, the artist wished to be able to produce at will in himself.



III

Not far away the long band of the sea glinted beyond the marshes. From a distance there was no way of telling whether or not the tide was in and as you climbed the sea wall the waves might be breaking onto the shingle or else a stretch of mud and shells a mile wide might separate the beach from the water.

In Winter and Spring it was a deserted place, except for the birds, but the sea was always different, always changing. In calm weather the tide came up with long, low waves moving in diagonally to the beach, each one spending itself gently until its whole length had turned over and left only a fine mark of foam and a noise of moving shingle. When they came in with a strong wind the waves seemed to be forming up far out and rising up as if to see more clearly their objective. As they approached they appeared to gather speed and become impatient until they had thrown themselves on to the beach in an explosion of surf and rattling pebbles.

Across the water was the Island, from this distance a landscape of rich fields and luxuriant trees; a remote and magic place pointing out through the estuary towards the sea.

Then, if you walked westwards along the top of the sea wall you could reach the strange, winding creeks, some wide enough to get a boat through but all becoming, quite suddenly, narrow, sumous ditches with overhanging, clay banks. There were short plants here, thickly covering the ground and turning everything a dull red when they flowered. It was a cryptic landscape, recessed and secretive. There was, in a way, a feeling of less-than-notingness about it and I used to call it "The Negative Place."

Of course, the images are not tracings of actuality but the traces of that actuality, as it becomes the stuff of memory and assumes substance enough to support and soak up the heavy emotional charge of a landscape which can never be revisited because it is a landscape of the psyche, not of this world. *Deliberate Holiday* is part of the artist's struggle to become reconciled to an irreconcilable loss: the loss of the idyll of a pastoral childhood.

The language Heathcote uses is telling, redolent of wistful longing. The final words of the book are these: '...something, of which I was still very much a part, was being left behind.' The burden of the book as a whole seems to amount to an elegy for a place to which the artist would long to return, yet which is unattainably remote from him now. '... Perhaps memories are more like dreams than they are like photographs', he writes. Not only are they elusive (and, if they come at all, they come in their own good time, unbidden and even unwelcome), but they also give us an inkling of somewhere that those who remember, like dreamers, feel they have been and yet to which they can never return. The landscape of memory is presented as a landscape containing 'a sensation of spaciousness and freedom'; the swaying poplars seem to converse 'in an elegant and secret sign language'; 'when one has leisure and life is a game, one can...become, in spirit, an extension of the heavens oneself'. However, the older man evokes his younger self recognising, reluctantly, that playfulness unshackled by duty is something consigned to the past. His *Deliberate Holiday* longs for a vacation in that past — a longing heady with perfume, glowing with luminous delights of isolation, hypnotised by the intoxicating 'drowsiness of a hot summer afternoon; a wasp on a fallen apple; the soft noise of bees among the hollyhocks and a feeling that this moment would go on forever.'

But such feelings, the perpetual summer and Heathcote's pastoral childhood inevitably came to an end. The child grows up, childhood's home must be relinquished and he must feel on his cheeks a cooler air from the uncertain prospects of the years ahead.

II. The French poet and critic Paul Valéry opened his essay *About Corot* (*Autour de Corot*, 1932) with the remark that: 'one must always apologise for talking about painting.' Needless to say, that didn't stop him from writing about painting, nor has it stopped writers since. Poets and critics continued to write about pictures — or at least it seemed as though that was what they were writing about.

Just five years after Valéry's essay was published, WH Auden visited the Musée des Beaux Arts in Brussels and saw there *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1558) by Pieter Brueghel. The painting clearly made an impression on him, for the following year he published his poem, *Musée des Beaux Arts*, in which he describes it. The narrator in the poem draws our attention to the details of the picture that he finds telling and, from the relationships he notices between them, he harvests moral instruction. The import of the image, for Auden, is nothing more or less than non-suffering humanity's indifference to the suffering of others. Moreover, the reader is led to suppose that it was the artist's intention to convey that message: as if the text of the message came first, the painting of the painting a close second and the poet's understanding a dogged third. However, Auden's view of the painting is arguably governed by the message he seeks to glean, and consequently he pays no heed to aspects of the picture which might strike another viewer as amusingly clownish. I might chuckle seeing that all that is shown of Icarus in the picture are his legs, for he has plunged headfirst into the sea: those legs are easily imagined waving frantically and futilely in the air. Features such as this might be used to support an alternative reading, one suggesting that Brueghel's intention is to prick the bubble of overreaching ambition that is represented by Daedalus's flight of fancy and his son's subsequent fall.

Frank O'Hara takes another approach to the question of painting — indeed, of artistic creation in general — in his poem *Why I Am Not a Painter* (1953). O'Hara was a close friend of many of the artists in New York who participated in the ferment of Abstract Expressionism at that time. In this poem, he tells the story of visiting Michael Goldberg in his studio just as he is beginning a new painting. The canvas carries little but the letters S A R D I N E S. Eventually, when the painting is finished, those letters can hardly be seen at all — scarcely discernible under layers and plaits of paint. Meanwhile, the poet has been stimulated by thinking of the colour orange (patently a painterly thought) and begins to write.



Festival, 2009, oil on board, 82 x 109 cm

When he's done, he finds that he has produced 12 prose-poems in response to 'orange', but in none of them has he mentioned that word. It seems that for both Goldberg and O'Hara the starting point has been just that — a starting point — and the work of art which resulted has more to do with the nature of making paintings and writing poems than it has with any identifiable initiating stimulus. Nonetheless, (perhaps in homage to that 'origin', perhaps to simply retain a teasing trace of it) Goldberg titled his painting *Sardines*, and O'Hara published his poems as *Oranges — 12 pastorals*. The lesson seems clear: we should usually suppose that the title of a painting ought to be read as indicating not the painting's subject nor its sense, but sometimes its pretext and sometimes its mask.

We learn little of the nature of painting or writing itself from the poem. Instead, O'Hara reflects on the process of creation itself: of how art is made, and of how the original stimulus may become lost and even irrelevant to the finished work. Its significance lies rather in being a moment of goading — prodding, distracting and tempting the artist into a place from which it is possible to make art. It is as though the integrity of the finished work depends upon an initial precipitating deception. The finished artwork must catch even (and especially) the watchful artist unawares.

III. Anyone who writes about art is faced with this dilemma. Do I write about David Heathcote's process of making work, or should I attempt to elucidate and interpret the work, trying to somehow complete the work that the artist started through a complementary or supplementary texture of exegesis, commentary and criticism? What, I wonder, does the reader hope to gain from reading what I write? Do you yearn to become privy to some secret place of artistic creation? Should I pander to a fancy which Ernst Gombrich once suggested lay behind the connoisseur's interest in the artist's creative process?²² Or is the concern with what the painting might 'mean', with settling the statement that it embodies or agreeing the proper interpretation? Possibly your interest is in reading some opinion about how this artist and these works may be articulated with some unfolding story of art, where in art's history he and they should be placed.

These are intriguing questions, in their various ways and within their various limits, and can generate fascinating and even useful discussion, although

it is rarely so clear quite for whom they are significant and for how long they remain useful. For my own part, I doubt whether one can be party to another's creative moments (indeed, the artist themselves may not even be aware of these, even though they might think they are), and surely it is a poor work indeed which is exhausted by the mere enumeration of its influences and influence, or by any attempt to paraphrase 'what it says'.

My starting point must be this: I find that I am moved by paintings, music and words. This puzzles me. How can it be that the arrangement of patches of colour on a flat surface can excite or depress me? Why are my reactions so strong to some works – loving some, loathing others, scarcely noting many? I am as much intrigued by what it is about the work of art which I feel engages with me as I am by the nature of any fantasy that I can know the origins of the artistic impulse. And so the first step is to try to become clearer about what is going on for me when I am there with the work itself, and trust that I will arrive at a more sensitive appreciation of what resources the artist has consciously or unconsciously been able to mobilise to produce a work which can resonate so powerfully with me.

IV. *Algerian Journey* (p.3) is a small (20 cm x 27 cm) oil painting on a board support which David Heathcote completed in 2006. My eye was drawn to this picture from the first time that I saw it in the artist's living room. It hung on the wall by the door, so that every time someone entered or left they would inevitably pause in passing, momentarily poised on the threshold of a threshold. It was not the only painting in the room, nor was it by any means the largest; that honour went to a much bigger canvas hanging above the fireplace. There is something about this image which compelled my gaze at first sight, and led me to respond as though I had caught it staring at me, silently insisting that I respond. Such experiences of an uncanny and seemingly involuntary fascination were termed instances of 'the gaze' (*le regard*) by Jacques Lacan, French psychoanalyst and connoisseur of surrealism and the surreal. In this sense, 'the gaze' gives a name to a commonplace paranoid inflection of everyday life: the feeling (often sensed out of the corner of our eye of awareness) of being 'looked at', a feeling which, when worked up, gives a singular vividness to many of the highlights of our experience of art works.



Bouquet, 2007, oil on board, 30 x 39 cm

However, the experience itself is in no way diminished by thinking of it in this way; on the contrary, in giving some rationale for the enigmatic, unnerving and intriguing qualities associated with 'the gaze', I seem to have become sensitised to its appearance, much as talk about wine or soccer can enhance one's discriminating enjoyment of them. My palate for the uncanny, as it were, becomes more finely attuned, my taste more complex, nuanced and layered, but the experience itself is always irreducibly there. Nonetheless, something has changed; no longer simply content to register the feeling, I find myself wanting to understand what might be bringing it about.

If *Algerian Journey* (p.3) were a painting made in front of the landscape which, by its title, one might suppose provoked it, then I might be tempted by that hand-me-down language of aesthetics which speaks of an artist capturing in the image the feeling that was induced in him or her. I confess I find it difficult to make sense of that way of thinking at the best of times. Perhaps 'Journey' gives a clue that something rather different is involved here. However, although a journey can be conceived of as a conceptual object, outside the realms of science fiction it is difficult for a human being to see it as something that exists (for all practical purposes of painting) untouched by time. Journeys are corporeal time marked by a passage through the landscape setting, or can be thought of as involving the continuous transformation of the landscape setting as one moves through it. They cannot be depicted in any straightforward sense.

And so in this case, as with all Heathcote's paintings (but not his drawings), what appears to be a reference to landscapes in the image relates more directly to memories of place — memories inevitably tinged by, flushed with or constructed from emotions. The subject of this painting, then, is not an outside subject but an interior object.

During a journey, the traveller moves. The artist-as-traveller is moved by the journey. Any painting which relates to the experience of the journey engages the viewer by summoning in her or him some resonant complex of memory and emotion, a complex which is conjured by whatever is visually noticeable about the painting. I wonder what it is that I have noticed in *Algerian Journey* that explains my sense of its hold on me? To begin to explore this question involves turning away from the thought of landscape as such and returning to the painting itself. I need to understand a little

better what it is composed of and how it is put together. Colour, form and structure, mark and motif, gesture and texture, the material matters of stuff and size: only by attending to these can I begin to tease out the whys and wherefores of my response to this modestly-sized painting, which turned out to be substantial enough to have somehow set up camp in my thoughts.

V. I remember first meeting David Heathcote. I had started attending some evening classes in painting and sketching — not least because I was thinking more about art and artists — and I have always held firmly to the view that it is important to gain some experience of any practice 'from the inside' in order to understand something of the kinds of challenges faced by practitioners. As long ago as the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche had put his finger on a problem of contemporary criticism in the arts: that is, that very little of it was written from the point of view of the artist. So I sharpened my pencils, rinsed my brushes, scrubbed up my palette and joined a local amateur art class.

In the early 1980s, I was in a life class, wrestling with the difficulties of knowing what to do when facing the live nude model. Many of my most intractable problems stemmed from my already knowing too much about how artists had tackled the subject over several centuries and in not a few cultures. In my case, I felt, greater ignorance would have been blissful, as time and again I was stymied by the difficulty of actually seeing what was there in front of my eyes, one that in no mean measure stemmed from a combination of expectation, ineptness and the domineering presence of having a desire to be able to achieve something distinctive.

Then, one evening, a new member joined the group. Tall and courteous, he struck me as someone both modest and mild yet, at the same time, there was a sense of a kind of wildness to him which drew my attention. He set up his easel alongside mine and, scarcely pausing to size up the model, he started to draw. He rapidly and (it seemed to me) fluently put down marks, filling page after page with images. Even now, in my mind's eye, his hand is hardly ever still, the charcoal stick scarcely leaves the surface of each sheet. While my efforts seemed tentative, even desperate, his seemed confident and directed, yet genuinely visually exploratory, testing and probing what could be seen, shown and felt.



Botanical Garden, 2007, oil on board, 49 x 65 cm

He stayed for several weeks, and we chatted from time to time. I gathered that he had not long returned from Africa, where he had taught for many years, and that he was now refreshing his art-making. 'Refreshing' suggests finding a way back to a previous condition, of recouping a capacity or ability, but even then it didn't seem to me that this was simply a matter of returning for Heathcote. Instead, he seemed to be more concerned with trying out new things, searching and questing, and never seemed content that any of the images that he produced stood as an image in its own right, complete and self-sufficient. It struck me that the hallmark of his accomplishment was a species of restlessness.

That was some 30 years ago now. We have both continued to live in Canterbury, a compact city, and inevitably our paths crossed from time to time. Through mutual friends, I knew that Heathcote had joined the staff of Canterbury Christ Church University and that eventually he had set up and led the sculpture department there. I was also aware of his exhibitions locally. We greeted each other when we both attended the opening receptions for various shows, and when I became Master of a college at the University of Kent in Canterbury, I invited him to show his work there.

Planning that exhibition with him introduced me for the first time to a broader range of his work, and our conversations then helped me to gauge some of his concerns. The opportunity to prepare this catalogue essay has widened and deepened my grasp of the terms of his significant achievement. I find it interesting, though, that the restlessness that struck me all those years ago still seems characteristic of his art, even though I now see also the thread of calmness and tranquillity that has also been there through all these years. Restlessness and struggle comprise one dimension of Heathcote's work; tranquillity and calm, another. These could be seen as the warp and weft of the art that he has made over a lifetime of creative engagement with the visual image.

IV. Heathcote has been producing work for more than 60 years, and there are continuities between early and late work in any medium; confusingly

for contemporary connoisseurship, though, no superficial 'signature style' emerges. What characterises Heathcote's oeuvre is, at first sight, an almost bewildering collection of disparate forms of expression, unashamedly inconsistent with our not-so-secret wish for each artist of note to have a recognisable core artistic identity which adds his tag to each work. No, this body of work squirms uncomfortably if we try to force it to fit the marketplace's demand for each work to bear the artist's brand logo. The scale and diversity of this art also makes it impossible to treat many aspects and dimensions of what is almost a lifetime's achievement in a text such as this; thus, reluctantly, I am not considering Heathcote's collages, assemblages and constructions on this occasion.

The incorrigible, wilful variety in itself is interesting. Even more so is that this is work of conspicuous quality, leaving few viewers untouched: most find themselves captivated by one or another piece with surprising ease, drawn to a particular image, vivid and experienced as something compelling. Getting to know such work takes time and requires a willingness to trust and relax into the company of the picture. These works are worth getting to know, and doing so will require a period of living with them. To live with a work of art can be (some would suggest, should be) not unlike living with a person: a relationship is established which allows each to change over the course of sharing a mutual space. In a well-worn English cliché — yet nonetheless true for that — we can look to art to 'move' us. And then neither we, nor it, remain still.

Allowing oneself to live with the art in this way, as the artist in his turn had lived with it, reveals that these works of art are inescapably entangled with the artist's concern to live with himself -- indeed, to live within himself.

There are striking features to be noted in Heathcote's art. He has destroyed a significant amount of what he has produced over the years, and yet, apart from a few years in which he undertook scholarly research on Hausa embroidered dress, he has consistently made art.



Spatial Poem, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 61 x 76 cm

However, the critical culling of his creative output has not resulted in giving prominence to one and one only clear line of development in his art. Instead, there are readily noticeable thematic and topical connections — a kind of intermittent continuity, so to speak — between early and later work, almost as though continuous lines thread their way through the fabric of his lifelike embroidery stitches, now visible, now not. Similarly, it is difficult to claim that any one style, or even stylistic development, has marked his work and, as I have mentioned already, it is impossible to assert that there is a conspicuous visual signature here that readily signals the identity of his painting or drawing. Lastly, I note again the common experience shared by many of those who have looked again and again at examples of Heathcote's work: there is usually a painting, drawing or sculpture which snares their interest to the extent that they can be said to become almost fascinated by it.

The need to destroy and a compulsion to create; the consistency that comes from a recurring return to a disparate variety of subjects, styles and themes; the viewer's experience of some specific images as exerting a compelling fascination, while others might seem vacant, limp and superfluous — an initial discrimination which could well relate more to the individuality of each viewer than to the exact intentions of the artist. To these I add a further observation: the more familiar one becomes with the range of Heathcote's art, the more it seems that painting and drawing and sculpture are associated with three distinct aesthetic 'atmospheres' or 'landscapes': the inwardness of the sculptures, whether figurative or abstract; the calmness of the fluent landscapes in the drawings; and the sense of struggle, of something hard won, in the paintings.

VIII. There are recurring marks, gestures and forms in Heathcote's work which play a key role both in giving some sense of unity to his body of work as a whole, and also to qualify, modify and inflect the relationship of the image and the flat surface of the canvas or board. Notable among these are:

- i. stippling, dappling, flecking and dotting;
- ii. barring, stitching, hatching and 'runging';
- iii. starburst, anemone, dendron;

- iv. a broad, pale, generally rectangular elongated horizontal or vertical form — a long white cloud, say, or a waterfall-like form;
- v. a black graphic gesture — in isolation, looking like a rudimentary notation for a bird in flight; linked, side-by-side this becomes an undulating sinuous line.

The roles that these play in the visual choreography of the image can shift subtly from painting to painting, but nonetheless each group serves to develop families of distinctive effects. Importantly Heathcote's characteristic repertoire of marks has matured into a strange troupe of Janus-faced performers. Standing resolutely on the threshold of pure abstraction and concrete depiction; not denoting, and not not denoting either, rather providing the opportunity for a free play of the imagination. The starburst may or may not signify a tree; repeated bars may or may not depict tree trunks or fence, and so on: they are not one thing, or the other, nor both.

The relationship between the foreground and background of a painting can be disturbed and connected by the waterfall/cloud motif. Many of Heathcote's paintings would otherwise suggest a sense of perspective, of recession, of a clear foreground giving way to a far horizon — and even evoke something beyond that, a sky perhaps, or a void. This sense of placing objects along a third dimension which recedes into the far distance is created by effects of texture, colour, placement on the vertical dimension of the canvas — indeed, all the usual means by which a sense of illusory sense of space can be created pictorially. Abstraction (especially abstraction as it became thought of and practised in mid-last-century in the West) may have revitalised our conscious awareness of the nature and role of colour and form in determining a sense of pictorial space, but never has colour been simply passively sensuous. In this connection, it is noticeable how active Heathcote's palette has become over the years: more nuanced, richer certainly, but never voluptuous. Colours push and pull and jostle each other in the space of the picture plane.

The waterfall/cloud motif is generally relatively pale and simply (if at all) textured, and so poised in colour, texture and placement as simultaneously to be brought into the foreground and embedded in the distance.



Grey Composition, 2008, oil on board, 60 x 75 cm

The result is more than a straightforward strapping together of the far and near, undermining the illusory third dimension. Typically, the viewer is also confronted with a visual insistence that the third dimension does not contradict the equally present flatness of the canvas itself. There are examples of this throughout Heathcote's work: *Excavation* (1984), *Yellow Moon* (1994) and *Algerian Journey*, 2006, (p.3) for instance. Sometimes the waterfall contains a delicate tracery of lines, as in *Botanical Garden* (p.21) from 2007, which subtly adds visual interest to this feature without compromising the flatness of colour. The use of clouds to similar effect (either a train of small clouds or a horizontal stripe of just one) can be seen in paintings such as *Autumn Landscape* (not illustrated) and *Spatial Poem* (p.23), both 1994 and *Grey Composition*, 2008 (p.25). *Mysterious Delta*, 2006, (p.33) is an instance of the painting which combines both motifs to modulate the perceptual depth of the pictorial space.

To reassure oneself of the flatness of the canvas, the viewer might simply move around to the side and squint along the painted surface. However, doing so would involve giving up any pleasure in the image itself, since this now disappears from view. I am put in mind of Holbein's legendary painting, *The Ambassadors* (1533). This presents to us two French ambassadors to the court of Henry VIII, surrounded by all the pomp and appurtenances of their office (and a good number of complexly symbolic objects), standing foursquare on the firm ground beneath their feet. However, Holbein has painted in front of them what looks at first sight to be little more than a mucky smear. Squint along the campus from one side, though, and that smear springs into referential life. It depicts a skull — a standard image of mortality and the sign that the picture is to be understood in some measure as a vanitas painting, a memento mori, seeking to remind us of our own mortality and the transience of earthly privilege, power and vainglory. Within the worlds of the picture — of the ambassadors in their grand setting, and of the stark skull — each comes into focus and makes sense only when seen from its own particular point of view. Since we mere mortals can't inhabit a place which optically encompasses at one and the same time both points of view, the effect is that we are compelled to recognise as coherent either the space in which the ambassadors stand in their dignified pose, or the space in which the insistent skull, rendered clean of the last fleshly vestiges of good living, lies directly at their feet and yet forever beyond their ken. These are offered to the looker-on as two irreconcilable points of view.



Excavation, 1984, oil on canvas, 122 x 91cm

Of course, there is another place, a third vantage point, from which it is possible to know that these points of view coexist within the intricate necessities of the painting. That place is the place, not itself physically located, which the viewer themselves occupies for the duration of contemplating the image. It is the point of view of the comprehending imagination. The effect is complex, even uncanny, invoking the sense of the truth of things glimpsed out of the corner of one's eye. I have a similar experience in looking at these paintings of Heathcote's. There is an air of, not exactly balancing one point of view with another, but of juggling them — of the viewer being forced to juggle with them — of keeping both in play at the same time.

In contrast, the barring and stippling motifs, far from producing such a grandly equivocal experience, usually serve to enliven and animate the picture surface. Were they closer together, such dots and flecks could produce a pointillist colour field as their distinctiveness merged and blended into an overall quality of paint. Here, though, even though painted over (and over again), there remains a ghostly sense of their energising presence beneath any flimsy veil of subsequent pigment. Stippling can furnish a textured ground for later and emerging form. On the other hand, barring generally seems as though applied late to an already existing colour surface. Barring, being applied on top of pigment, may produce the flickering effects of close-spaced gratings or a sense of obstruction, of a kind of barrier baffling a clear sight of what is beyond. As a graphic device, then, barring both adds vim and vigour to the picture surface and functions as an obstacle to the viewer's looking.



Yellow Moon, 1994, gouache and pencil on paper, 16 x 19 cm

The visual impact of it amounts to an insinuation of hints and whispers, and a corresponding whipping up of the viewer's desire to see beyond this obstruction to what is imagined or fantasised to lie beyond. Snagged by the threads of their own inescapable desire to see, and to see more, the viewer is tempted to engage ever more closely with the picture.

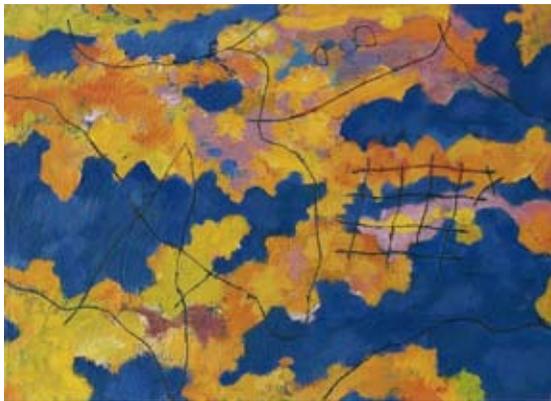
Starbursts introduce another dynamic into the image space — that is, a sense of movement, or of extrusion, or of collapse and concentration. Sometimes, these forms with their tendrils, tentacles and rays call to mind amoeba-like entities, extending and retracting pseudopodia to crawl across the two-dimensional plane of the painting.

On other occasions, they may remind us more of the conventions for showing the energetic brilliance of those points of light we call 'stars'. And yet at other times, they seem like emblems of the puckered mouth, threatening to set up a force field, about to draw breath and suck into themselves everything else in the picture. In these ways pictures acquire a sense of static tension, of dynamic equilibrium. No immutable balance, but rather of something poised at the apogee of its trajectory to and from somewhere else.

It is difficult to see how one could use the commonplace critical vocabulary of 'resolving the image' and its variations in connection with these paintings. Anything which seems to be at rest here carries with it the tag of being temporary, provisional and transitory. Whether we scan a picture with pleasure or distaste, we cannot avoid the sense that there is nothing bland here — that viewers are called upon to respond, precisely, with feeling. At their best, these are irreducibly edgy paintings. Each viewing leaves us paused or teetering on the edge, on a cusp of possibility in which we are made aware that we may tip forwards or backwards, plunging into or drawing back from some vertiginous abyss.

The edge is a place not of communion or of commingling, but of conjunction. Two or more distinct regions rub against each other. In this sense, 'edgy' paintings not only move but snag us, and we may find them difficult to remove them from our mind. They don't seem to evaporate easily.

A shorthand way of expressing this sense of edgy incommensurability would be to say that Heathcote's paintings typically occupy a zone which is neither that of abstract painting nor that of representational figurative painting, nor even that of abstracted or stylised painting. Rather, it tends to be capable of being seen in more than one way, in terms of these (over-simple) categories. In other words, Heathcote's paintings mark out an idiosyncratic and enigmatically novel way of confronting the problem of how to make art in the 21st-century. The artist today has inherited, on the one hand, not only the apparent honesty and sincerity of 'pure' figurative and representational paintings, but 'pure' abstraction and/or expressionism on the other — as well as a motley ragbag of associated 'isms' which derive their sense and weight from their relation to these painterly poles. In this situation, it is increasingly difficult to 'develop one's own voice', to create a sense of unique and distinctive identity in and through one's work. Recourse to irony and/or to an aesthetically frivolous eclecticism have become prominent strategies for forging a way forward to recognition, acclaim and reputation: and there are others, of course, most of which share with irony and eclecticism a diluted sense of history. In contrast, in his most persuasive and distinctive paintings, Heathcote expresses a sense of the momentous significance of a continuing personal struggle with the primary material of painting — with colour, form, mark and scale. Painting is visibly a labour in whose service not only must the artist bring to a fine pitch of sensibility his usual senses, but also the difficult discipline of a scrupulously honest inward gaze which seeks clarity — often an uncomfortable clarity — in perceiving an inner landscape of memory and emotion.



Remembered Journeys, 2000, oil and pencil on board, 25 x 35 cm



Sailing to Byzantium: Drying Her Wings, 1999, mixed media on paper, 18 x 25 cm

IX. Although titles generally tell us remarkably little about the works to which they are attached, they are often more revealing about the frame of mind with which the artist wishes the viewer to approach the image, and in doing so often tell us more about the artist than they do about the work. My attention is drawn to three recurring features of the titles that Heathcote gives his paintings — features which help to orient the viewer towards 'reading' his art. Like the magnetised needle of a compass, they not only give that direction, but also point to the opposite pole and indicate, in some measure, the artist's creative concerns.

Heathcote's paintings have favoured landscape over the human figure for many years, and I have explained that the landscape paintings are no more produced in front of some specific place than the majority of the paintings referring to people are made in the presence of a human figure. The titles of his landscape works rarely inform of the details of place and time, but do often invoke the theme of journey: *Algerian Journey* (p.3), *Remembered Journeys*, the series of images called, after W B Yeats's poem, *Sailing to Byzantium*. Visually, a painting may reference such movement through the inclusion of one or more items from the visual bric-a-brac of travel, such as a path or a boat, but it need not include so explicit an image for us to find it natural to relate it to travel. The recent *Country Walk, Birdsong* (2010) is a case in point. The image may be mute, but the title says much.



Country Walk, Birdsong, 2010, oil on canvas, 137 x 170 cm

Now we can see that the picture quivers and flutters between depiction — is that thistledown I see? — and abstraction (how enjoyable is this play of swirls, arabesques, trickles and tufts!) as the title declares: 'This could not have come into being had I not walked in the countryside with quickened senses'. A country walk cannot be the subject of a painting in any straightforward representational sense, any more than can birdsong. Travel takes time, whereas the paintings, although demanding time from us, are themselves composed of the 'congealed time' (in Federico Fellini's felicitous phrase) of the act of painting sedimented onto the surface of the canvas. I want to say: the artist is restless in these paintings, forever on the move.

This leads me to the second of the subjects signalled by his titles: memory. Although a painting may putatively be prompted by some journey or place, it is the memory of an experience which is uppermost in the artist's mind as he begins to paint. Hills, walks and journeys all provide experiences that seed memories, and we may guess that at some times during the process of making a painting, the artist's concern is to find a visual image that promotes feelings similar to those associated, in memory, with the originating events or objects themselves. In other words, the act of painting involves an alert venture into the artist's own interior world.

Thirdly, I notice that often one element of the picture's construction is singled out and placed in the foreground by being named in the title. We might naïvely suppose that this could provide the key which unlocks a crucial entry point to the image. For some artists, though, the title provides nothing of the kind: they may use it as a sign to misdirect the viewer (who could be conceived as a foreign invader, of course), or set the title to function simply as a mnemonic to enable them to recall the picture from an entry in an ever-growing inventory of work done. However, this is surely not the case with Heathcote. We might imagine that *Pagoda* (2009) is so named because there is, indeed, a pagoda pictured on the canvas. However, at first sight, the pagoda is one of the least striking elements of the image, which is dominated by references to human figures. The mother and child, family trio even, spring to the eye, and the pagoda, if noticed at all, appears little more than a touch of exotic visual spice.

However, a pagoda features prominently among the childhood memories that formed the substance of *Deliberate Holiday* (1958), and there it leads the author to meditate on the wilful elusiveness of memory. Heathcote treats it as a token of a kind of memory which resists deliberate recall, but which nonetheless can flood one with an almost hallucinatory vividness, unbidden, at unpredictable moments. By 2009, the importance of the pagoda may lie precisely in its being something which could be overlooked by the casual glance, which is naturally tempted to focus instead on the shadow-play of human figures in the foreground. The title, then, suggests not that the depicted pagoda is the subject of the painting, but that it is the elusiveness of childhood memories themselves that could be at stake.

The journey, remembered experience and the elusiveness of memory: these seem to triangulate an ever-present constellation of concerns in Heathcote's painting. The subject matter of his work turns out to be not the exterior world but, quite explicitly, an interior world, a world of recollection and remembrance. From this perspective, the artist's actual travels might be understood as a distraction from the distress of never being able to return to one's childhood, and as a kind of search for some other place which might pass muster instead.

Christmas 2009: David Heathcote and his wife travelled to Australia to stay with family. Each day, he set aside part of the morning to draw and sketch. At first, line drawings of things seen are echoed on the adjacent page by some painted variation of the view. This pattern of creating diptychs, one panel of which elaborates the other — rather as a jazz musician might improvise a melodic riff on a given harmonic pattern, continues to the end of the Australian sketchbook.

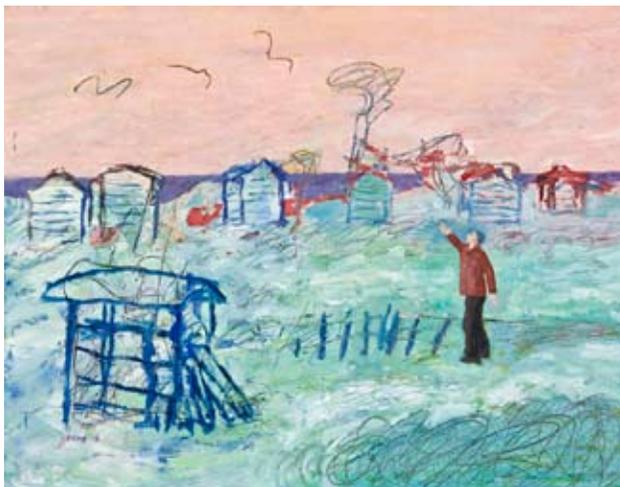
But a new note enters towards the final pages: Heathcote starts to draw and paint what he can remember not of the recent but of the distant past. A childhood left behind on the other side of the globe seems to be providing the subject matter, and the way in which these remembered moments are painted achieves a new kind of fluency, and a vibrancy and luminosity in the handling of wash and colour which I have not seen before. This can, and has, carried over into his studio painting.



Pagoda, 2002, oil on board, 31 x 41 cm

Back in Canterbury, Heathcote paints *Greeting the Seagulls* (2010), a delightful painting in which the characteristic marks, motifs and gestures of his art serve to catch and release the memory of a moment, steeped in joie de vivre. This picture also manages to recapitulate some of the unrestrained freshness of a small painting which he made when he was only 17 years old — *Feeding the Chickens* (1948). It is as though something that was always close has been found again by going away: a threshold has been crossed, an old limit surpassed. Inwardly, he seems to have travelled beyond an internal horizon and, at least for a while, dwelt in a new found land of cherished memory.

Heathcote's work to date can be seen as a record of a struggle against limits, and as a search not for a present tranquillity, but for the artistic alchemy by which lost tranquillity can be recovered. That futile ambition — doomed to failure — has produced some momentous struggles which we glimpse transposed and condensed in his art, creating a potent distillation to which we can resonantly respond. If we allow it, Heathcote's paintings can touch something in us. The Australian sketchbook itself seems to enjoy a renewed hope, one in which making art could be, like Ariadne's thread, offering the promise of safe return, however labyrinthine and fraught the journey into the present.



Greeting the Seagulls, 2010, oil on board, 38 x 49 cm



Feeding the Chickens, 1948, ink and gouache on paper, 23 x 15 cm

In 1958, Heathcote's memory of his childhood landscape, embalmed in golden sunlight, was imbued with yearning for the unattainable: '... from this distance, a landscape of rich fields and luxurious trees; a remote and magic place pointing out through the estuary towards the sea.' For the rest of his life, he has taken his bearings from this feeling, and struggled to push himself and his art beyond all limits, striving to break through to a place beyond all horizons, a place which we may believe has existed within him all along.

Notes to the Essay

1. The epigraph for *Deliberate Holiday* (1958) is taken from William Wordsworth, *The Prelude. Book First. Introduction: Childhood and School-Time*; lines 250-54.
2. Gombrich's discussion of the viewer's interest in the work of art is succinctly presented in: Gombrich, E. H. *Psycho-Analysis and the History of Art* (1953). Pp. 30-34 of Gombrich, E. H. *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*. London: Phaidon, 1963.



Mysterious Delta, 2006, oil on board, 29 x 39 cm

David Heathcote: An artist's life in summary

Note: Comments by Professor David Reason are shown in italics. Otherwise, this account is in David Heathcote's own edited words.

1931

Born Westminster. For the first two years, the family lives in an artist's flat in Victoria Street. Later, while still a child, I return there, and meet the artist Walter Spindler again.

Walter Spindler (1878-1940) lived at 104 Victoria Street. He was a significant artist who produced many works in the art nouveau style, and is probably best remembered today for his portraits of the actress Sarah Bernhardt. David's father worked for him as his private secretary and, when he married, he and his wife were generously offered the Spindler apartment to live in, and Walter moved to the Grosvenor Hotel.

1933-37

We move to Whitstable, then to the country, near Dargate. We have a large garden, and many animals. The countryside is very quiet. I love quietness, and never bother to own a radio until I am over 35. Even during our 12 years in Nigeria, my wife and I have no radio, television or newspaper, except a surface-mail edition of The Listener.

Dargate is a small village of some dozen households surrounded by hop fields and fruit orchards, lying between Faversham and Canterbury in Kent. David's father was often away from home, working as a psychiatric nurse.

1936-1947

Schooling in Whitstable, and Faversham Grammar School. During 1946-47, on our old gear-less bikes, a friend and I make day trips to Hastings (102 miles) and Chelmsford (135 miles). Neither of us being swimmers, we take off, unprepared, to row from Whitstable to Sheppey just as the tide turns against us. We have to row like maniacs for hours to avoid being swept out to the North Sea before we can get across. Searching in the 'cleared' minefield near my home, I find a bag of blasting gelatine. I try a small piece on a friend's red-hot stove; it is very effective. Memorable alarm at the police station when I hand it in. A Russian woman offers to teach me the piano; we have no piano. I shall have lasting regrets that I never become involved in music. In 1946, the new Scottish art master at Faversham Grammar asks me what I plan to do on leaving. I say, 'I don't know. I just want to leave.' He says, 'I think you should go to art school' (my only experience of career advice).

1947-51

I am accepted at Canterbury School of Art and, on the first day, after the pencil-and-paper art programme of Faversham Grammar, realise that this is what I want to do. I train as a painter, and am inspired by the work of Degas and Cezanne, Watteau and Chagall. Though my efforts at objective painting seem unpromising, I learn a great deal about drawing and painting from my tutor, Jim Palmer, an enthusiastic teacher who was to remain a good friend.



Landscape with Three Stupas, 1998, oil on three canvases, 62 x 230 cm

1951-53

A National Service commission in the Royal Air Force. I don't regret it, and spend some of my spare time doing a little painting and trying to learn Italian. When I leave I work at various jobs in London. I am accepted, probably on the strength of my drawing, at both the Royal Academy Schools and the Slade.

1955-57

A painting student at the Slade, where I have the old problem with objective painting, and can't find my way until I discover Cubism, when the feeling of being able to structure and control a painting brings a sense of creative strength. At last, I have some hope of a future as a creative artist. I am now 26.

In 1959, Heathcote leaves England and moves to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to take up an appointment at Peterhouse. He later teaches in Penhalonga, Harare, Mutare and Bulawayo.

1960-67

Teaching at Peterhouse. I do not enjoy it. My painting becomes expressionist. I have my first one-man exhibition in 1961. A failed marriage, and two daughters. After my divorce, I meet Janet just before I move to Nigeria to teach art history. We are married a year later and have a daughter in 1971. Increasing commitment to research into Hausa art eats up my creative life. What painting I do now is still essentially Europe-inspired. When I settle in England again, it is extremely Africa-inspired.

1962 finds Heathcote in Rome on an Italian scholarship. He returns to Africa.

1967-1979

*Heathcote led the Department of Art History at Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria. He becomes fascinated by the textile arts of the Hausa, collecting all the artefacts, photographs and documentation for the major exhibition *The Arts of the Hausa*, as part of the World of Islam Festival at the Commonwealth Institute in London (1976). He produces a catalogue¹ that contains a scholarly account of the material on display. This establishes an international reputation for him in the field. Continues his research to write a doctoral thesis which he successfully defends and he is awarded the degree in 1979. His interest in this field leads him to essay a few small embroidered works of his own. Throughout this time Heathcote showed his work in solo exhibitions, notably at Arts Council centres in Nigeria.*

1979

We settle in Canterbury, and live frugally on our savings for a number of years, without jobs, and no handouts whatsoever, while I paint Africa-inspired pictures, and eventually find a part-time job at Christ Church College. I have rediscovered the countryside: cycling through it, I pause to make rapid sketches. In this period, I am increasingly drawn into making assemblages and suddenly realise, as I look excitedly at modelling tools in the window at Tiranti's, that I am truly a sculptor as well as a painter.

1983-96

Senior lecturer in the Department of Art and Design, Canterbury Christ Church University.
Established a sculpture section in 1993.

1996

Retired to concentrate on painting and sculpture.

Long-term allegiances: Chagall, Cezanne, Cubism, early de Chirico, and Bonnard; Claude, and Watteau; Cycladic, Egyptian and African sculpture.

I have been involved with a wide range of drawing media, and with oil and acrylic paint, collage and assemblage, clay and stone. But, for the last two years, partly encouraged by my limited sculpture storage space, I have been concentrating on oil painting and landscape drawings in ink. These are a great source of discovery and pleasure, though I make no direct use of drawings for my paintings, which are all done from memory and imagination.

I foresee the immediate years ahead as a period of special concern with painting, although I know that at any moment I could, if needed, turn my whole attention to the making of a piece of sculpture. My range of subjects in the past habitually involved the human figure and the human head. These now concern me as a sculptor rather than a painter, and it is landscape that has become the most important subject in my painting. On entering a museum that is new to me, I now find that I am soon searching for a choice landscape painting sufficiently well placed for me to make a drawing of it. But it is remembered landscape that is at present the principal focus in my paintings. There is something very poetic about it, and I feel that to have a genuine involvement with it is a great privilege.

Selected exhibitions

- 1958 *Young Contemporaries, London (painting)*
- 1961 *Meikles Gallery, Salisbury (now Harare) Rhodesia, (solo, paintings)*
- 1961-66 *National Gallery, Salisbury (Harare) Annual exhibitions (mixed, paintings sculpture)*
- 1967-78 *Ahmadu Bello University and British Council Galleries in Nigeria (nine exhibitions)*
- 1985 *Brighton Polytechnic (with Martyn Brewster, paintings)*
- 1986 *Loughborough College of Art (solo, paintings)*
- 1989 *Museum of Mankind, London (solo, terracotta sculptures)*
- 1989 *Gallery Shurini, Lower Regent Street, London (mixed, paintings)*
- 1990 *Gallery 92, Portobello Road area (mixed, gouaches)*
- 1993-2006 *Canterbury Festivals (annual outdoor showing of a new sculpture)*
- 1994 *Marjorie Parr Gallery, Chelsea (mixed, collages on paper)*
- 1995 *Canterbury Royal Museum (mixed exhibitions at its 3 local galleries)*
- 2000 *Metropole Arts Centre, Folkestone (solo, large 50-year retrospective - with Arts Council grant)*
- 2006 *The Gallery in Cork Street (mixed, bronze of the violinist Kyung Wha Chung)*
- 2007 *University of Kent at Canterbury (solo, mostly large abstract paintings)*
- 2008-2010 *GV Art Exhibitions, London*

Note to the Text

1. Heathcote, David. *The Arts of the Hausa*. [Catalogue of a Commonwealth Institute exhibition : *World of Islam Festival*, 1976, London.] World of Islam Festival Publishing Co Ltd. London.1976. Out of print, but available in some libraries.



Mother and Child (icon), 1999, terracotta, h. 17 cm



Mother and Child, 1998, bronze, h. 35 cm



Woman with a Mirror, 1979, gouache and collage, 20 x 22 cm



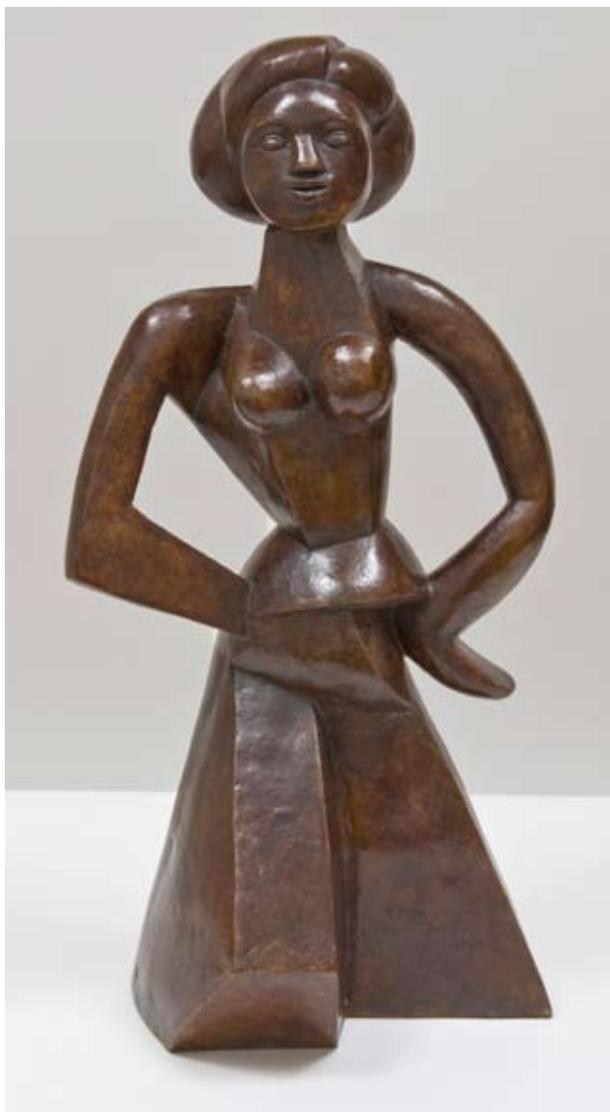
The Adventurer, 2008, oil on board, 45 x 60 cm



Two Ships and a Dark Pier, 1974, oil, pencil, collage on paper, 12 x 17 cm



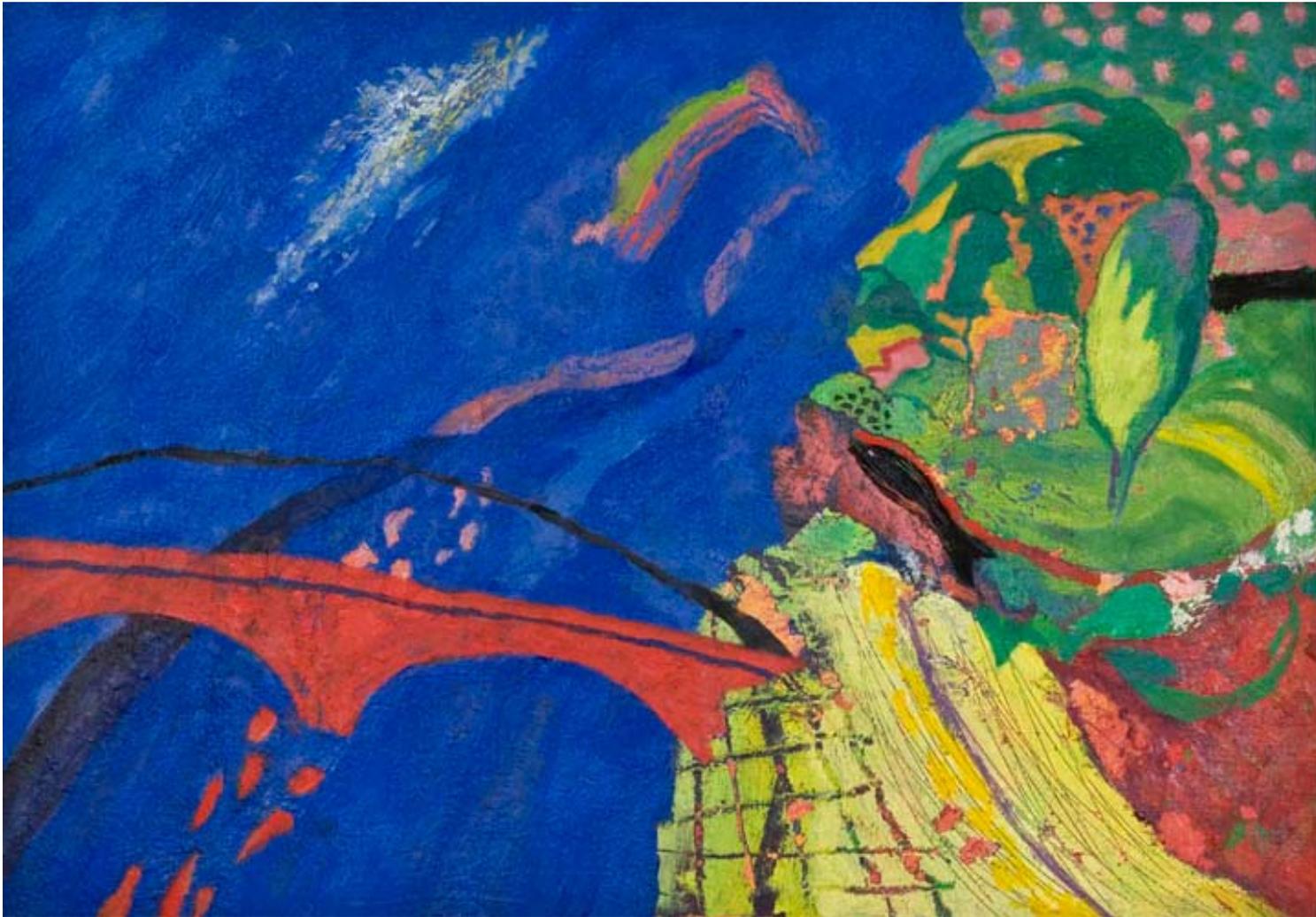
Spirits Watching the Drowning and the Drowned, 1964, ink on paper, 30 x 44 cm



Woman in a Long Dress, 1997, bronze, h. 43 cm



Blind Girl with a Bird, 2000, bronze, h. 77 cm



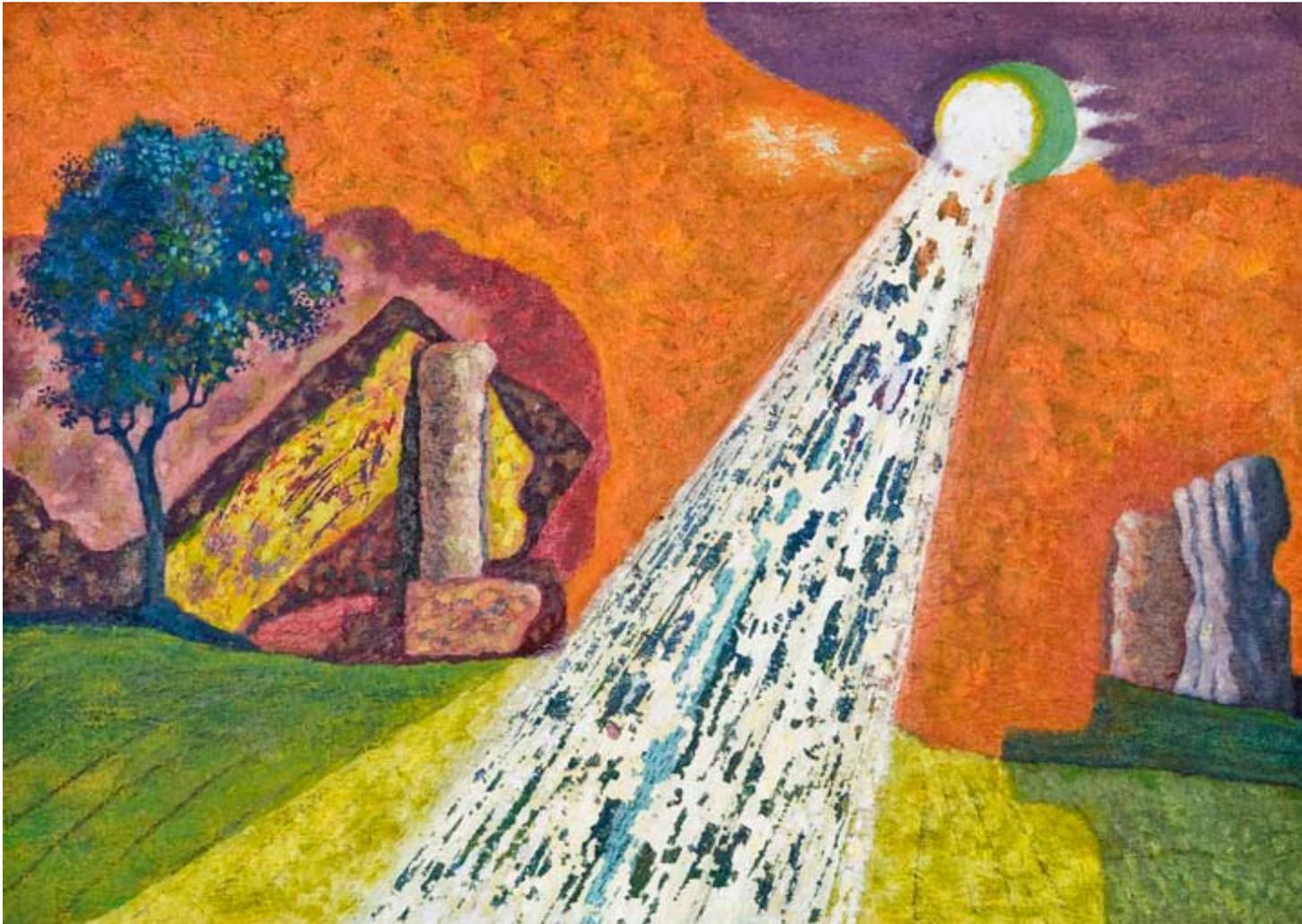
Red Bridge, 2006, oil on board, 29 x 42 cm



Blossoms, 2006, oil on board, 37 x 42 cm



Burning Tree, 2009, oil on board, 40 x 40 cm



Solstice, 2006, oil on board, 26 x 37 cm



Sculpture Park, 2010, oil on board, 92 x 123 cm



Night Thoughts, 2009, oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cm

Professor David Reason

David Reason graduated from the University of Essex and was appointed to a post in Interdisciplinary Studies (in the Faculty of Social Sciences) at the University of Kent in 1971. He was a founding member of the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies in the Humanities (the first such in Europe) and of degree programmes in Communications & Image Studies, before joining the School of Arts. In 2005, David became Master of Keynes College, a post he held alongside his teaching and research. He retired from the university in 2008.

David Reason has produced many publications, including notable critical studies on land art and environmental art. He has also curated significant exhibitions, most recently *Two Cameroonian Photographers: Joseph Finlak and Samuel Chila* (with David Zeitlyn) at the National Portrait Gallery, London, 2006. He is still active in all his fields of interest, working freelance.

Beyond Horizons David Heathcote

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The logo for GV art features the letters 'GV' in white inside a red circle, positioned above the word 'art' in a large, bold, lowercase red sans-serif font.

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