

Graham Crowley makes strange hybrid pictures, which draw upon traditional forms but reinterpret them with a contemporary spin. He paints landscapes and flower pictures, mostly modest in size, but large in ambition. The artist pursues a new reality: Crowley offers more clues, less overt description and absolutely no symbolism.]The paintings are tougher and paradoxically more modern than ever before, though, as he gleefully says, they are guaranteed to offend any 'O'level modernist.

Covert religious or literary meanings are definitely out.

Crowley proposes a new reading of time-honoured genres: specifically a new reading of the rural and the floral. No longer is place metaphor, nor mood inspired by landscape. No longer are flowers a mere sub-division of decorative still-life painting. The tone of these images is determined by the demands of painting, and by the authority of the artist. The subject matter becomes a pretext for seductive paintwork. Yet Crowley is still dealing with particularized appearance, so much so in some instances that he puts in what he calls »banknote minutiae«. But the paint surface interferes with the image, interrupts it, and vice versa.]This also helps to focus attention nicely on the objecthood of the pictures.

Distance intrudes on foreground – which is which? – in the way that a surface mark »representing« background detail will break up the contour of an up-front tree-trunk.

Traditionally, landscape purveyed a pure innocent vision of romantic sylvan glades, idealised scenes from a mythical Golden Age. It was as if the land offered some hope of redemption. As Simon Schama astutely comments: »Landscapes are culture before they are nature: constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.« Everything depends on what we want to read into nature, and fashions have changed. Crowley is very much against genius loci and all its implications. Not for him Pope's 18th century invocation to »Consult the Genius of the Place«, nor its latterday interpretations at the hands of Paul Nash or Graham Sutherland and the Neo-Romantics. He is all for specifics and atmospherics, and for setting up a formal dialogue between lucidity and atmospherics. His range of enriching reference is wide: besides the spread of mainstream art history, Crowley refers eagerly if obliquely to such sources as 1930s book illustration and duotone Rhodesian stamps of the 1940s.

The ostensible subject of the landscapes is Rineen on the west coast of Ireland. Crowley overlooks a broad prospect of forest and field, river and scattered dwellings. Through different layers of space, conveyed in varying bands of colour, trees appear like clumps of fur, twigs like hieroglyphics. The trace of the brush vies with the identity of the land. Does Crowley paint this terrain just because it's on his doorstep? No, he chose to live there,]

or at least spend a good part of each year there

and he has built up a highly individual relationship with this particular locality. His paintings service that emotional and practical rapport.

Flower arranging 6 70" x 60" oil on canvas 1998



Here is a deeply intelligent painter at work, difficult to categorize. Consider the whole question of technique: Crowley employs different approaches to suit different ends. Wet into wet; a one colour ground with a second colour wiped over it; grisaille. Much of Crowley's practice is in the overlap between painting and drawing. The landscapes on canvas contain diagrammatic drawing to locate the chief elements before the impasto is stippled, pressed or dragged into becoming figure and ground at one and the same time. Crowley achieves convincingly the textures of rough-cast concrete or corrugated iron. He also sets up a counterpoint between what's already drawn in the impasto, and the effect of the colour washed over the top. Each performs a different function, and their dialogue initiates another fruitful tension. If you hold a painting up and move it through different lights, the image shifts accordingly from sense to nonsense, from configuration to chaos. Crowley relishes these ambiguities.

The human element in the landscape is restricted but nearly always present. Telegraph poles bestride the scene, but not in the grand manner of pylons. Rather, their wires and uprights conduct a useful articulation of space. They knit the picture space together as well as punctuating it. Even more effectively, their presence counteracts the picturesque. They indicate man's central place in the community of Crowley's paintings. In the face of untamed nature man is relatively unimportant. But this is cultivated land, the rurality is by no means extreme. It is tamed and controlled - largely - though into this decorous domain insinuate wild beauties like the serried mud swirls as the tide eddies and recedes in the estuary. These in turn echo against the mowing rings in other paintings. Houses, or rather their gable-ends, are touched in with decorative pastel accents of local colour. In other places, wild highlights on tree-trunks foregrounding a view give a febrile aspect to nature. One painting features a bungalow with pretensions to be the Parthenon, caught unkindly in a lurid satiric light.

Crowley is an acute cultural observer, and this awareness seasons his art, at times providing its rationale. He's been painting flowers in this distinctive and beguiling grisaille since 1988, and the impetus to do so came from seeing a faded bunch of flowers sellotaped to a lamp-post in memory of a young man who had been killed nearby cycling to work. After that first sighting, Crowley began to notice similar tributes, more and more frequently.

As he says: »It was as if the boundaries of private grief were being redrawn, expanded.« The sea of cellophane-wrapped bouquets which overwhelmed London at the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, was confirmation, if confirmation were needed, of the changing role of flowers in public manifestations of private suffering.

Does Crowley paint from nature? The vases exist, but the vast majority of the flowers, with their wonderfully rococo stems, are invented. Moths and flies, indicated by scattered blips of white or black, fugitive smudges, tumble over the surfaces of the grisailles. They serve to indicate the scale: in relation to them, these flowers are huge, magnificent. Note the direction of the light: there are good complex reflections, while shadows spread and linger weightily. There could be something spectral about these paintings but they are reassuringly physical. Crowley likes making things.

There are ten small monochromatic canvases besides larger paintings and drawings. First Crowley draws and models his subject in white impasto. When this is dry, he glazes the surface with Paynes Gray and Charcoal Grey, perhaps over Cobalt Violet. The glazes account for the refulgent luminosity of these pictures. Sometimes the neutral greys diversify into other one-colour combinations – hot-house reds or yellows. Here the illusionistic naturalism of the Vanitas painting or the Momento Mori is subverted. What meaning does Crowley ascribe to his pictures?

Flowery painting has for long been regarded as a bit-part in the gangster hierarchy of art types. It's not considered serious art. With one or two notable exceptions – and Fantin-Latour springs inescapably to mind – flower painters have operated at the popular end of the market. If you want an alternative to the reproduction Constable, you buy a nice flower painting.<sup>1</sup> Crowley, of course, in his role as style historian, finds this marginalization fascinating. He subverts the expectations we have of flower painting – where for instance are the lovely colours? – and reaffirms its status as a lively and innovative genre. He makes the paintings work against the nature of the subject. Gorgeously decadent, disturbing, questioning,<sup>2</sup> Crowley makes flower paintings apt for the late 20th century.

After his 1940 internment as an enemy alien, Kurt Schwitters had two main sources of income in Britain: painting portraits and painting flowers. When he moved to the Lake District, the portrait commissions dried up and he relied on flower paintings. The great Dada-ist and poet of Merz was reduced to entering his pictures for the local art prize. Happily, for the sake of his finances, he won.

<sup>1</sup> is this art supposed to be celebratory or not?

Crowley can draw like the wind. Look at the flowers done in compressed charcoal layered over with polymerised alkyd resin. The dense blacks are wonderfully recessive, the marks assemble like iron filings. When working on board or canvas, much is drawn or inscribed with the wrong end of the brush. Crowley's other principal method of drawing is by removal of the paint – wiping off. And everywhere is evidence of his sheer delight in the activity of painting: licks and turns, all manner of incidents in the paint, a much relished sensuality of application.

He says he spends more time removing paint with a rag than actually applying it.

Graham Crowley is no artless optimist, but neither is he a cynic. If the post-industrial landscapes and exploded interiors he used to paint – and came to prominence with in the early 1980's – have more of cacatopia than utopia about them, there is nevertheless an irrepressible joy and insidious hopefulness to these new paintings. There is profound love for the medium – for its history and its present position, for its facture and techniques – evident here. And there is belief in painting's future. Above all, these images are instinct with personality – who but Graham Crowley would have invented such beautiful fictions?

Andrew Lambirth | London | October 1998