

Midwinter Spring

Charlotte Verity, 2015

Spending time in the hamlet of Flatford and the surrounding villages in the Stour Valley it is easy to imagine John Constable as a child and as a young man living and working there. His great paintings arose from his intimate knowledge of and love for the area. The title of the exhibition comes from the opening of the final quartet of T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets, *Little Gidding*. Eliot is just one of the poets who find words to picture a place and a season, and by doing so describe a state of mind. With his imagination and powerful visual memory, Constable takes himself back there bringing us with him, just as poets in exile do.

Constable's paintings have always touched me. I admire *The Hay Wain*, both the full sized sketch and the exhibited piece. At different stages, I have absorbed different aspects of it - the way he finds a paint mark to match the fleeting, often unnameable colours of fields, pools, wind-blown trees and the elusive blue of the English summer's sky; its depth and composure. And now, as someone who has found herself in London surrounded by inner city life, I recognise the importance to Constable of the middle distance, the sunlit field. Both versions of *The Hay Wain* were painted in an upstairs room in London above a clattery, smoky, wintery street. The brief glimpse across the water to the harvest is painted with longing. Alone in his painting room, it is to him a little piece of heaven.

I came to stay in Flatford in February 2015. It seems to me that throughout the history of painting, the most touching portraits are of loved ones, and the more familiar the land depicted the more interesting the picture. So I wanted to be there long enough to reach a deeper sense of the place by working in the landscape. Mid-February was a very good time for me. I enjoyed the clarity of the land with its leafless trees and my experiences became dominated by the water and open skies.

There were a thousand practical things to consider in order to work well. When painting in the open it is essential for me to have privacy, and at that time of year there are relatively few visitors. It was cold and the days were short. Working had a sort of urgency, no time to dither. I found a place by the water where the easel could be under cover, but after two days painting a large tree was felled a few feet away. Its branches shattered the smooth water (my subject) as they came down hard. The tree was then burned over days, smoking me out and into the fields. Being winter, the sun was low in the sky and I was intensely aware of the exact time of day; the time I had left before it would come round to shine in my eyes and the time I had before cold and numbness would prevent me from painting with any concentration. Twilight came quickly. Just once the rain drove me indoors, and I painted a tree through the window, opened a crack. All the while I saw things of extraordinary beauty.

My first serious group of paintings in the late 70s were direct and swift responses to my own landscape by the Thames in Chiswick. As soon as I started painting at the Stour's edge there was a strong sense of recognition. I felt quite unlike a tourist. A sense of familiarity overcame the danger of painting a cliché, a 'beautiful view' or of being, as Constable himself put it: 'a poacher on other men's grounds.' Another serious painting of mine was a wide horizontal of a winter field. Its width could be divided in a similar way to the paintings of the run of oaks in this exhibition.

I didn't regret leaving my colours in London. The black, sepia and grey watercolour gave me the range of tone I needed. Constable's paintings, despite depicting brilliant light, are surprisingly dark. Looked at dispassionately on a light wall, they appear as dark rectangles. My awareness of this was helpful in exploiting the potential of tonal painting. Drawing in paint with a brush on handmade paper means that my hand and mind can follow and feel the line of a particular branch or twig, the shape of a petal, or whatever it might be, as I paint it. The stance of a tree must be caught, a curve just so, a patch of ground the right tone against the sky. What I put down often surprises me, being intuitive and largely uncalculated. Crucially, it is as direct a response to what I see as I can manage.

My work is about looking, staring, gazing. In his final lecture, Constable quoted the blind Milton speaking through Adam in *Paradise Lost*: 'Tell, if ye saw, how came I thus, how here?'. In paint I can choose how I say what I have seen.