

The Landscapes of Martin Greenland

Phillip Blond

Martin Greenland's work immediately strikes you with a sense of the uncanny. Yet at the same time you recognise the terrain. When you look closely at the paintings they seem to be English landscapes but one's lit with the light of a continental sun. In Greenland's work you sense the historical manners of the Dutch masters their illumination pervades the painting. It is like looking at a space fashioned by Frans Hals, yet no mercantile or bourgeois figure focuses the work. Rather, it is almost as if you see the absence of human beings. You feel that you are looking at the world of Courbet or Corot, it seems evident that this world was made for people, yet none are there. In earlier work this space or incongruity is enacted by surreal figures who demonstrate their and your lack of familiarity with the surroundings. They gaze at you, with a disinterested hostility that challenges your own location and perspective. Similarly in other examples of Greenland's work, ships lie mysteriously aground on land, becalmed in an earth they cannot navigate - as such these vessels testify to a human activity run up against its own limit. In all of Greenland's work human figures are noticeable, not least through not being there, or if they are present they either wholly ignore their surroundings being consumed with themselves or else they gather in ancient forms of collective nature worship. The merit of this work is that it shows both attitudes are misplaced, as indifference to nature or absorption within it somehow gets the relationships between people and the world wrong. Thus landscape retains its objective transcendent and instructional character as the place and locale of our own discovery of meaning and truth

There is consequently, in Greenland's work an almost cubist sense of the other side of things, what the world is like when we are not present. Volumes jut up from the foreground - some edifice or industrial artefact sits in a state of brooding unknowing in the middle of the visual plain. Wholly realist this work eschews representation in its depiction of the contours of the real. As such its symmetry with the best of Surrealism comes to the fore, insofar as Magritte or indeed De Chirico tried to paint not the mind or the world but the hidden interaction and disjuncture of the two. In this sense it is metaphysical painting at its best, meta not in the sense of what is beyond the physical beyond but rather what comes before the visual field is wholly conditioned by our subjectivity. Thus it paints what we tend to lose when we look - a sense of the magnificent objectivity of things. The sheer strangeness of a world that exceeds us is shown to us in a picture not attuned to its own contours. As 'world' Martin's painting abuts out - it has depth and relief - without the necessity of ever thickening layers of paint or collage. Perhaps Martin's work on landscape achieves this extra dimension through blending in an unprecedented fashion the visual and conceptual metaphors of the entire tradition with a unique sense of place and phenomenology.

Despite the brilliance of Greenland's visual and theoretical method this is not the ultimate aesthetic goal of his work. For in the end Greenland paints relationship, between mind and world, and world and meaning. And even perhaps between me and you. For he depicts a mysterious cosmos one that need not entertain us or our offspring but yet one that still creates a world for us to inhabit. As such Greenland draws and colours the ultimately transcendent nature of the world and the peculiar character of its visible exchange with our eyes. The world opens up and unfolds internally, differentiating itself from itself, to greet the figures that have yet to enter but for whom all this was intended. Greenland genius is to paint the world as it is being made for us but before we have been invited in. He charts a line originally drawn by Cezanne between an objective universe somehow apart from us and our own subjective reception of the phenomenal world that we see and craft. Martin paints the saturated visibility of this world so that we can see how its donation evades all our attempts to deny that it is indeed a gift.