

1985 Stephen Cooper | A Year in Painting (text), Ikon Gallery



Photo: *I keep a dog and bark myself* 94" x 120" acrylic on canvas, July 1985

A Year of Painting

A year of painting is a marriage between constants and changes—it is as much about the restatement of past concerns as it is about new ideas, sharper ambitions and fresher ways of working. In attempting an introduction to the exhibition at IKON Gallery and, hopefully creating a context in which the changes become apparent, it is necessary to consider those concerns which have been constants in Stephen Cooper's work since his student days.

He has lived in Bristol for some two or three years. To get from his house, where an upstairs room is used for painting in, to his studio 'proper' on the docks, one must first climb Brandon Hill to the Cabot monument, then descend into the city, walk along the dockside past Arnolfini, cross the swing bridge under repair and walk down and along the other side past the cranes, trains and moored boats.

It is a spectacular walk with, especially from Brandon Hill, spectacular views across the city. The city itself is spacious, uncluttered, suggesting distance and a freedom to move about—such a different experience to that of the average, cramped Birmingham inhabitant. Whether Stephen Cooper's paintings refer to landscape—studied, glimpsed or invented—it is hard to pin down and, probably, not worth the attempt. That they suggest a sense of space—large, deep spaces—is a result of the artist consciously trying to provoke such responses.

An ambition, as a student at the Royal College of Art, to paint the saddest picture in the world, was probably not achievable. But a constant need to deal equally with both formal and emotional concerns demonstrates that, although the question may have changed, the business of questioning in the present works is from the same root. The synthesising of formal and emotional is still the motivating force behind these paintings.

The paintings achieve their emotional impact through a sense of placement across the canvas. Earlier work developed an assumption that some areas of the canvas will be focused while other areas are forced into a blur. This is a sensitivity to animating certain areas, stated over and over again in the works in the exhibition. The angling and positioning of the 'nervous characters' in the 'black paintings' are echoes of a similar angling and positioning in earlier paintings, although now the characters have changed.

Stephen Cooper's working methods are a constant—working large on a number of canvases at the same time, using smaller canvases as notations or to capture spin-offs from the larger activity.

These are not paintings that have been made quickly and quick painting is not a constant element in his activity. These are paintings that evolve over a lengthy period of time where the time spent sitting in front of the canvas is as crucial to a painting's success as time spent working on the canvas. Some of the paintings, and especially some areas of some of the paintings, have taken several months to resolve, months in which the altering of the painted surface mirrors the exterior experiences working on the artist.

The work has always been knowledgeable of the work of other artists whether they be Spanish cave painters or teaching colleagues. To an extent, the paintings and drawings have been a working through of this knowledge—an assimilation into a personal response. This is true of the body of work in this exhibition, but this year of painting has seen less time spent looking at the work of others, less time travelling and researching. The degree of personal responsibility taken for the paintings at IKON suggests that this is almost a first year of painting.

The key to the changes during the year lies in the black drawings, only a selection of which are in the exhibition. This is drawing as a process of clearing the ground—of 'condensing' or 'editing' a lot of what was going on in earlier work. More importantly, these are drawings that suggested possibilities of painting, the realisation of which forced many of the changes noticeable in this exhibition.

Some thirty or forty drawings were made at the start of the year—a body of work that filled the studio and created a physical environment which the subsequent 'black paintings' in their layers of paint would pay reference to before moving on to develop their own identities.

The immediacy of the drawings is only recognisable in the final surface of the 'black paintings'. The process of adding and erasing, basic to the manufacture of the drawings, translates awkwardly. The wet into wet skidding of oil paint, colour into colour, and the resulting build up of paint layers, is evidence of an uncertainty. Despite the confident handling, the 'black paintings' are a reflection of not being sure and of the search for a picture.

This is not to deny the strength of the 'black paintings' but rather to be made more aware of a nervous physicality producing a breadth of sensation and a delicacy that does not border on the precious. Yet, if these paintings were struck with a tuning fork, one suspects they would emit a muffled sound. In similar circumstances, the more recent acrylic paintings would positively 'ping' with tension.

The decision to change from working in oil paint to working with acrylic (the first acrylic paintings were made in the house, suggesting that the medium had to prove itself before being allowed into the dockside studio) would seem to be the most significant change in this year of painting. This is a reversal of some ten years ago, when many artists abandoned acrylic to work again with oil paint in a hope of reclaiming a type of painting absent in Europe for a generation.

Stephen Cooper's move back to acrylic could also be about reclaiming. More immediately, it is a direct response to the demands of the black drawings—to attempt to realise more fully the suggested possibilities.

These are sharper paintings. There is still erasure (white not black) but the emphasis is now on addition with modification—what goes on the canvas will probably stay. Modifying first marks by watering out implies a surface as evocative and physical as the clogged surfaces in the 'black paintings'. There are few regrets about losing the heaviness of the oil paintings—and the release from painting fat over thin and the inherent lengthy drying times is noticeable in the openness, expansiveness, of the new canvases. Rawer paintings with a greater subtlety—these are new paintings for Stephen Cooper.

This is an exhibition of work from 1985. It is not possible, even if it were desirable, to ask, "What sort of a year has this been? A good year? A bad year? Or just an OK year?" Such questions can only be answered by the next year.

David Patten. January 1985