

# L A U R I E   L E E

Graham Ovenden is a natural-born artist of acute originality and grace who has captured regions and perceptions unmistakably his own. Nor are his intense appreciations of the world restricted to a single medium: best known as painter and draughtsman, he is also freely involved in the practice of music, poetry, photography, design and the precise discipline of architecture.

Ovenden was an instinctive and self-directed artist from his beginnings; whilst still a child he was filling sketchbooks with both imaginary and direct drawings from nature. Amazingly, by the age of twelve - having heard Wanda Landowska on the wireless - he had built for himself a full scale harpsichord in good order and decorated it lavishly in the Claudian manner. This could, perhaps, be one of the earliest examples of his particular obsession: a love of harmony, yes, and of light and form which he has steadily perfected throughout the years. He is a man who not only reflects a world he wishes to see, but has also created from it keen and personal perspectives.

It was some fifteen years ago when I first came to know Graham Ovenden's work, at a one-man show at the Piccadilly Gallery. I had wandered in by chance and was immediately entranced, not only by the brilliance of his landscapes, but also by his audacious explorations into almost forbidden territories - among them a series of paintings of young girls, some nude or semi-nude, veiled by bands of shadow and light, whose faces, neither blossom-pretty nor waif-like wistful, showed that they were wiser in their brooding provocation and contained sexuality than any of their adult observers.

The reproductions in this book show some of these, together with the whole sweep of Ovenden's other skills and affections. We see here the full range of his landscapes, unexpected, unsentimental, but arresting for their luminous passion; studies of trees, the form of their roots and branches surrounded by a radiance of leaves and light. These landscapes belong to no other painter. Most of them are of the far West Country, many of them idyllic, others bearing the mysterious imprint of fearful man's presence on this land and the former life of the rocks.

Ovenden persuades us that these landscapes are also portraits - there is mood and character in them. But it is the changing flow of light, set against the steadfastness of tree and stone, that seems happily to engage the artist, so that we see expanding cloudscapes, sweeps of water and waves, and often that brightest rural goddess of all - the fertile and inconstant moon.

Indeed the occasional presence of the full moon, basking above this rural amplitude, reminds one of the artist's acknowledged indebtedness to the oblique influences of his youth, Samuel Palmer and William Blake, and later, Graham Sutherland and Paul Nash. Even so, he is not an artist overstamped



*The Lovers*, 1976

by influences. The world he offers comes from his own original vision, a romantic classicism wrapped in well-tempered truth.

The collection of works shown here, spans roughly thirty years, beginning with darkly observed photographs Ovenden made in the late 1950s reflecting the damp light of Rotherhithe and the East End, and an age of aproned street-children playing ancient games none of which will ever be seen again. We also have his figures in landscape, his superb portraits and his nudes which, as he says, 'are also primary portraits. Most nudes in art are little more than cyphers, bloodless clichés of complacent technique, all similar as garden gnomes. Ovenden's nudes are portraits, in that they are acutely observed studies of personality at exact points of time, each subject separate and caught in a moment of fate. They have names and faces, and the faces are often trapped in the suggestive stance of the body, as if not yet belonging to it, or not ready to acknowledge it. For the most part they are studies of young girls, at the time of questing, calculation, uncertainty and power, when the fluent prepubescence of mind and body has not yet been locked into a stiffened maturity.

This is one of Ovenden's outstanding gifts, the way in which he delineates with such tender perceptiveness the wayward witcheries of some of his younger models. Whether in pencil, paint, charcoal or conte, this lightness of touch and originality of view is visible throughout his work. In his *Alice and Lolita* prints, for example, a series of slumbers surprises, neither pretty nor shocking but haunting in their sombre assurance - young visitors of night and dream; while his book illustrations, particularly those for *Wuthering Heights*, are of dimensions the book only hints at.

His work in pencil can be as light as gossamer, but often conceals darker shadows beneath. This poetry also has an assured lightness of touch which sometimes hides far deeper implications. Graham Ovenden is a masterly enigma. There is no one like him. He is an artist of penetrative innocence who still rules his own private island. And this book is part of its treasure.