POST-MODERN LANDSCAPE
THE ART OF GRAHAM OVENDEN

Hugh Cumming

The Valley towards the Moors, 1978

In an era of extreme formal aesthetic experimentation that has embraced such notions as the concept behind a work of art is more valuable than the work itself, or is in fact the work, landscape has not been recognised as a vital field of contemporary art. It has on the one hand either been regarded as the provenance of the outdated and unfashionable or the domain of the amateur watercolourist. In fact the strong romantic association between English art and the natural world is often unjustifiably viewed as a provincial and at best idiosyncratic concern. An artist such as Turner is often valued only because, in certain instances, he was respected by the French Impressionists, and can be said to have anticipated the use of pure colour in abstraction. This ritual purging of the past, which ends in the valuation of only that which seems to relate to the art fashion of the moment, is a superficial action which now ironically has had its day.

At a time when the fashion of the moment is to begin to celebrate those representational and formal values in art that not so long ago were vociferously dismissed, it is vital to distinguish the nostalgic pastiche from the original. Both the recent publicity surrounding the opening of the Clore gallery and the major exhibition of Neo-Romantic art of the 40s at the Barbican attest to a major critical interest not only in British representational art, whether it be visionary or academic, but a welcome reappraisal of the British romantic vision. This can be seen to be synonymous with an international return, whether one calls it Post-Modern, Neo-Expressionist, Transavantguard or the return of the figure, to an art that deals with myth, symbol, the figure, landscape and representation.

The work of Graham Ovenden provides a significant instance of an artist, who despite the fashions of recent years, has assiduously pursued his own aesthetic concerns, resulting in a

Spring Morning, Wiltshire, 1984

body of landscape work that is not only a vital addition to the landscape tradition but is a wholly orginal synthesis of his own imaginative vision and aesthetic values. Ovenden is an eclectic figure who has deep a respect for English artistic, decorative, architectural and photographic traditions. Tradition is not to be understood in terms of the pejorative sense that many of its detractors have given it: for, Ovenden, both as artist and collector, it is what he values and respects.

His value of ornamentation and Victorian architecture can be seen in his own house Barley Splatt which he has built and designed himself; his respect for the colours forms and vision of the English Romantic painting of Blake and Palmer can be seen in his rich powerful landscapes, as can his value of the bright electric and emotive colours of the Pre-Raphaelites; his fascination with Victorian portrait and scenic photography can be seen in his own photography, painting and drawing. It can also be said that the romantic vision, the relation of the natural to a mystical or aesthetic vision, which was celebrated by artists from Blake up until the Neo-Romantic revival in the 1940s, is reflected in Ovenden's own landscape vision.

What characterises Ovenden's landscapes is a dual quality that shows an ability to evoke the reality of a place through draughtsmanship and manipulation of colour, as well as a deep feeling for the spirit of a scene, resulting in a painting that is much more than a view or a landscape. Ovenden has a powerful appreciation of the value of rich colour combinations. This is both a sensual, mystical, and aesthetic appreciation that is vital to his work. His colours are not the dull muted colours of the Euston Road School, nor are they the hazy formless colours of expressionistic abstraction, they are deep rich colours that evoke the sensual mystery of the natural world, as well as being the colours of an original vision. They are visionary or romantic colours with symbolic qualities: essentially they are poetic.

So it is possible to relate his work almost immediately to that of Palmer and Blake, the two most visionary of English romantic painters. In fact some of Ovenden's earliest works relate most closely to some of Palmer's scenes. *Landscape with Moon,* 1963, and *Summer Moon* are rich scenes, evoking the magical and mystical sense of the nocturnal world in terms deep blue, russet and pure white. If it is possible to relate Ovenden's work to this tradition it is also possible to distinguish it. Ovenden does not have the same detailed mythical and figurative vision as Blake nor does he have the same idyllic pastoral sense as Palmer. He has a vision all of his own.

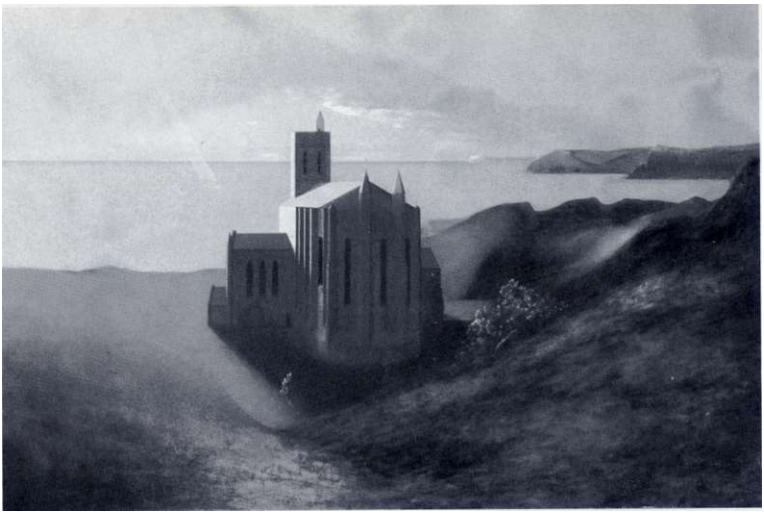
It is interesting to relate his work both to a literary as well as artistic English romantic tradition. Ovenden is also a poet and, like

The Residence of the Philosopher, Kemp, 1984

Blake, has experimented with combining visual images and poetry. The almost pagan mystical qualities of the landscape and its objects is a constant theme. The Victorian writer most acutely aware of this was Hardy, who set his novels near the West Country where Ovenden paints. The presence of a pagan past that exists in terms of monuments such as obelisks and in the very hills, fields and trees of the land is one strongly evoked by Hardy. However Ovenden does not share Hardy's tragic vision. But he does show a similar interest in the mystical resonance of pagan monuments and symbols. This sense can be seen at every level in his landscapes. His evocations of season such as *The Autumn Apple Tree,* 1976, his sense of time and period of the day, whether it is evening in *The Evening Cornfield,* 1976, or the *Valley (Evening near Combe),* the indeterminate half-day/half-night of the *Sentinels of Silbury,* 1982, or morning in *Spring Morning Wiltshire,* 1984, or the setting sun of twilight in *The Residence of the Philosopher Kemp,* 1984, are all evocations of a mood or presence that is part of the scene and part of the imagination of the artist. Whether one calls it romanticism or mysticism, it is an integral part of Ovenden's vision. In *The Obelisk,* 1979, an obelisk acts as the symbolic focus for this sense of mysticism.

Ovenden has given some of his landscapes more explicit religious connotations. *The Tower of Babel,* 1984/5, shows a monolith or obelisk as a Tower of Babel. Here the title of the painting gives a more specific emphasis to the symbolic function of these pagan monuments. In *The Enigma,* 1984, a tiered vision of the skies is given again a more specific connotation by the title of the painting. The fine line of the horizon sets the graded pale world of the heavens apart from the rich deeper blue world of the sea. A pale white form perhaps a mountain or a cloud floats indistinctly in the blue. What we see is a symbol of eternity, perhaps the promise of infinity in the poetic evocation of sea and sky. However, for Ovenden, it is not so crudely specific as that What we see is a mystery, or an enigma.

The Enigma is one of a series of major landscapes of the 80s that reveal Ovenden as a mature original landscape artist. In *Sentinels of Silbury,* 1982, we see the deep rich colours before light fades from twilight and night dominates the sky. The dormant world of the woodland in the foreground leads to the central focus of the painting, which is a dark looming Silbury Hill. Yet the painting's focus is not just Silbury Hill. The clouds floating above the hilltop meet at an apex in the distance that fixes the foucs of attention at point almost behind the summit. In fact the painting emphasizes by means of visual focus a presence that is intangible. The presence is at once part of the scene and is almost something else that lies beyond the material reality of the



All Hallows (The Sea Cathedral), 1983

scene, the mysterious sentinels of the painting's title.

The qualities of trees, both full grown and sapling, are a constant subject for Ovenden's paintings. They often stand as the central subject as in *The Bright Cloud,* 1981, *The Burning Bush,* 1975, *The Autumn Apple Tree,* 1976, *The Great Tree,* 1978, and *The Communion of the Trees,* 1980. The radiant glow of the colourful foliage of these trees is often represented as a ball of colour. The trunks, bows, and branches as well as the leaves, especially in a work like *The Valley Towards the Moors,* 1978 are painted with a clear sensual delicacy. The potent mystical quality of the tree suggested both by its colours and forms is a theme that Ovenden goes back to often. *The Lovers,* 1976, and *The Communion of the Trees,* 1980, reveal their further symbolic value. A work such as *The Druid's Grove,* 1983, stresses more explicitly the significance of a tree or natural scene as a mystical emblem.

Of the more recent landscapes *The Residence of the Philosopher Kemp,* 1984, is one of the most powerfull in its use of rich evocative colour. The title relates to a Walter de la Mare short story. Whether Ovenden is allying his visual stance with that of Kemp or not, the powerful sensual beauty of purple light that hangs around the mountain vista carries the evocative power of the painting alone. This is far more than a natural scene. The particular place has taken on in Ovenden's imaginative representation, a presence similar to that evoked before.

In *All Hallows (The Sea Cathedral),* 1983, another work which relates to a Walter de la Mare short story, the Sea Cathedral rests on the land's end facing the ocean. In the distance a shaft of light beams down on the ocean. The church, like the obelisk of other works, is a symbolic focus at the very edge of a view that separates land from sea and sky. The scene has the same mysterious air of presence created by many of his other works.

In the 1970s when Graham Ovenden joined Peter Blake to form the Brotherhood of Ruralists it could be said that there was a valid attempt to establish a late 20th-century equivalent of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Although many of the artists shared the same concern with a form of romanticism, their work has remained distinct. No more so than with Graham Ovenden whose landscapes are the result of a unique imagination. Despite changes in taste and fashion he has maintained what has now become a mature romantic sensibility. There is no one else like him: the colours, concerns and themes of the paintings are those of a unique sensibility.

The current interest generated in Turner and British Neo-Romanticism goes deeper than the urge to fill empty exhibition halls. The tradition that these artists celebrate each in their own way is one that is a permanent part of people's lives, even more strongly so in an age in which the contrasts between reality and vision have never been harsher. This respect for tradition is one that in the case of Graham Ovenden has nourished a powerful and original landscape sensibility.

A monograph on Graham Ovenden has recently been published by 'Academy Editions, London/St Martin's Press, New York. Ovenden's recent work is on show in an exhibition at the Piccadilly Gallery, London.