Exhibitions 2

Back to the sublime

John Spurling

Martin Greenland: Arrangements of Memory
Art Space Gallery, 84 St Peter's Street, London N1, until 10 October

'In Painting there must be something Great and Extraordinary to surprise, please and instruct, which is what we call the *grand Gusto*.' 'Tis by this that ordinary things are made beautiful and the beautiful sublime and wonderful,' wrote Roger de Piles in his *Art of Painting*, translated into English in 1706, extending the notion of the sublime from literature to painting and opening the road to Romanticism. Martin Greenland's large, skilful, traditionally painterly landscapes bring us smack back from what Reynolds called 'the little elegancies of art' to the sublime. Andrew Lambirth's persuasive introduction to the catalogue finds touches of Courbet, Corot and the Barbizon painters, also of Russian and American 19th-century landscapists such as Levitan and Frederic Church, but even Claude and Poussin peep out too. Greenland is a bold and ambitious artist using the past to rediscover and repossess the natural world of our own time, and he fully deserved the first prize he won in the John Moores exhibition of 2006.

These mostly wild landscapes, with broken, rocky foregrounds, narrow streams, sudden waterfalls and mountain ridges across the skyline, are evidently those of Cumbria, where Greenland lives, but you could not pin them down quite as you might Cézanne's Mont St Victoire or Bibémus Quarry. They are creations of the artist's imagination, stimulated in the first place by vistas and motifs seen during his walks by day and night, assisted by sketches which he then puts aside, but constructed finally almost in the way a novelist might transform memories into fictional scenery. In 'Primitive Landscape', for example, the eye is carried up from a dark chasm, by way of a waterfall, to a brilliantly lit pathway between quarried rock faces surrounded by outcrops of tufty vegetation, and across a dark, scarcely visible, foreshortened valley to a line of dark-blue hills under a clouded sky. The view is framed by clumps of pine trees, their pinkish-orange upper branches also sunlit, and on one side by the horizontal branch and feathery light-green foliage of a larch tree. Away up to the left, beyond the central rock faces, is a small hut which might be as remote from the modern world as the rest of the landscape, except that just above it, below the mountains, travelling up the valley appears a jet-fighter, to be followed no doubt a few moments later, if the painting had a soundtrack, by that ear-splitting, nerve-shivering noise one hears in wild British landscapes where military pilots practise their skills.

In 'Into the South', again with a quarry at the centre, the quarry buildings are clearly visible among the trees, and in 'National Park' one can pick out an old pillbox, the corner of a reservoir and its dam, and an up-to-date communications mast with its square transformer.

But Greenland is just as likely to tell his visual story the other way round, from the new into the old. In 'Old-fashioned Light' the rocks and vegetation dispute the foreground with two huge slabs of building and a chimney, while, against a flat horizon under a rainy cloudscape, the distance is filled with a sprawling city. In one of the most recent paintings, 'The Flood', he goes further still, perhaps a little too far, with a broad landscape of modern semi-suburban debris — houses, backyards, pools of water, sheds, wharves and a lot of drying mud — over which, in the sky, floats a small ark like a barrage-balloon. An earlier, smaller painting, 'From the Voyage of the Somnambulist', is a night-piece in which, though the emphasis is again reversed, with only a single small house, a few streetlamps and two huge granite gateposts standing for man's presence in a dark mass of trees against a shadowy sky, it is the human elements which seem the more dream-like and even sinister.

What a pleasure it is to share Greenland's brave confidence in the *grand Gusto*, to agree with Reynolds that 'the Sublime in painting, as in poetry, so overpowers, and takes possession of the whole mind, that no room is left for attention to minute criticism'! ❑

'Primitive Landscape', 2008, by Martin Greenland

Watercolour

Love of queens and princes

Mark Glazebrook

Watercolour: only a medium but what a medium! It's so versatile, and when painting the landscape it can respond with lightning speed to changes in the weather. The latter's unpredictability has made it our most predictable national topic and the English have long taken watercolours to their hearts, both as practitioners and as collectors. Indeed, Queen Victoria (a watercolourist herself) presided over no fewer than two comparable organisations, the Royal Watercolour Society (RWS), founded in 1804, plus the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours (RI), which became Royal in 1885. Queen Elizabeth II has questioned the logic of retaining two apparently similar bodies but Prince Charles, a noted practitioner, is patron of both. As Macheath puts it in *The Beggar's Opera*: 'How happy could I be with either, Were t'other dear charmer away!'

It is sometimes said that our monarchy has survived partly by espousing the best middle-class customs and values — while appreciating that aristocrats tend to have more fun.