

Julian Perry

an extraordinary prospect

the coastal
erosion paintings



Austin/Desmond Fine Art, London



Tree and Clouds Suffolk 2010
Oil on panel
41 × 31.5 cm

An Incremental Annihilation

As far as I am aware there is no coastal erosion in Hackney. I have therefore been obliged to travel significant distances to witness and create the works for this project. It was hence all the more disappointing to arrive again and again at locations to find so little evidence of destruction. Occasionally there might be a few bricks at the cliff bottom, or once a microwave oven poking out of a muddy avalanche. Yet nowhere the drama I had expected. In fact what is most striking about the sea dissolving the land is its total commitment. In other words it does not compromise, it annihilates. Where there was once solid earth there is now an expansive view of very fresh air and salt water.

Dunwich on the Suffolk coast is perhaps the capital city of coastal erosion, yet people who arrive at this quiet place are often disappointed that there is so little to see of this one time metropolis, no spires or ruined castles visible at low tide. What they experience is exactly the point, nothing: it has gone!

It took a little while for me to realise that these “non events” were exactly what is so extraordinary about coastal erosion. Land collapsing, dissolving and disappearing has no equivalent. Earthquakes are more deadly but erosion is more profound. There is an almost biblical implausibility to houses, farms, woods churches, even whole cities turning to nothingness.

It was whilst painting a silver birch tree at Benacre Fen (Suffolk) that I at last found a way to do justice to these extraordinary phenomena. What I wanted to do was lift the tree up to the position it had occupied prior to the sandy cliff dissolving beneath it. On my return to the studio this is exactly what I did.



Painting Scarborough 2010

JP 2010

Painting on the edge

Incredibly, in a catastrophic eighty-year period (between 1328 and 1408) the churches of St Bartholomew's, St Michael's, St Leonard's, St Nicholas, St Martin's and St Anthony's (a Benedictine Chapel) one by one toppled down the sandy cliffs of the once thriving town of Dunwich. A bustling East Anglian port of three thousand people, which had once been a mile inland, was diminished and denuded by the effects of what geologists term 'longshore drift'. On occasion, the impact was indeed dramatic; a single storm in 1347 wiped out 400 dwellings, but for much of the time the effect was silently corrosive, the relentless impact of the tides making its gradual but inexorable progress through the town. Not that the townsfolk did nothing by way of defence. In 1540 the churchwardens of St John the Baptist sold off all the precious plate to fund a pier to stave off the sea. Alas to no end; the waters continued their western surge and the church went East. In an act of supreme defiance an entirely new church, St James, was built in 1832, but it too fell into the sea during the years leading up to the Great War, with the last stump toppling into the high tide the very day the Armistice was signed.

Dunwich, and its tormented topography, has become the capital of coastal erosion in Britain, the doyenne of those villages lost to the sea and now remembered for once being somewhere 'over there'. Further up the coast in East Yorkshire, there are regular tours to visit the sites of two dozen villages lost to the sea in the 14th century but now reclaimed as a tract of salty land known sweetly as 'Sunk Island'. There is of course nothing to see on the land or on a map, not even a single contour line, except their curious ancient names – Penysthorp, Frismersk, Orwithfleet, East Somerte. All gone, swept away by the waves, including one hamlet known only as 'Odd', memorable in the Guide Book for the line: 'The history of Odd is short.' As at Dunwich, it is difficult to know what to expect: there are no surviving stone walls, certainly no stone spires poking out of the reclaimed marshes, not a trace of centuries of habitation, nor evidence of an offshore English Atlantis complete with ancient sunken remains. Instead, there is an overwhelming emptiness, a backwater amongst backwaters under mother-of-pearl skies, a place of "dread fascination" but not one that lends itself easily to picture-making.

Such was the prospect that faced Julian Perry as he embarked on his most recent odyssey to capture the volatile edge of modern Britain. Perry is one of our foremost landscape painters. An artist engaged in depicting modern man's often uneasy relationship with the natural world, his most recent one-man show 'A Common Treasury', explored the doomed allotments that have now been subsumed by the 2012 Olympic site, and in 2004 he staged an exhibition that drew its inspiration from Epping Forest, London's 'threadbare back garden', with its odd fusion of the bucolic and the urban, hubcaps trapped in trees, litter-strewn lay-bys, and large ponds formed from the craters created by mis-aimed V2 rockets at the tail-end of the Second World War. In fact, there is always something embattled about Perry's landscapes, something adversarial, where natural elements come under unexpected duress, or sit uncomfortably in awkward juxtaposition. His is a landscape vision of latent violence. In one large painting from 2004, *'Long Running'*, Perry depicted a ragged array of silver birch trees, which had over time encroached on an open space threatening to destroy its unique character. It is a striking, quite singular painting. Not only is the central tree reminiscent of those fake periscope trees that were erected by Royal Engineers above the parapets of the Western Front, but it is surrounded by a deep trench of newly dug earth. Its function is simple, if somewhat surprising: one of the few effective ways of ridding a tract of unwelcome silver birches is to dig out the roots, exposing them to the elements through 'perimeter entrenchment'. If this doesn't work there is always the option (used occasionally) of blowing them up with explosives. Once again, Perry has drawn uneasy parallels with landscapes of war, creating places suffused with tension and expectation, drawing us towards outwardly becalmed and settled tracts that are in reality potent places of sudden noise, unchecked disturbance and hidden danger.



Long Running 2004
Oil on panel
122.5 × 158 cm

Yet it was the very absence of these characteristics that surprised him on his painting forays up and down the beleaguered east coast. Instead of crashing cataclysm or booming birch, there was the banality of bungalows perched perilously on friable embankments. 'Trees', he said, 'didn't tumble spectacularly into the sea. They slid almost imperceptibly down on to the beach to be gradually washed away by the tides.' How is it possible to convey the massive tragedy of such places, the profound loss of livelihoods and property, and the irretrievable vanishing of the very stuff that makes up the British Isles? We may indeed have been prepared to fight them on the beaches but what happens when the same beaches appear to be fighting us? Patiently and rigorously Perry set to work, hauling his painting paraphernalia many miles, to locate *the* motif that would best summarise the

fraying edge of the country. The resulting subjects are sometimes totemic – an apparently fossilised tree standing proudly out of the sand, and another depicting one splendid erect trunk washed over by the surf (*Sea Tree, Suffolk*, 2009) – or they may be rather subtle, their tragedy captured in the image of an earthen bank incongruously peppered with fridge freezers. In others, the sheer pictorial juxtaposition conveys the magnitude of the catastrophe. In *Suffolk Cliffs* (2010) a 1920s villa, with exquisitely described red roof tiles, leaded windows and neatly maintained guttering, peers incredulously over a sloppy, fugitive bank of earth as if to guess at its inevitable fate. But Perry knows that exactitude cannot convey truth. Despite the sense of dramatic expectancy that pervades this work, despite the extraordinary violation and inevitability, Perry wanted the components of this landscape to have a future as well as a past, however ordinary. This explains, in part, the poetic decision to create floating forms that appear to freeze the land in time and space. Instead of sliding inexorably

into fragmented banality, Perry offers us the remarkable prospect of poetic redemption. Instead of atrophy and collapse we are offered lightness and grace. In a leap of surrealistic imagining, which Paul Nash or Tristram Hillier would have instantly understood, the pill-boxes, 1920s semis, Fish and Chip shops and other seaside *monumentalia* have been salvaged from a briny doom, and lent an extended existence frozen, suspended, in paint on panel.

Perry cites many precedents for his audacity. He takes no easy refuge in obvious comparators – Magritte perhaps, or possibly the Dymchurch



Sweet Chestnuts
Photo Benacre Beach 2009

paintings by Paul Nash – but points to those telling details in landscapes by Constable or Cotman, painters who also learned their trade on the eastern side of England, not far from the crumbling edge patrolled by Perry. ‘Look closely at a field of corn painted by Constable’, he argues, ‘you can actually see that it’s not quite ripe, you can feel the very moment that the breeze wafted through it. That moment is frozen in time, never altered since 1810, and I’ve always wanted to capture that temporal quality in my work.’ In his new paintings, Perry has defied nature in a way that Cotman or Crome could never have imagined possible, but he does so not to be sentimental, to mindlessly turn back the clock. There is a toughness about his work that stops it being maudlin or even mawkish. After all, it takes an unusual confidence to set up an easel within yards of some cliff edge calamity and peer into the misery of another’s disaster. Grayson Perry, in an insightful review of ‘A Common Treasury’ also identified this stubborn trait, this unwillingness to become nostalgic in the face of common tragedy. Much of Julian Perry’s robustness is achieved through the rigorous and deeply intelligent application of his craft. Capable of lovingly rendering any given surface – whether it be rusting Crittall windows or wispy *cirrus stratus* – he

is not seduced by easy pictorial solutions; his formal constructions are tough-minded. Look for example at the handling of the tissue-like texture of the silver birch in the audacious *Coastal Tree*, or the suffusion of Indian yellow in the water-line of the foreshore paintings. Few British painters working today are capable of such subtlety, that ability to accurately describe the saturated density of recently eroded earth as it is stirred by each new wave. Perry has learned his craft by careful study of other Eastern England painters: he has determined that Constable created his distinctive painterliness by applying white pigment to one side of his brush and, say, burnt umber, to the other side, rolling and rotating his brush across the surface to create the remarkable effect of sparkling light. In certain of his own works, the fragment of *Beach Tree*, for example – he achieves equal effects, conjuring up the vivacious surface textures of Thomas Gainsborough or Jacob van Ruisdael. Indeed, the work of the great seventeenth century Dutch landscape masters spring to mind when savouring Perry's oeuvre: his command of cumulus cloud formations owes a great deal to their example. Of course, in their work we have painters thriving on a flattened landscape reclaimed from the sea, while in Perry's we have a landscape that is being reclaimed and flattened by the sea.

To complement the temporal dimension in Perry's recent work there is an inexorable spatial axis – the westward thrust of the ocean, the eastward slide of the land. Writing from the blighted 'memoryscape' of the Belgian trenches in 1915, T.E. Hulme, the Imagist poet and philosopher, noted how 'in peacetime, each direction of the road is as it were indifferent, it all goes on *ad infinitum*. But now', he added, acutely aware of how so much had changed, 'you know that certain roads lead as it were, up to an abyss.' To an extent, Perry has been working at a front-line, where peacetime rules have been reversed, and directions have become crucial determinants in sorting danger from safety, in discriminating those places that one can take refuge and those that offer unlimited views, or 'prospects'. 'Perry [wrote William Feaver in an earlier catalogue essay] has a feel for in-between zones, for places where boundaries waver and enclaves are created'. He has a natural affinity for liminal places that are caught in transition and flux, and his creative temperament is ideally matched to the chronic tragedy of the imperilled east coast. In these works he has created a new commemorative form, one not predicated on memorial plaque or inscribed stone, but one that re-institutes those doomed caravans and drowned pill-boxes to a guaranteed future suspended above the voracious waves, to live on in sun-blessed purity under those characteristically Perryian skies, while all around England frays at the edges, physically and (for much of the future) fiscally.

Professor Paul Gough
Autumn 2010



Suffolk Cliffs 2010
Oil on panel
70 × 57 cm

Coastal Tree II 2010
Oil on panel
122 x 94.5 cm



Fanfare 34 2010
Oil on panel
103.5 × 122 cm



Sea View Caravans 2010

Oil on panel
122 x 94.5 cm





Artist's studio 2010



Crossways Fish and Chips 2010
Oil on panel
25.5 x 34.5 cm

Happisburgh Defences 2010

Oil on panel
26 × 20 cm



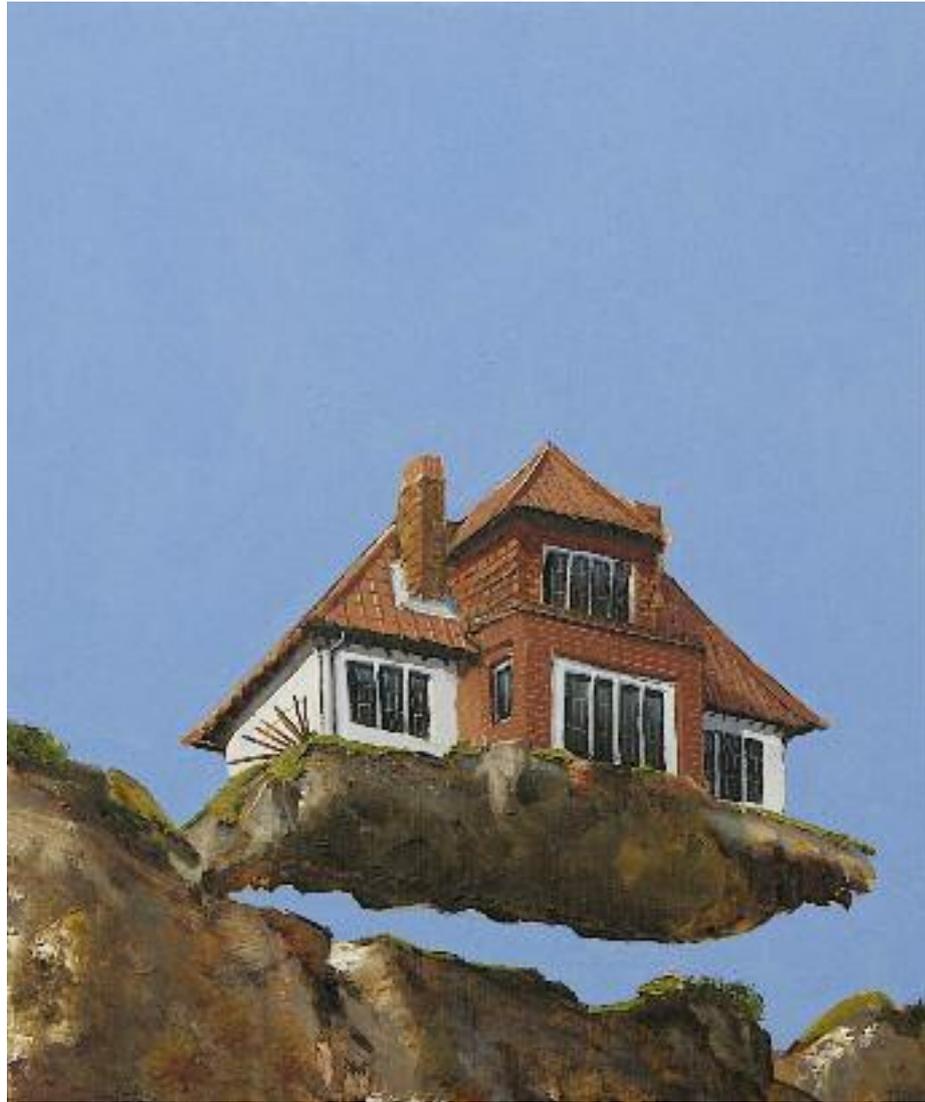
Sea Tree Suffolk 2009

Oil on panel
42 × 32.5 cm





Cliffs at Happisburgh 2010
Oil on panel
20 × 26 cm



House with Blue Sky 2010
Oil on panel
30 x 25 cm

Muddy Seascape 2010
Oil on panel
36 × 26 cm





Skipsea Bungalow 2010
Oil on panel
25.5 x 34.5 cm

'Was it a bomb?' I gasped.

He laughed, 'That? No it were only an ordinary fall. Haven't you seen wun yet? 'Ow long you been walking?'

The shock of the cliff fall seemed to have jolted my memory and without needing to consult my notebook I was able to explain I'd come from Skipsea that day, and Bempton via Flamborough Head the one before. Thrilled at my own lucidity I rambled on about the Holderness coast, its strangeness, and how there must be some odd connection between its progressive engulfment and the ignorance of the wider world.

The fossicker was also thrown into loquacity by the cliff fall and spoke of his fossil hunting, how the Yorkshire coast was perfect for this, exhibiting three successive strata - the Jurassic, the Cretaceous, the Cainozoic - exposed successively from Whitby in the North to the Humber estuary, and how he himself had found, 'All sorts, I dug up a whole bloody bison in Tunstall mere last year and a fossilized tree the year before'.

Excerpt: *"Walking to Hollywood"* by Will Self.

Norfolk Pill Box 2010

Oil on panel
31 × 25 cm



Early Morning Inverted Pill Box 2009

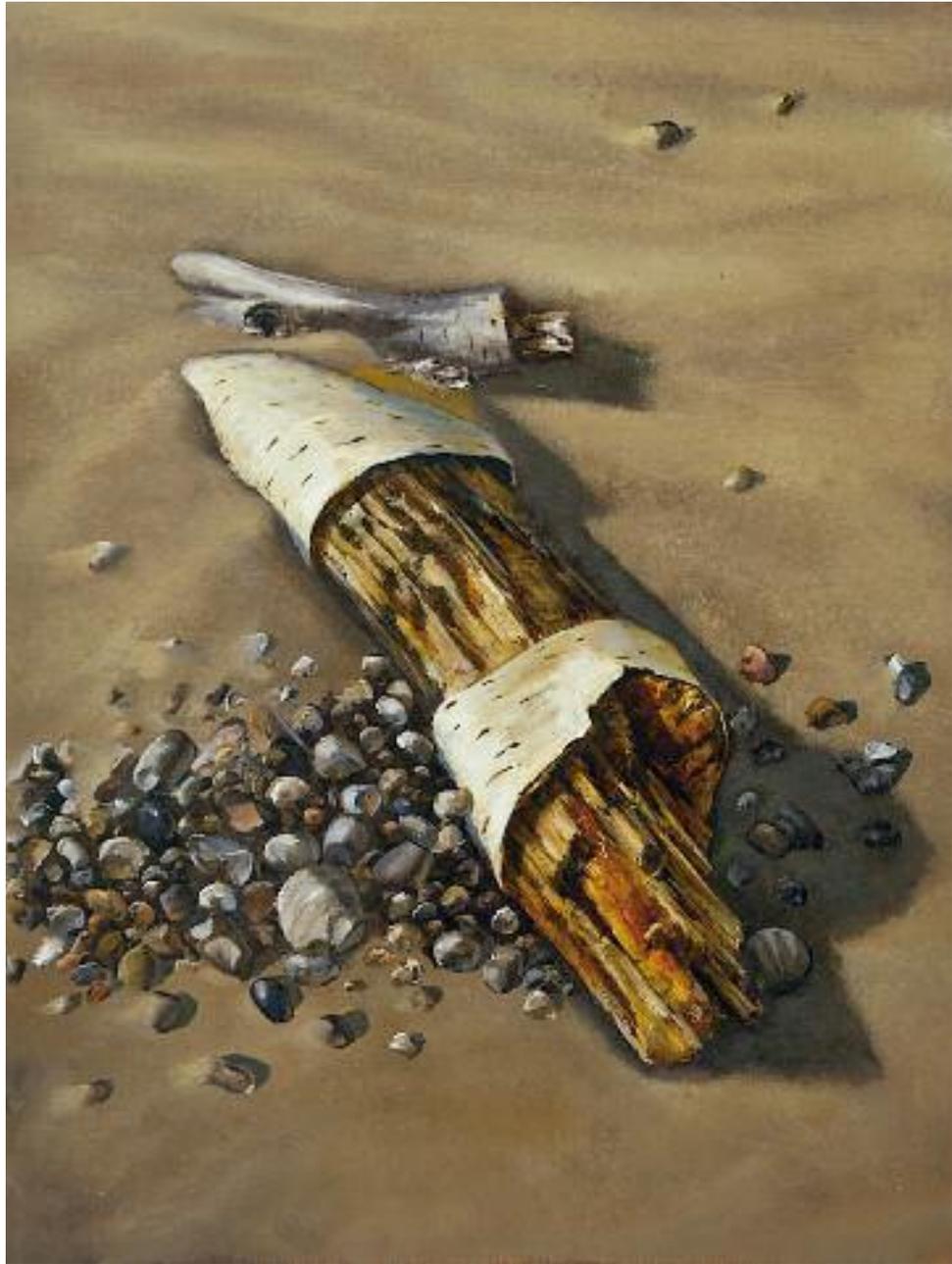
Oil on panel
41 × 34.5 cm



Coastal House Suffolk 2010
Oil on panel
34.5 x 41 cm



Beach Tree 2009
Oil on panel
46 × 35 cm



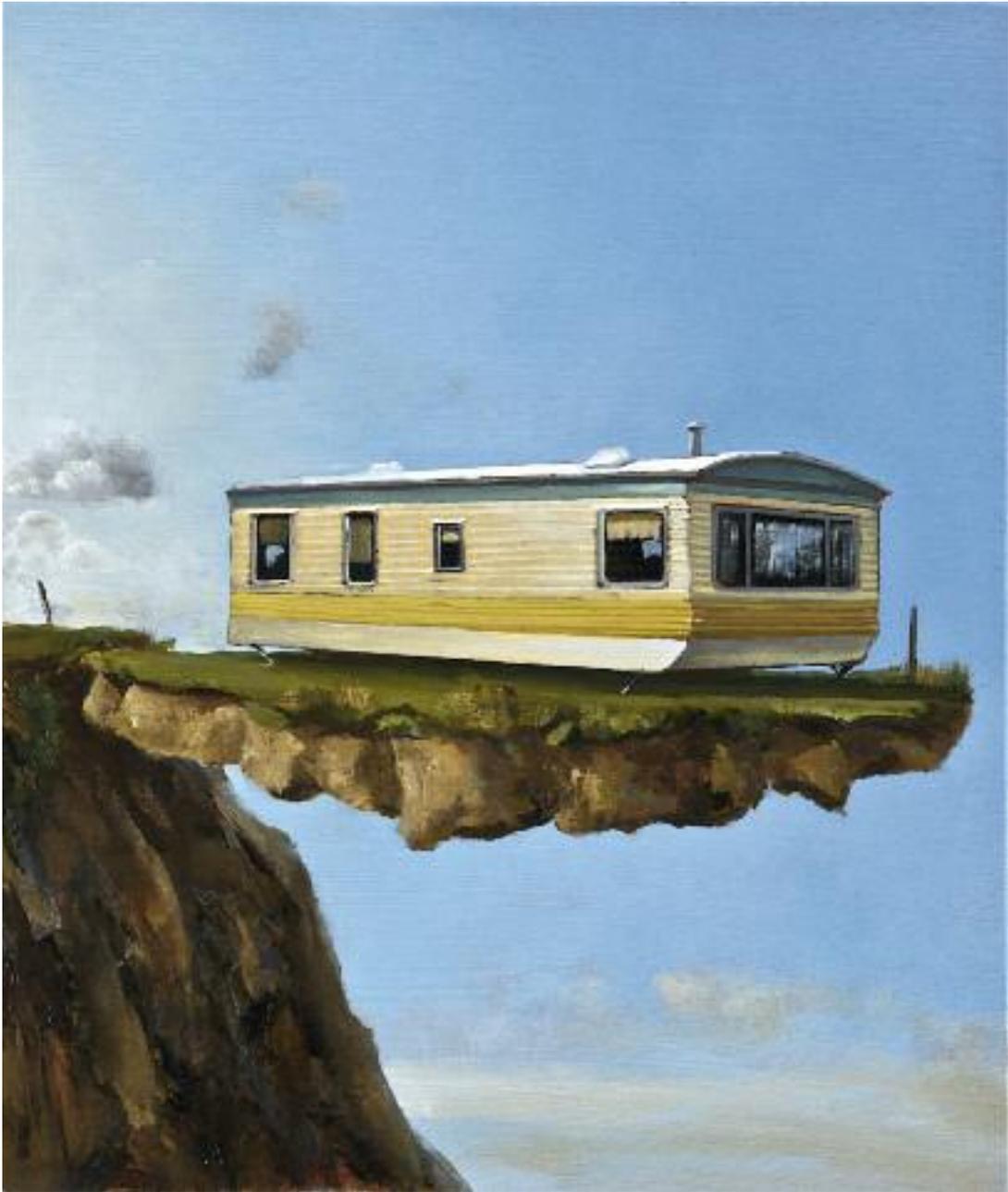
Doomed Suburban Tree 2010

Oil on panel
30 × 25 cm



Caravan Holiday 2010

Oil on panel
31 × 26 cm



JULIAN PERRY BIOGRAPHY

- 1960 Born Worcester
1997-78 Berkshire College of Art & Design
1978-81 Bristol Polytechnic, BA (Hons) Fine Art

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1987 *This Unique Distance*, Tom Allen Centre, Stratford
1995 *A Walk to the Marshes*, Austin/Desmond Fine Art London
1997 *Brittle England*, Austin/Desmond Fine Art London
1998 Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery
1999 *Significant Others*, Austin/Desmond Fine Art London
2001 *Viewing Point*, Austin/Desmond Fine Art London
Wysing Arts Cambridgeshire
Testament, Guildhall Art Gallery London
2007 *A Common Treasury*, Austin Desmond Fine Art
2009 *Dust on the Nettles*, Chelsea and Westminster Hospital

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1983 Annual Open Show, King St Gallery, Bristol
Landscape in the 80s Salisbury Art Centre
Gallery Artists, Neville Gallery, Bath
1986 Out East Show, Out East Gallery, London
Acme Selection, Showroom Gallery, London
Eight Artists William Morris Gallery, London
1987 Southbank Picture Show , Royal Festival Hall, London
Whitechapel Open, Whitechapel Gallery, London
Art From Acme Houses, Chisenhale Gallery, London
Royal Overseas League Open, Overseas House, London
Gallery Artists Show, Jayne H Baum Gallery New York
1989 *Spirit of London*, Royal Festival Hall, London
1991 *A Several World*, Two person show: Northern Arts and British Council
touring show, Cleveland Gallery Middlesborough; Museum Kunstsammlung,
Hinter Glauchau; Galerie At Domhof, Zwickau, Germany
1992 Department of Transport selected Competition, London
Three Invited Artists, Madler Passage Galerie, Leipzig, Germany
1993 Sotheby's Contemporary Art Exhibition/ Auction, London
Aspects of Modern British Art Austin/Desmond Fine Art London
1994 Art 94', Business Design Centre London
Twentieth Century Art Fair, Royal College of Art
Pictures at an Exhibition, Touring Exhibition Northern Centre for
Contemporary Art, Sunderland, St David's Hall Cardiff; Victoria Art Gallery
1995 *Towards the Millennium*, Museum of London
British BFAMI, Christie's London
1996 *City Journeys*, L.A.C. Inaugural Exhibition, London
City Beautiful. L.A.C Exhibition London
1997 Twentieth Century British Art Fair , Royal College of Art
Art 97' , Business Design Centre, London
Beware of the Trains, Gallery 27 London
1998 *Aspects of Modern British Art*, Austin/Desmond Fine Art
1999 *Tower Blocks: The Artists View*, Museum of London
2000 *Blakes Heaven*, Sclar Fine Art, London
Order and Event Landscape Now, Art Space Gallery, London
2001 *Creative Quarters*, Museum of London, *Discerning Eye* (invited
artist) London *Six Landscape Painters*, Chapel Row Gallery, Bath
2002 Hunting Prize Royal College of Art, *Sea*, curated exhibition,
Wolverhampton City Art Gallery, *Discerning Eye (invited artist)*
30 x 30 Vertigo Gallery London
Hunting Art Prize Royal College of Art, Basildon Arts Trust Inaugural exhibition
2006 *Forest Dreaming* Centre For Contemporary Art and the Natural
World Devon. *England's Dreaming* London
Royal Academy *Summer Exhibition, Critics Choice*
Abergavenny, *Discerning Eye* London, Hunting Art Prize, Royal College of Art
2008 "Precious Things" Highlanes Art Gallery, Drogheda Ireland, Drawing
Quarters (Quarter Master) University of the West of England. *Margate Rocks*
Margate Arts Festival, invited Artist
2009 *Pretty Baa-Lambs* Group Show Madder 139 Vyner St London.

AWARDS

- 1983 Prize Winner, King Street Gallery Open Exhibition
1984 Prize Winner, Artsite Gallery, Bath
1987 Best Painting by an Artist under Thirty, Spirit of London
1993 British Council Exhibition Award
1993 British Council Travel Award
Nat-West Art Award – Shortlisted
Arts Council England Major Individual Award.
Arts Council England Capital Equipment Award
2003 Research Residency; Wysing Arts Cambridgeshire.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

The Museum of London
Cleveland County Council Collection
London Transport Collection
London Guildhall Collection
Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery
Basildon Arts Trust
Collection of H.M Prince of Wales
Forbes Collection (USA)

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1991 Terry Bennett: *A Several World*, catalogue essay, published by the Cleveland Gallery Middlesborough
1995 Graham Crowley: *A walk to the Marshes*, Catalogue essay Austin/Desmond Fine Art London
Mirelle Galinou: London in Paint, published by Museum of London.
Andrew Lambirth: Brittle England, exhibition catalogue published Austin/Desmond Fine Art London
1998 Andrew Lambirth : Alternatives, Stephen Chambers and Julian Perry, London Magazine
David Buckman: Dictionary of Artists in Britain since 1945, published by Art Dictionaries Ltd Bristol
1999 Nicholas Usherwood / Paul Gough: Critical Acclaim. Galleries Magazine selected artist.
Vivian Knight: Modern Painting in the London Guildhall Gallery, published by London Guildhall
John Craxton : Significant Others, catalogue introduction published by Austin/Desmond Fine Art
2000 John Russell Taylor: Order and Event Landscape Now, the Times (Sept)
Andrew Lambirth : Vistas of the Imagination, the Spectator (Sept)
2001 Sarah Drury: Exhibition Review, Galleries magazine (Sept issue)
Andrew Lambirth: Viewing Point, Modern Painters Magazine (Autumn Issue)
Andrew Lambirth extended interview with Julian Perry Exhibition catalogue Austin/Desmond Fine Art.
2004 William Feaver : Exhibition catalogue essay, Published Guildhall Gallery, Felicity Owen exhibition review Galleries magazine (Sept Issue. Andrew Lambirth exhibition review Spectator magazine
2006 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition review Andrew Lambirth, Spectator magazine
2007 Dr Martin Postle, Yale University, "*Common Treasury* " Exhibition Catalogue essay Published by Austin Desmond Fine Art. Ruth Hedges Blueprint magazine October edition. The Times "These Humble Sheds" Grayson Perry. Time Out Exhibition Review Sarah O'Reilly, Spectator Exhibition review Andrew Lambirth, Exhibition Review Galleries Magazine Corinna Lotz. Exhibition Review "The Art Newspaper" Melanie Gerlis. ARD German TV feature on exhibition. "The Week" Exhibition Review Jane Ross. Huon Mallalieu 'Save our Sheds', Country Life magazine.
2008 Mark Lawson BBC Radio 4 Front Row interview.
2010 Paul Gough "Cultivating Dead Trees" Essay on influence of Paul Nash on the work of Julian Perry. The Journal of War and Cultural Studies
Andrew Lambirth feature 'Julian Perry' in Spectator magazine. Blueprint magazine 'Opening Shots' September issue.
Ian Collins, *Water Marks; Art in East Anglia*, Black Dog Books, Norwich, 2010.

Catalogue published in 2010 to coincide with the exhibition

JULIAN PERRY : AN EXTRAORDINARY PROSPECT

Held at Austin/Desmond Fine Art, London, 13 October - 12 November 2010

I would like to thank all the experts who have engaged with this project; especially all the people who have contributed their local knowledge at the various sites. Thanks to Evie Howard, Sethy Alamgir and Dean Hearn. Thanks also to Will Self who generously agreed to the use of his text and Professor Paul Gough whose essay helped place the work in context.

JP Autumn 2010

Paul Gough, in composing his essay, drew on writing about Julian Perry by William Feaver, Grayson Perry and Martin Postle as well as conversations with the painter.

Paul Gough's examination of Perry's "Epping Forest" paintings is to be published in *The Journal of War and Cultural Studies* in Autumn 2010.

Will Self's *Walking to Hollywood* is published in September 2010 by Bloomsbury.

Title page photograph: End of Road, Skipsea, East Yorkshire, 2010

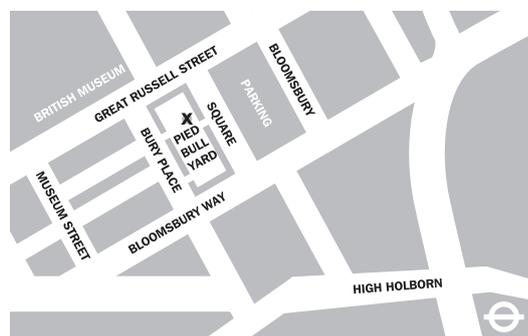
Colour plates: Photography by Julian Perry

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Catalogue Cover Design: John Durrant of BDH

Printed by Healeys Print Group, Ipswich

ISBN 978-1-872926-33-9



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