

Graham Ovenden

Peter Nahum

Countries, like dogs, have their day: inspired artistic movements emerge to bloom as a poetic vanguard. Japan, India, Germany, France, Britain, Scandinavia or the USA, for instance, have all, in different eras, been the focus of, and influence on the international *a la mode*. What may have been obvious to fewer in the know at the time becomes manifestly conspicuous to the majority in retrospect.

It is clearly arguable that the most consistent and important contribution that Britain has made to the world's artistic endeavours and connoisseurship over the last three centuries has been inspired by a joyous observation of nature, which emerges in all three arts: painting, music and poetry. And this flowering of painting in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries of an intimate and somewhat mystical expression of the humbling beauty of the artists' rural surroundings echoes the illuminated manuscripts uniquely created in Irish and Northern British monasteries over a thousand years before.

Graham Ovenden is a traditional landscape painter in the sense that he makes no attempt to be avant-garde. In the same fashion, he is a man of his time and his images are unlikely to have been created in any previous era. He is, as were his antecedent muses, at one and at peace with the landscape and awed by its gentleness, its power, its spirituality and in wonder at the poetry within a transient snowflake or its dramatic and overpowering presences. This, in itself, does not make great art. To see and feel deeply is one thing, but to have the gift of the gods and the application to express those feelings in a manner which enhances the life of us mere mortals and draws us deep within our private emotions, is quite another.

For to be gifted one great talent is not nearly enough - in Graham's case a photographic memory, an ability to absorb a visual moment in time with all its subtleties and detailed nuances, as Turner did - a turn in the light that takes your breath away before, in the blink of an eye, it has been lost forever. No, nor added to that the ability to draw and paint, making poetic marks and lines that form an entity that can be read and felt by all. No, not even enough is it to hear and play and be moved by the most lyrical composers, nor enough again to read and absorb and revel in the poets - for those talents may be held lightly by those that have them, but they are not given to all. Combine all these with an intellectually curious brain and these are still not enough. For it is only consistent dedication and application to the artist's craft over a lifetime that hones and coalesces these talents into fragile objects of purity, that are imbued with the power to communicate with the viewer to the profoundest level.

Graham calls this process, from conception to completion of a finished painting, alchemy. And I cannot think of a better expression. Making a painting from the first idea, setting down the initial composition in small mono-tonal brushstrokes on a chosen prepared board, and then building the subtleties of mysterious colour balance to reflect a magical moment of atmospheric bliss, to emerge finally over three to nine months later. The paint is laid on with pure glazes, mostly with tiny brushes, using four primary colours of oil paint, but that is not exclusive. There may well be watercolour and almost certainly places where precise draughtsmanship has been laid down in pencil or outlined finely in oil. As the translucent diaphanous layers are laid, over a period of time, one over another they fashion, as in Pre-Raphaelite painting, multicoloured surfaces through which light may pass, to then bounce off the pure white ground, returning to produce, for the viewer, elusively ever changing combinations of colour balance as the

quality of daylight brightens and wanes. Each diaphanous glaze must take its time, over a day or more, to dry before another may be applied. But this lengthy process is not as simple as it may seem, for as the layers build they are rubbed back and added to again, not just with brushes, but fingers and other chosen instruments. Throughout the process, moods materialise, are gently tuned, transformed and balanced with other emerging tonalities. Alchemy indeed; a moon may receive ten or more applications of white glazes before it shines with the definitive intensity or the glow of dusk. Light changes with each new application of layered colour, from gentle to misty to mysterious.

Each one of Graham Ovenden's paintings reflects a differing degree of light and atmosphere; just as those that nature infinitely creates. When we, those that know his work and those that are seduced for the first time, have the privilege of seeing a group of his landscapes, there will always be one to favour our mood and transport us. The evocation of one of these momentary encounters may conjure up an intimate memory, a descriptive passage from Thomas Hardy, a movement by Elgar or a sonnet by Shakespeare. For our perception of nature and its poetic celebration by others must by necessity be interwoven, and these entwined elements are as much part of the lyrical components of Graham's paintings as is his glory in its actuality. A short conversation with him on Romanticism in Britain and Germany produces a rapid fire check-list interwoven with inspiring commentary:

A E Housman	<i>Children's Songs and Poems</i>
Wordsworth	by Walter de la Mare
Robert Burns	<i>A Prisoner in Fairyland</i> by
Walter Scott	Algernon Blackwood and
Thomas Hardy	set to music by Elgar as
M.R. James	<i>The Starlight Express</i> (1916)
Richard Jefferies	The rediscovery of Folk culture in
Gilbert White	the 1840s and 1850s
George Herbert	Music & songs & dances of Britain and
Elgar	middle Europe
Vaughan Williams	Emily Bronte's <i>Wuthering Heights</i>
Frank Bridges	High Romanticism
Edmund Rubbra	Wagner
Peter Maxwell Davis	Shakespeare and Goethe and Heine's
Benjamin Britten	poems
John Clare	Goethe: <i>Erlkonig</i> 1782, set to music by
Walton	Schubert aged 18 in 1815
Percy Grainger	Loewe
Delius	Otto Beamish
Henry Purcell	Caspar David Friedrich
Handel	Rembrandt landscape drawings and
Denton Welsh	etchings
William Morris	Rubens landscapes
Samuel Palmer	Ruisdael
William Blake	Durer's Landscape study of water, sky
Blake - Thornton's <i>Virgil</i> - woodcuts -	and pine trees (British Museum)
<i>The Corn Laid Waste</i>	The Book of Kells
Paul Nash	

And these are only jumping-off points to explore the rich hinterlands of interpretation, influence and counter-inspiration where poetry and reality intermingle. For conversation with Graham Ovenden is always enlightening and revealing. He wears his self-made scholarship lightly and donates it freely and without condescension. To while away a few hours with him is always an enriching delight. I once remarked that when I thought about his out-of-focus edges, where the leafy outline of a tree is seen *contra-jour* against a gentle evening sky that it reminded me of Vermeer, whose softly myopic and mysterious interiors result perhaps from previewing his subject in the *camera obscura*. Whereupon Graham replied by beginning to describe his in-depth observations drawn from studying Vermeer's techniques first-hand. His small studio is always alive with music played from his extensive collection of early recordings, where pastoral symphonic idylls counterpoint with the soulful tones that originated in the sugarcane fields of slavery. The very first 78 recording that he chose for me from his extensive collection was 'Careless Love', a long-held favourite of mine which I first listened to in the 1960s; an extraordinarily perceptive and unprompted choice on his part. However, my version, which I play often, is by Otilie Patterson & Chris Barber recorded in the late 1950s, whereas his, the original of 1925, is by Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong.

Early recording is only one of Graham's scholarly interests. He was one of the first academics with a comprehensive knowledge of the Arts & Crafts Movement, from Augustus Pugin to Ernest Gimson, not only revelling in *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), but its antecedents and influences. His library burgeons with original publications not only on these subjects, but also early photography, his first love. As a young and lauded photographer in the 1960s, he developed the tools of his trade in the darkroom as well as the fresh air. These skills have re-emerged in the new millennium in his use of the computer, where he creates enchanted imagery which materialises as elegiac giclee prints on archival paper or lettered and bound publications, all "hand-made" by the artist. This contemporary manipulation of his classic photography and draughtsmanship, combining his knowledge of Owen Jones' *The Grammar of Ornament* with contemporary design, has spilled back into his more recent landscape painting, where the dreamlike qualities of the landscape are enhanced by a contemporary vision. (*Autumn Moonrise* 2007)

Sotheby's pay failed to stretch that far. In fact my first purchase was his iconic *Ophelia* (1979-81) which I bought in 2000. My wife's first reaction to this honest and revealing portrait was one of slight shock and incomprehension, which, on better acquaintance, was soon replaced by one of admiration and respect. This is a common initial reaction which many people fail to overcome, for what we require from our greatest artists is a deep dug honesty of thought that we are often in denial of ourselves, such as Lucien Freud's female nudes, both vulnerable and post-coital. Graham's young girls, on the other hand, reveal the intermingling of the vulnerability of innocence and the very first learnt behaviour; that of discovering and exploiting the cracks in their parents' armour, a determined seductive manipulation of their love and weaknesses. *Ophelia* is all the more initially shocking as its carefully applied Pre-Raphaelite detail and glazes are displayed in the language of contemporary advertising, thus making perhaps too raw and immediate a statement to the contemporary viewer, who almost certainly expects to be protected by the familiar artificial and sugary language of Victorian genre painting. But perceptive modern statements nearly always take their time to mature in the viewing public's eyes.

This purchase and the next, a glowing little landscape entitled *The Secret Valley*, which we covert, led to our first meeting, and since that time he and his family have enriched our lives on so many levels. Not only do my wife and I intimately live with many of his paintings, but his artistic perceptions and far reaching scholarship have enhanced our appreciation of our own artistic world. And so, in turn, have his fellow Brotherhood of Ruralists: his wife Annie, Graham and Ann Arnold, David Inshaw and Peter Blake. Graham Ovenden's masterpiece, *Sentinels to Paradise* (2002-3), homage to Paul Nash,

hangs in our bedroom. Its inherent and intangible spirituality not so much waxes and wanes, but deepens, enlightens and transforms as the light changes from early morning clarity through evening softness to deep night enigma.

Our world at The Leicester Galleries is populated as thickly as we can make it with symbolist and visionary artists, those whose perceptions, however subtle, travel far beyond the merely decorative, and so Graham becomes not just a perfect piece in the jigsaw, but a real inspiration. We have handled works by Turner, Constable, Palmer and Blake, the Pre-Raphaelites: Millais, Holman Hunt and Madox Brown and their symbolist brothers, Rossetti and Burne-Jones, along with their European Symbolistes counterparts, Gustave Dore, Gustave Moreau, Paul Gauguin, Eugene Carriere, Leon Frederic and Odilon Redon, the forefathers of the Surrealists, who we also handle. Those monumental 19th century British landscape painters who dig so deep into their poetic vision, inspired by 'England's Green and Pleasant Land', have many followers in the 20th century, but the two giants who stand head and shoulders above their admirable colleagues are Paul Nash in the first half of the century and Graham Ovenden in the second.



135. GRAHAM OVENDEN (1943-)
*Through the Window of Mine Eyes
or the Communion of the Trees*
oil on canvas, 950 x 1220 mm
Peter and Renata Nahum

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Graham Ovenden describes his work thus:

Fugue - 'The flight of the parts' - within the severest architectonic structure we may achieve the greatest spiritual freedom, and thus the intertwining pillars of vigorous growth stand as portals framing the infinite domain of Eden...

The intense luminous deepening of the night sky, the symbol of our ever-future search into the greater mystery of our universe.

The full moon and attendant sky being the symbol not only of unsullied grace but also the fecund benediction of the reflected sun, thus our sensuality is made whole.

The lower light of the evening sky tells of the journey towards paradise, the 'garden of grace', which lays always just beyond attainment: an unrequited longing touched by the edge of anguish.

The soft luminous sward that is the garden of our spirit, cultivated through light out of the coming darkness - the compassion of Pan's domain ever loving in its fulfilment.