

’ “You see it, Watson?” he yelled. “You see it?” ’

Obedying the first law of animation, the objects in Graham Crowley’s paintings – tooth-brushes, chimney pots, gasometers, radios – are exaggeratedly true to form. Compulsive behaviour is second nature to them. They are caught in the act, tin-opener lockjawed, 100w filaments engorged, twiglet TV aerials crossing swords. Out of sight, monitoring the hysteria, there’ll be dinning burglar alarms.

It has taken Crowley some years to reach this pitch. In the course of the Eighties, a period of government-sponsored freebooting in the private sector, he has – like all of us – seen social differences aggravated. On the one hand the world of commercials, in which the deodorants roll sweetly and shiny appliances do the jobs; on the other bristling decay.

‘Britain is always being rebuilt’, wrote the anonymous author of a booklet accompanying the R.I.B.A.’s ‘Rebuilding Britain’ exhibition at the National Gallery in 1943. ‘Constantly the face of Britain alters, although, like our own face in a mirror, we may not notice it day by day. Man’s surroundings alter because he makes them in order that they may serve him. They are a reflection of man and of his changing way of life’.

Crowley’s ‘In Living Memory’, a five-part painting,¹ traverses rooftops and landing, exposing a house to ordeal by flashlight. Toys lie abandoned walls and give way, as in a studio set-up. A net curtain veils the end of the sequence. This is the latest and most elaborate of a number of panoramic introspections.

‘Reflections’ (1983), comprising interior and exterior views through an imagined South London window, side by side like the double-spread of an open book, was the prototype. Indoors a do-it-yourself hammer and electric drill leap into action of their own accord. Outside, buildings cower under a threatening sky. ‘Poor Reception’ (1986) is Brixton again, this time a closely-packed confusion of housing stick and wireless apparatus.

The gliding approach of ‘In Living Memory’, the mirrorings and other reversals, suggest a dream state. This is the sort of London visited by Gustave Doré in the 1870’s, a nightmare London of almighty warehouses, crowded washing lines, thick rigging. The grey backyards

¹ plus sunset strip

seen from above in his ‘Over London By Rail’ were, to Doré, a nether region filled with life’s victims; cubicles from Dante’s ‘Inferno’.

A lesser space Embracing, so much more of grief contains.

Districts untouched by the planners, enclaves of unruly privacy: these inner-urban vistas are the Britain observed by George Orwell heading North in 1936 on ‘The Road to Wigan Pier’, the ‘labyrinths of little brick houses blackened by smoke, festering in planless chaos round miry alleys and little cindered yards where there are stinking dustbins and lines of grimy washing and half-ruinous wc’s’.

Years later Winston Smith, born in 1945, rented a hideaway alternative to his 7th floor flat in Victory Mansions, ‘a room which did not give on the street but looked out on a cobbled yard and a forest of chimneypots’ in the heart of prole London. There, in furtive assignations, he found love; not for long of course, for it was 1984 and the Thought Police were bound to pinpoint him. ‘It was at night that they came for you, always at night’.

‘In Living Memory’ is to do with basic fears: the bolt-hole blown open, the shadow creeping up the stairs. It spans the childhoods of Crowley himself and of his elder son Robin, now five. The painting was provoked by Robin’s reaction to the news that another little boy, John Shorthouse, had been accidentally shot dead by a policeman searching a room. The officer had thought that what was lying on the bed was just a heap of rags.

‘Something crashed onto the bed behind Winston’s back. The head of a ladder had been thrust through the window and had burst in the frame. Someone was climbing through the window. There was a stampede of boots up the stairs’.

Orwell’s 1984 was a projection of London in 1984, things getting that much worse. Britain had become Airstrip One. ‘In Living Memory’ has planes strung overhead, Airfix types, propeller, jet and space-shuttle, the forces of Oceania, as it were, heading for home. Helicopters too maintain surveillance in the blue darkness.

Crowley’s 1986 comes at the end of forty years of ‘Rebuilding Britain’. The two nations of Doré’s London are altered but there are still fixed positions. It’s still the London of ‘Little Dorrit’: ‘Nothing to see but streets streets streets. Nothing to breathe but streets streets streets. Nothing to change the brooding mind, or raise it up...Miles of close wells and pits of houses, where the inhabitants gasped for air, stretch far away towards every point of the compass’.

Yet this is also the scene of animation. To a child all objects have their own vitality. To Arthur Clennan in ‘Little Dorrit’ – and to many other Dickens characters – articles of furniture were lively old friends. ‘There was the large, hard featured clock on the sideboard, which he used to see bending its figured brow upon him with a savage joy when he was

first of the post-war
baby boom

born 1950 – one of the
last of the post-war
baby boom

behind-hand with his lessons’.

Dickens, like his early idol George Cruikshank the caricaturist, knew that just as clocks could gloat chairs can dance and chimneypots assume lordly airs. In popular art, from fairground to fairy tale, there’s no time for inertia. Animism frees the spirit.

The opening shot of Walt Disney’s ‘Pinocchio’ brings us in over a sleeping town to land, in a brilliant feat of multi-plane camera navigation, outside Geppetto’s humble workshop through the window of which dozens of ingenious wooden toys can be seen clicking away. Crowley’s use of drawings cut to shape – chimneys, trucks, light bulbs, bits of Lego – as variables to swap around when accumulating a composition is comparable to the super imposition of cel on cel in the Disney studios. But he is both the Claude Coats, designing the Geppetto workshop backgrounds, and the Milt Kahl, devising appropriate movements for the animated puppet-boy Pinnocchio. Each painting is a dramatisation; each one has its special effects.

There is the peculiar glut of ‘Spider with Mushroom Soup’ the tap as big as a capstan, the screech of the tortured tin as the cheese-grater drools. There is the defenceless toothbrush in ‘Light Fiction’ at that moment when the light-bulb shatters but its reflection in the mirror shines on. Simultaneity is more than a pretence in these circumstances; it’s a twinkling of perception.

James Rosenquist’s 86 foot long ‘F111’ of 1965, is another sort of formal departure, a spray-painted scrap-screen filled with lightbulbs, angel cake, a child under a hairdryer, tangled spaghetti, all immaculately presented, as on a billboard, with the fighter plane looming throughout. Rosenquist’s paintings have no overt meaning, as a rule; they convey a sense of whopper wonder and market strategy but that’s about it. The mixed up images are treated as the largesse of a land of plenty.

Crowley has had his Rosenquist phase. In the mid Seventies he was a spruce formalist but by 1981 the slats and curves were identifiable as grotesque particulars, for his retreat from abstraction was accomplished under cover of pastiche and jocularly. Fingers and buttons materialised in ‘So and Sew’ together with thread that was more like rubber hose, snaking through a range of influences: Patrick Caulfield, Stuart Davis, Gris, Picabia, Leger. The excitement clearly lay in creating illusion. Instead of working on disassociative ground Crowley found himself opening doors into pictorial space.

His 4,000 sq foot mural on the back of Pitt / Scott’s warehouse, facing the railway line outside King’s Cross, was his most Rosenquistic feat. Bolts and spanners, a hand proffering a ticket and a lopped tree float on a corrugated surface, bold and cheerful: Hi Diddle Dee Dee on a huge scale. From this was a disconcerting stylistic plunge into chiaroscuro. The paintings grew more complex in theme and execution. Where previously colour had carried the weight, now there were glazes, tinting grisaille. Suddenly the decorative impulse was

subdued and the energy became disquieting. Crowley seemed to be recognising himself as a Prodigal Son of the age of Modernism, unschooled in traditional practice. His task was to work his way towards convincing representations.

Hence the heaving and popping and caricature astonishment. Crowley battled on the home front, uprooting fixtures, switching lights on and off, tugging curtains aside, tweaking and unplugging. He began his indoor/outdoor pairings. He laid on spectacular shadows.

One had come to expect that pop subject-matter should be treated in more or less pop manner; that's to say with plenty of airbrush and decal finesse. Everyone from Rosenquist to Peter Blake tended to assume that some sort of photo-realism was in order. Crowley's washes of pink or blue, his pursuit of showy baroque effects seemed at first perverse, a wilful flouting of one sort of brashness for the sake of another. But the key difference between the passé Pop of the Fifties and Sixties and Crowley's growing attitude was that he never just itemised; he set scenes.

There is a disgust with prevailing circumstances combined with a relish for everyday things in Crowley's mature paintings. He lets rip, painstakingly, yet also aligns himself with the moralistic tradition in British culture traceable back to Hogarth and Defoe. His saws and hammers, fallen cups and violated toasters are akin to emblematic trophies, the brooms and broken palette of Hogarth's 'The Bathos' and the vital bits and pieces Crusoe saved from the wreck. Each composition begins with preconceived assortments. He brings on the spasm or crisis by degrees, leaving the colours until last. There is room for improvisation but on the whole he proceeds methodically, knowing that to be expressive in painting means not being slapdash.

We are what we inhabit, conditioning sees to that. Thus the crumpled blankets on the bed could be a body; the house stripped of its outside walls is oneself exposed. The lines scored across the unfocussed image on the TV screen erase someone else's idea of the truth. 'In Living Memory' is an unwieldy vision. The violation of rules the disconnected joists and tricks of scale leave one guessing. In the dark heart of the painting a body dangles; behind the net curtain a piece of Lego, seen in perspective, recalls last summer's helicopter shots of Chernobyl.

After the Blitz it seemed possible for a while that London could be reconstituted along lines suggested half a century before by Ebenezer Howard in 'Tomorrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform'. Setting the faults of the towns ('Closing out of Nature, Isolation of Crowds, Army of Unemployed, Foul Air, Murky Sky') against the drawbacks of the countryside Howard came up with the ideal compromise: the Garden City. Post-war policies resulted in New Towns for some, tower blocks for others and, for the rest, as before. Crowley's perennial cityscapes, his eaves rimmed with barbed wire, his chimneys spouting defiance of the Clean Air Act, are states of mind, every broken window pane a splash of violence, every

the fruits of
mass-production

the massaging of roofs,
the plop of moonlight
across the bed

'Lack of Society,
Trespassers Beware,
Lack of Amusement,
Deserted Villages'

twisted aerial a sign of imperfectability.

Yet, like Bill Woodrow investing used good with cut-out transformations, Crowley treats his household effects as potential phoenixes. There's an obvious delight in the twists and turns of metaphor, the ramifications of allusion. Brixton sleeps but still the helicopters buzz, the lights burn, the TV drizzles on. It's the witching hour when, in even the most innocent minds, horrors stir. A door opens, a floorboard creaks, a ventilator hisses.

'The instant that we heard it, Holmes sprang from the bed, struck a match, and lashed furiously with his cane at the bell-pull.

“You see it, Watson?” he yelled “You see it?”

What happened at Stoke Moran, that night, when the snake insinuated through the ventilator turned tail and dealt with Dr Grimesby Roylott, is what happens in so many Crowley paintings.

'On the table stood a dark lantern with the shutter half open, throwing a brilliant beam of light upon the iron safe, the door of which was ajar'. Panic strikes and we are transfixed.

William Feaver | 2002