

Workplaces & Wildspaces

Graham Crowley in correspondence with Joanna Whittle



Graham Crowley
A Love of Many Things
2019
Oil on canvas

there is something there – an emergence that has not been there before – a better understanding of the work but always with the fluidity for inflection and evolution.

04/10/20

GC: Blimey – what an amazing painting. *The Machine* is great. It abounds with cultural and visual references – not least of all the famous episode of 'The Twilight Zone' that featured a classic galloper. In your version the horses have galloped off. The allusion to rain or the aftermath of a cataclysmic event, like a flood – the 'machine' rising like a swimmer with wet hair.

BTW. Many thanks for your kind words regarding *A Love of Many Things* – and my statement. In the statement I mention that painting has the potential to become 'remote viewing'.

Have you ever watched the film 'Primer'? If not – try and catch it asap. Yes, it's lo-fi – the dialogue is often unintelligible – and yes, the 'plot' is abstruse and frustrates. Nonetheless (as it's only 70 minutes) it's watchable. The reason I mention it is that it throws up many parallels with painting – and the idea of remote viewing. NB – Do not Google and try and find out about it. In fact, you should actively avoid trying to gen up on it prior to viewing. Last night Sally and I watched it a second time – but somehow 'enjoyed' it more. Once you've watched it, you'll see why I mention it – and the connections with 'looking' at paintings.

In your email you make a fascinating observation about an emergence that has not been there before and I recognise this in myself and my current paintings. What I believe you're describing is the confluence of several factors; experience, opportunity, a maturing of understanding, sustained desire, facility – acquired through diligence and practice and finally self-awareness and self-belief – which are not to be confused with self-confidence.

26/01/2020

JW: Beautiful and unnerving at the same time – the pulling in different directions, horizontally and vertically – displaces and unsettles.

Talking about painting is important – and reading your conversation* reminded me of this and how it invigorates the work. It's the richness of discussing something motile and lucid in both its physicality and in its underlying discourse. It both eludes and sits heavily in itself and it never fails to astonish, after years of pushing it around, that it can still and always surprise by throwing something out of a blankness – a refusal to comply and how it sits while it spills out into illusion, like an hallucination.

Thank you for the comments about the work. I do feel that



Graham Crowley

Tiernan's 3

2021

Oil on canvas

physiology) and the repeated motif of the garden path – with blackbirds and sparrows.

Near Lough Hyne – marks vibrate and writhe across the surface like Henri Michaux's mescaline drawings from which a landscape emerges unruffled and expansive.

Traces of Asbestos 2 – the construction of sheds, plank by plank with a flat brush, each stroke bringing about conviction. The light in this and the shadows cast could be from a hot, stark sun or the cool shadows laid down on a late summer night. And a brush splays into the sky.

Tiernan's 6 – I love the left-hand side of shadow, surface and line, and the way the room recedes backward and the beautiful simplicity of light which authenticates each mark into a tool.

Joanna Whittle

The Machine

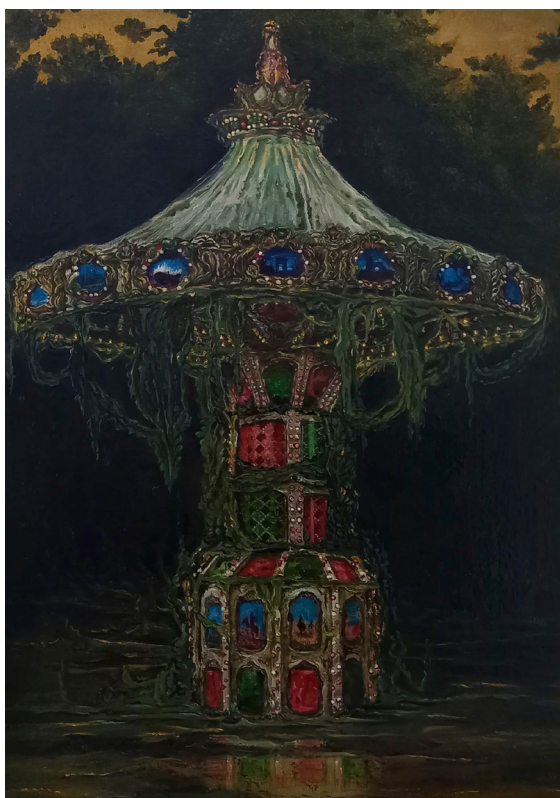
2020

Oil on canvas

Regarding 'remote viewing' I think you are correct. Even on these screens paintings unravel and expand.

And what you say about the emergence (you are correct it is a confluence of these things) these elements suddenly appear to converge and collaborate to create a new understanding which is indefinable but definitely there. I think it is a commitment to belief.

Thank you for the comments about *The Machine* – I like the comment about it emerging like a swimmer with wet hair. The machine itself is a 'Waveswinger' – this one was in Sheffield and I was hypnotised by it. The way it moves is so disturbing and quite deranged – everything seems to move in different directions, and it seems possessed and malevolent. I think by subduing it with weeds and mud it became briefly less frightening but as you say it seems to be re-emerging, re-animated. I love the decoration on them – these strange worlds painted within jewelled windows. Really enjoyable to paint too.



05/10/21

GC: Many thanks for your amazingly generous email. I intend printing it out and keeping it somewhere safe. Your observations are some of the most intelligent and insightful my painting has ever garnered. But I must now take a breather as I don't want to simply perpetuate the appearance of these paintings – I want the next group of paintings to develop the themes and echoes that are beginning to emerge. I thought your mention of Henri Michaux was spot on. Have I ever mentioned the ink drawings of Victor Hugo?



Graham Crowley

Tiernan's 6

2021

Oil on canvas

The more I paint – and the more I think, the more significant and influential I now realise Samuel Palmer to be. Without Palmer and Blake, British painting wouldn't be what it is today. As much as I love both Constable and Turner, it's Palmer I think of most. Of all the (many) paintings that Sally and I have hanging in the house, it's your two that I 'see' most and reflect upon most. You seem to be able to make paintings that exist on the threshold of the apparent and the invisible. I believe that's what people are seeing when they look at your paintings – whether they're aware of it or not. You can make your intentions visible without trying to depict them. BTW I know one of the Thomas family that are responsible for the best funfair/showman (Flamboyant) painting that you mention. Rowland Thomas used to work in Ian Shipley's marvellous book shop in the Charing Cross Road.

06/10/21

JW: Thank you for saying that. I feel strongly about your work and find it difficult to put it into words. I agree about the necessity of a breather – it is essential after an intensive period of work. I think otherwise, as you say, there is always a risk of perpetuating an aesthetic, which stifles the development of those emerging echoes.

I have not thought about Victor Hugo for some time, and it was good to look over these ink drawings. Some of them are amazing with such deep inky, puddling shadows. And there is something about Samuel Palmer – bucolic but unsettling somehow.

And thank you again for my comments about the paintings. I am so glad to think of them in your home and more pleased to have two of yours. I look at them so



Graham Crowley
Workshop, Hastings 4
 2022
 Oil on canvas

through process. Painting is always truly magical to me – even on those slightly disappointing days when nothing remarkable happens. They are the good days for watching the weather.

10/10/2021

JW: I hope you are well, and I hope your show at Jugg Art went well. Karen put some pictures on Instagram, it looked like a fantastic exhibition. I love this one Graham.

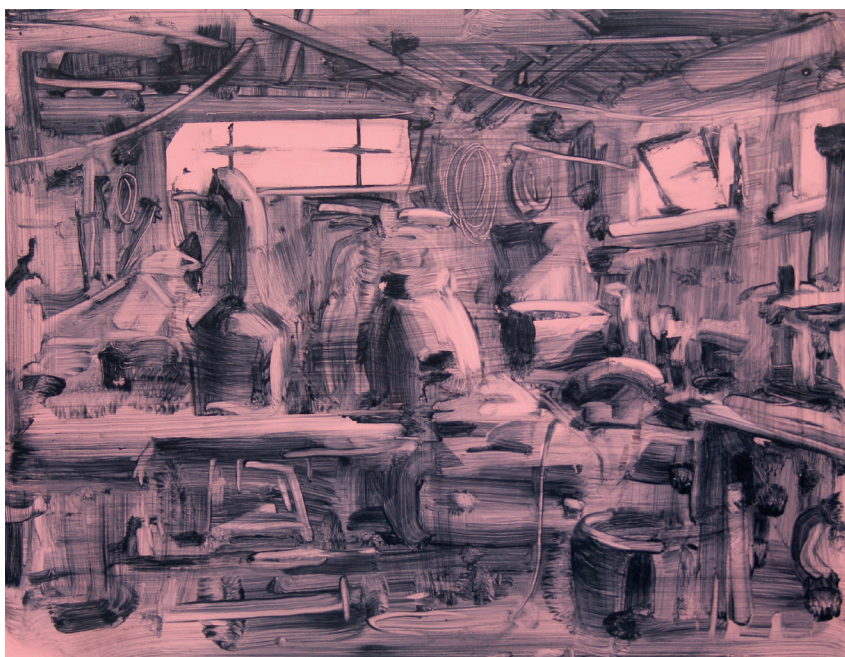
I love the almost abstracted space – a rectangle of paint. And then looking into a space and through a space back to the outside and behind of it. Beautiful Graham.

GC: What a lovely surprise – and such kind words. They're much appreciated. Many thanks.

I've attached a couple of other recent paintings, the best of which is *Tiernan's 6* – a large (152 x 173cm) oil painting that manages to strike a balance between image and object (i.e. the painting being its own object). Referential and non-referential; I think that makes sense. I think it's probably one of the best paintings that I've ever painted.

Graham Crowley
Dark Arc
 2022
 Oil on canvas

JW: The way *Meth Factory* and *Dusk Moths* vibrate within a painted rectangle, their borders shimmering between surface and space.



often. They communicate so differently yet feel part of the same dialogue. When I am painting, it is very odd in that the paintings are so unplanned; embarking on one is both daunting and slightly daring. They are so time-consuming and arduous at times, but I embark on them with very little planning – like a mountaineer setting off to scale a mountain with just a bobble hat and a couple of bits of rope. But this lack of planning is essential to avoid the illustrative or a forced direction and I think many elements of the paintings are made in a near state of automatism. Decisions are made almost despite themselves. It doesn't always work out but when it does the painting becomes a very unique thing – 'other' to the creator, yet completely imbued with their presence

And you are right, *Tiernan's 6* is a fabulous painting – I think it's the way in which the surface constantly fluctuates – marks float, disembodied in abstract space and smeared in the surface, like a vitreous floater on the surface of the eye, interceding between the described world and the sticky surface of the eye... and the painting. Then almost as certainly as they swim across the surface, the marks shudder and move back into space, casting shadows on walls and suddenly gaining vertical weight as illusionistic gravity pulls them into place, hanging from hooks and ledges, coiled and re-embodied. Fantastic and fascinating painting Graham, and really what I love about painting, the way it squirms and shifts before your eyes, forever eluding stability and always the tension between



Graham Crowley

Blue Roof

2020

Oil on board

material, surface and illusion and the floundering of perception.

GC: Many thanks for your very kind (and thoroughly insightful) words. You're absolutely right. You've captured quite eloquently what seems to be happening. Every time I look at *Tiernan's 6* I see a slightly different image. Your observation about floaters is spot on. If you stare long and hard the experience of seeing becomes fluid – indeterminate. I genuinely feel that I'm close to making something that's synonymous with the experience of seeing. This may sound daft but I'm reminded of the late work of Arshile Gorky with its constantly morphing elements, where identity seems

elusive and thoroughly ambiguous.

P.S. Attached is *Flower Painting B* – painted without using a brush.

JW: I can see the links to Gorky. I think it is in the constant movement, a juddering and fluid perception which flicks and almost fizzes. These sparks of perception constantly on the edge of becoming or unravelling.

Flower Painting B is beautiful Graham, small round pools of sherbet colour which sit circular on the surface and defy gravity. There is such an oddness too without the use of a brush. The familiar unfamiliar – looking like painting painted with a brush, and then somehow the marks skid out of focus and you can't find the streaks of a brush through paint. Very clever but also intuitive and golden glowing.

12/12/21

JW: I think your teaching** in the early days of my practice has enabled me to evolve, to have a quiet faith in the endeavour of painting and maintaining dialogue with it so

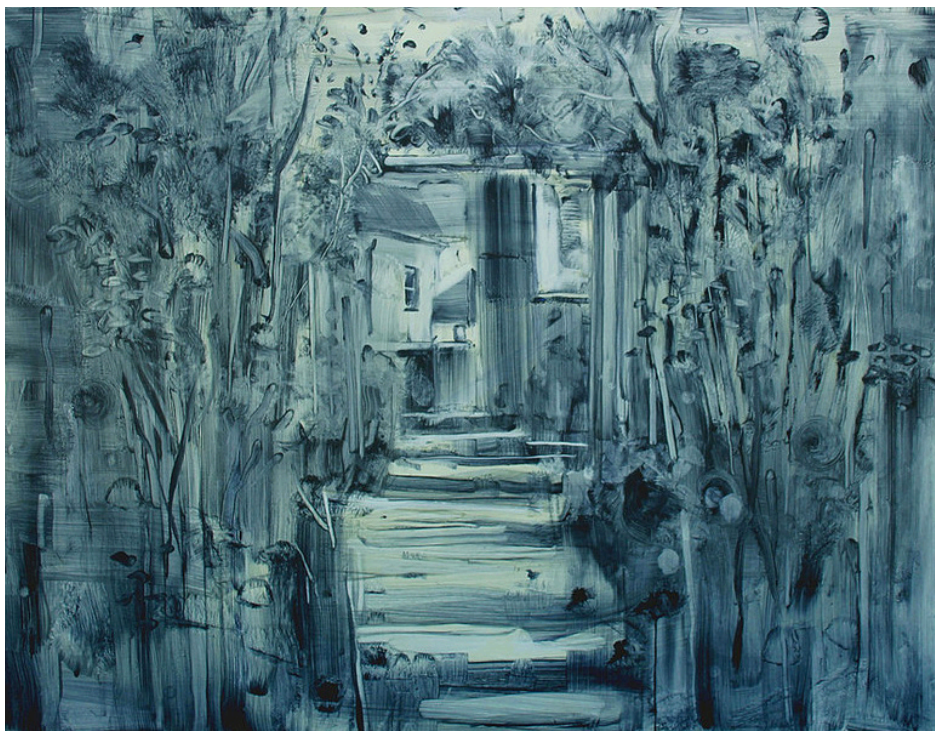


Graham Crowley

Post War (Orford Ness)

2019

Oil on canvas



Graham Crowley

The Blackbird

2020

Oil on canvas

think that all painters should study your paintings to understand the reflex of painting, the modulations and inflections. It's not the simplicity of gesture, gesture seems a banal phrase in your relation to your work. Your paintings are as utterances of paint itself and there is something about the workshop paintings too, this sense of silence which is somehow a deeper silence due to the falling silent of machinery and tools – imagining wood dust floating on motes of light or paint. And finally Graham, the smudges of dogs at the base of a vertical layering of landscape, each mark opening out shadows beneath trees and the wetness of grass.

08/01/22

JW: Thank you for the images and as ever, I love to see the paintings, the slip and glide and their illuminated underbellies. I love your *Tiernan's* paintings Graham, there seems to be so many worlds within this one site – expanding. *Tiernan's 6* seems to open out into a landscape on its back shelves where dust, motes, tools and shadows move beneath our gaze to form trees and hills and strange islands with heavy moons, with the whole painting surface blossoming with mildew like paint blooms. Dust and paint speaking of the same quietness and wood. Whilst the surface of *Tiernan's 7* resembles a staccato form of morse code, of blunt little signifiers punctuating the surface in the removal of paint. Like a secret cold war missive to be laid over a coded panel. Beautiful paintings.

Joanna Whittle

Sorrowing Cloth

2020

Oil on copper



GC: I forgot to mention that *Workshop: Hastings 5* and several other recent paintings sometimes remind me of the work of Edward Ardizzone – his bomb sites and prefabs. His work often leaves me with the sense that experience invariably dwindles, becoming visual memory.

JW: Well, now that you mention the Ardizzone works I can see that reference. I think it is that essence of presence. The lightness of touch both in mark and palette in both. The present almost washing away before one's eyes, already traversing the surface into past. A moted loneliness. Not muted, moted. As the dust settles on the present, making of it a past.

*My conversation with Judith Tucker in Turps No. 23.

**Joanna Whittle studied at the Royal College of Art, 1998-2000, while Graham was Professor of Painting.

that this venture is approached with an implicit agreement.

It is so lovely to see this version of *Tiernan's*. The subtle modulations of change with each painting, a forever exploring of this space, it becomes a place which seems to wait quietly for your return, a site for exploring the nature of painting. Frozen in time, it feels like each mark can be inspected in its suspension.

The new Hastings Workshop pieces, the beautiful, flattening zig zag of stacked boards and strip lights described as strips of light themselves in the removal of paint, seeming also as if it was done with a neon marker and its flat chiselled nib. There's always that wonder with your work where the absence of paint becomes light. I