

Clyde Holmes (1940 – 2008)

A talk given by David Woodford at the opening of a retrospective exhibition of Clyde's work at Tabernacl (MOMA), Machynlleth, January 11th 2014. Exhibition continues to the 8th of March 2014.

Clyde's words and paintings inhabit the same consciousness, but each is locked into its own medium. Reality usually compromises dreams but Clyde's reality and his dream were the same in his immediate surroundings; the literal, the abstract and the poetic fused. There is a credibility here that already belongs to the imagination. Land and art cohabit without the strains of artifice.

The founders of the conservation movement saw the love of nature as a saving grace, nature perceived through the optimism of the human condition, addressing a vernacular wisdom reflecting fundamental human values and psychological needs.

The malfunction of the landscape aesthetic for social advantage, exemplified in the more feeble devices of the picturesque in Gilpin's famous pontification warned that 'nature is not always correct'. It did not anticipate that a humbler vision would cause artists such as Clyde to return, meaning and poetry complete in an existential submission.

In his work shadow is dark substance, light's older and more permanent brother. Between them they agree to divide and take possession of land, water, sky and time. If one brother leaves the other takes its place. They caress the undulations with ease and travel in the eye of the beholder. Their authority is magnified by a sense of the monumental held in silence.

In a world determined to distort art as charisma, burst its boundaries and disfunction as philosophical curios without parameters, it seems often forgotten that it is precisely that silent world outside fluctuation and distraction that facilitates contemplation by which we visit and revisit the image. The work is completed by our engagement. Against the mantra of 'anything goes', Clyde re-states that fine art has a natural condition upon which its energies are dependent – as is the unquestionable case with the other arts. Its value is to be found as Robert Hughes suggested 'not in extravaganza but in integrity and intensity'.

Clyde states that nature is simultaneously outside and inside us; he might have quoted Ruskin's 'Pathetic Fallacy' – I prefer the term empathetic poetry – the condition whereby we attribute to nature, through empathy, sentiments that actually belong to mankind. Without this aesthetic transference the sublime forces of nature would cause us nothing but angst.

Surely few painters so precisely find that place of equilibrium where the clearly recognisable operates simultaneously as abstract forces, not a simplification towards some dry geometry but always distilled experience, born of feeling not measurement.

This is a topography of place as sensation. A place in his landscape is a place in our minds. His images each entertain one temperament by judicious selection of only those elements that serve this unity.

I love Clyde's term 'self aloneness', again a shared sense of solitude in which human time is too fast. 'Left aloneness' is an older slower culture that pre-dates and is indifferent to our inventions of so called relevance permitting only a submissive celebration of the elemental. Belonging but estranged we close the enigma by inventing the devices of the poetic to pacify our sense of insignificance and touch the untouchable.

If I present Clyde as the classic romantic, benefitting from the admiration of a public following, I do him and many others a disservice. It is necessary to explain the context that has put the contemporary landscape painter into an unwelcome isolation within his own discipline. Exhibitions present a brief window into a perfect world which would wish to make viewing permanently available. This gallery, thanks to the quite exceptional belief and dedication of the Lamberts, along with the National Library, under the caring eye of Paul Joyner, here in Mid Wales, represent an exception to the rule. It is a well documented fact that Wales recognises its identity without the cornerstone of fine art. Perhaps its physical splendour is historically too close and causal of subsistence living, but nevertheless, surprising in a country otherwise envied for its beauty. The craft of painting whilst in fact ubiquitous, is gently ignored as essentially foreign. Yet its landscape featured so prominently in the cauldron of British Romanticism in the first half of the 19th Century and the second half saw the Conwy Valley artists establish the largest colony in Britain, nowhere recorded in its epicentres of Trefriw and Betws Y Coed.

In the busy corridor of North Wales, this problem is acute in the absence of any meaningful comprehensive collection in historical depth. No celebration has been so uncelebrated. It is often quoted that the Welsh collection exists in diaspora valued elsewhere.

From other perspectives, matters are now no better. It will surprise many to know that in the centres of artistic deliberation, landscape painting is condemned by a negative critique as a redundant genre, incapable of freeing itself from the prescriptions of sentimentality, ignoring the new definitions of landscape requiring environmental responsibility. Against this tidal wave of popular cant, the artist is a vulnerable defendant trying to remind us that the human spirit, when it has finished with measuring the world scientifically, reverts to a condition of awe and wonder. Love is very disobedient. Celebration lives in a world of excitement not relevance.

The contemporary scene is a development of a century of disturbance in art, broken loose from traditional wisdoms, self orientation and a permanent state of transience idiotically seen as compulsory and automatically virtuous. Clyde was a little younger than me, but we both experienced an art training now redundant. Time is faster, revolution more frequent. This means that a system that proposed that maturity

would be met by just deserts instead has run us so we are told into our own outdatedness. Anachronism is a cruel criticism of creative impotency that can only be countered by exceptional conviction, dedication and application. Yet apprenticeship and passion as integral to any process of discovery are supposedly replaced, as Andy Warhol would have it. 'Inspiration' he said 'has been swapped for influence', so that art pre-exists itself in that the artist is a mere supplier of tokens that most effortlessly accommodate modes of fashionable success.

My father had a cousin an eminent scientist who was famed for ascertaining that when lightning strikes it is met by and dependent upon an electrical charge travelling up from the ground. This is a perfect analogy. I studied music for eleven years and soon discovered that musical authority is maintained not by the players in some solitary persuasive role but by the audience who bring their scholarship and anticipation with them. A performance art carries the stabilising developmental growth consistencies in its repertoire. Without this rapport in fine art a casual public browse without commitment tacitly reasserting that painting is some slightly superior recreation of merely personal, therapeutic perspectives, therefore below the threshold of cultural consequence. It is not obvious in which direction the finger of blame points. Despite my fervent persuasions Clyde was never elected to the Royal Cambrian Academy, a misjudgement of offensive proportions and now too late it continues to upset me.

With Clyde, one is reminded of the Augustus John and J.D. Inness sojourn under the lonely Arennig again where wildness was the catalyst of an innocent vision, but theirs was only for two years and subsidised by ready-made reputations born of a Slade in its heyday. Each year during the Bethesda festival I guide a group around the Nant Ffrancon talking about John Piper who lived there for short periods. I end my tour by reading a roll call of national and internationally famous artists who worked in Snowdonia. It takes me several minutes. I verified the locations of Pipers works for a retrospective at the National Museum which of course included a date and venue for a home coming in North Wales. North Wales rejected it! This turning of the back on achievement even in a new age of qualifications in fashionable art continues undisturbed. We are mindful of the Tunnicliffe saga, a close run thing, and given time we could visit the lengthy roll call of the abandoned, Powys Evans, Mildred Eldridge – just read Peter Lords catalogue of the forgotten in his book, 'Imaging the Nation'. Including all, we are talking not hundreds but thousands over the past two centuries. With the aid of nearly a hundred million pounds, North Wales has and is building two art complexes, neither has provision for, nor intends celebrating fine art. The evident strongholds of art can be understood as procured by individual crusades in defiance of public apathy.

An art form that provides access to all ages is serving the aspirations of education. But an art that provides these opportunities and constructs no special place for the conservation and celebration of excellence and mature achievement is in denial of its own convictions. An absence of a desire to secure the past enfeebles the present

preparing its own oblivion, denying the very probity on which it supposed its own endeavours to be of value.

Forgive me for these rather glum observations from another grey haired dauber who would also like to know about the fate of a life time's perseverance. But now Clyde's single mindedness is seen as a much braver thing than at first supposed.

The products of art are physical, singular and therefore vulnerable. Those occasional exhibitions of rediscovery are compromised by unavailability and loss from neglect and decay. We all always ask 'how on earth did we let this happen?' It must not happen again – means we must not let it.

Clyde's life was the stuff of legend, but his contribution is the work. The former has no purpose unless the work finds its proper place in Wales and beyond as amongst the truly heart-felt visions of landscape into art.