

# Ian Jeffrey on the Paintings of Graham Crowley

## Why paint?

To see what the painting looks like after a while or when completed. It might be a surprise, or just as you predicted. A lot would depend on choice of topic. On the other hand you might have a transformative treatment at your disposal. Take *Tragumna*, for instance, on the south coast of Eire. Seen in photographs it looks like anywhere else on western coastlines, but here it is energised and redeemed by brush strokes and strong tonal markings.

There is some kind of challenge involved. What is it? Take the workshop pictures. Any workshop contains a mass of stuff, shelved or heaped, ready for use, if it can even be found. A workshop can be a labyrinth, or a complex moment in time with half-finished or just-begun items. You couldn't do justice to everything, or to much in particular, but you might give an impression of workshop movements and of varying scale – nails, screws, spanners, lathes and so on. So, there is an element of virtuosity involved – the artist gives an impression of apparatus and elements. I could add to that by saying that the pictures look, in most cases, like stripped or flayed versions of original sites, cleared of tangible surfaces down to the ligaments. You might say that the sites are played over/replayed in a fast, sparse tempo, complemented by and contrasting with many examples of sagging wires, pointers to gravity – at *Rineen*, for example, and at *Tragumna*.

## What is he doing? Is there a sub-text?

Yes, there is a redemptive element. Take a garden shed, for instance, usually the embodiment of decay. Garden sheds, exposed to the weather, lapse (collapse) into the earth. They come to pieces and sink, as a rule – the felt blows from their roofs and door-hinges rust. They epitomise a kind of suffering in old age, neglect and mistreatment. Painted in fast monochrome they are brought back into active life, part of the circulating swirl of stuff on the round windswept earth. I would say that there is a planetary feel to a lot of the imagery, close to weather-charts under surging fronts and gouts of cloud. It is an energized (temporal) view of the surface of the earth subject to squalls and to changing light effects. I am reminded of Constable's cloud pictures complemented by stationary windmills – and by TV weather charts traversed by arrowheads and by scraps of cloud – and by the amusement arcade on Felixstowe Pier where you can imagine yourself attacked by whizzing armoured monsters and screened space-ships heading off screen in your direction.

Sometimes I repeat to myself that Donne's sonnet re. "The round earth's imagined corners" in which there are a lot of shifting forces, seething lists in relation to reflective moments. In the paintings I got/get a sense of the average world of garden sheds, Irish villages and workshops in Hastings taken over by palpable floods of light directed from off stage. In some cases, flooding light is emphatic – in some of the closing pictures in the book – *Houses at Myross* for example, from 2004.

## Dogs and Birds?

There are scenes in which he features dogs and birds; blackbirds in several instances and terriers on garden steps. I can easily recall blackbirds scuttling about, keeping an eye on me and looking for shelter, in case of a turn for the worse. Dogs, too, keep their eyes open as they negotiate paths and steps. They move by fits and starts and represent watchfulness. They embody a kind of rhythm. I was looking at a slow worm the other day: uncovered and surprised, it paused to take stock of the situation and after a few seconds moved off through a jigsaw of rotted wood. I was watching a play in time, or a play with time – suspension into animation.

A lot of the pictures have this kind of arrangement – a sweeping fall of coloured light around houses as static blocks. In many of the pictures there are lines of detached fence posts for example, or ascending steps or echelons of shed roofs. There is an invitation to count, that is to say, andante. Skies, brushed in beyond, serve as a continuo. The workshops in this context are interesting because of their scrambled sections, often in a context of drooping wires and loose spring motifs.

## Why not just paint abstracts?

Because of the uncertainties of actuality/real life. You don't find rhymes and patterns so easily as you go around on average business. They are there, maybe, but you might not always respond to them. There is something arresting or surprising about seeing compositions drawn from average or passing life. Is there some kind of congruity or relationship between common culture and a changing rhythmic undercurrent? Do we live, unknowingly, with reference to proportional ratios, even at Jaywick Sands – Britain's most deprived location?

What the artist is dealing with is a kind of possibility – something you might test, even on a commonplace day anywhere.

I.J. 2023-11-08

*Ian Jeffrey is an art historian, writer and curator.*