

Martin Greenland's Selected Fictions

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Martin Greenland paints compound images involving the English countryside, arrangements of memory that have more to do with imaginative reinvention than with straightforward recording. 'I'm not interested in sticking to the topographics of things', he insists. 'My paintings are all about my experiences with places. But then I'll get an idea about a place I've never been to before in my life.' A substantial part of his painting practice is maintaining the capacity for surprise: at what he sees in the landscape and what his brain will throw back at him in response. The ideas that accumulate around the subjects that fascinate him have been the impulse behind his latest group of paintings, perhaps the most assured and inventive of his career.

When he's not in the studio, Greenland takes long walks, wandering over his favourite countryside, observing it in all moods and seasons, by moonlight as much as by day. Although he doesn't want to be seen as a landscape painter, preferring to be thought of simply as a painter, he marines in a sense of place, or rather a series of individual places that particularly appeal to him. He sometimes draws during these excursions (he doesn't take photographs), but mostly he looks. In terms of information-gathering, Greenland makes drawings to find out about things, how they piece together, and how their appearance may be rendered. But he doesn't use these drawings as source material for the paintings - that would be too direct a procedure. He needs to transmute his observation in front of nature through the burning glass of memory and imagination.

The impetus behind Greenland's paintings is much more of a modernist endeavour than the traditional approach to the depiction of pleasing countryside. He composes, he invents. Greenland's roots are in many art forms, from Symbolism to Surrealism via Realism and Romanticism. He paints ideas and feelings about the context in which we find ourselves and live out our lives. His work seems always to be concerned with the penetration of light into darkness; or to reverse the proposition, with the determined emergence of light from an all-encompassing gloom. Although he ostensibly paints dark pictures, he is a dab hand at the braiding of vegetation with light, or at spilling light subtly down the most chasml landscape.

Water is also an important source of light, in the way it moves through landscape - in pursuit of the easiest route to the sea - dropping down and worrying at the rock, flickering and glinting, throwing back light from its ever-moving surface. See the wild whirling of *To the River Duddon* (ill. inside front cover), one of the darkest paintings here, inspired by a Norman Nicholson poem. Ironically, Greenland's painting began in full spring sunshine and was originally very bright and colourful to look at. But the artist had something else in mind. 'I saw what it could have been', he says, and began to repaint his canvas with a darker vision altogether. As he freely admits, he made up the whole form of the landscape, but it is nevertheless true to the feel of the river, splitting, tumbling and levelling out down the valley. Don't overlook the mysterious point of light, far back on the left amid the trees, like a candle-flame placed in a window to guide the wanderer home. This is a poignant and poetic

motif which reappears in Greenland's paintings, seen here in lively contrast to the cascades of water like smoke tracing out the space of the painting.

Or a more craggy terrain, sexy with water moving through it, the strangely titled Primitive Landscape (ill.pp.4/5). Here is a landscape that goes back a lot further in time than the recent industrial past, that could belong to the dawning of the world. And yet Greenland is also ambivalent about depicting something so unequivocally ancient, and has painted in a jet plane to bring a taste of the modern into view. At least, there's a paint mark in the top left third of the picture which could be a jet plane, though I'm not convinced that anyone would read it as such unless tipped off by the artist to do so.

Yet it's undoubtedly true that this Victorian quarry has a prehistoric quality to it, besides being oddly reminiscent of a favourite Cézanne subject - the rocky outcrop surrounded by pines. A real mixture of signals emanates from this painting: there's a strong Nordic element, but this is balanced by a pastoral Italianate feel to the subject. (Note the dramatic framing of this classical composition.) Yet it remains firmly rooted in the locality Greenland knows and loves so well, the North-West of England. On the left is a pine, on the right pine and oak with larch breaking in. This is not a portrait of a place, but an imaginative reinterpretation, its characteristics channelled through the formal dynamics of picture-making.

In National Park, consider the skill in the mixing of colour in the depiction of the hills and outcrops, with the pale green of sunlit grass masking the warmer, redder tints of earth beneath. Notice the precise way in which the folds and declivities of the land are taking the light or dropping back into shadow. This wonderfully subtle drama is counterpointed by a communications mast and attendant hut on the left of the landscape, and an edge of a reservoir. Not for Greenland the editing out of the unpicturesque. He doesn't feel the need to record urban sprawl but does like to interject traces of man's presence in the landscape: buildings, roadways, evidence of technological advance. In fact he has a penchant for what he calls 'sub-industrial landscape turning back to nature'.

In another curiously-titled painting, From the Voyage of the Somnambulist (ill. inside back cover), the viewer's eye is carefully guided by the artist: we look as

were through the gap in the foreground stone wall, down the suggested path and through the main space of the painting to the tall house with the red awning in the background. In addition there are three other focal points: pinpricks of light to catch the roving eye, lamps in the dark wood. If this seems to suggest something out of Narnia, there is no corresponding hint of whimsy here. Rather, there is an underlying spiritual optimism to the work: nothing so overt as a stated faith, but a reassuring glow of possibility amid the deep Prussian blues and greens sifted with shadow.

Compare the wintry mystery of Ghosts. The alert viewer, on first looking at the livery of the trees might deduce the season to be autumn from the warm coppery tints of the leaves. But on this kind of detail, Greenland is strong. The beech keeps its leaves until late in the season, into December. This strange haunted landscape derives from a memory of an old airfield on top of a plateau in another part of the country. Again, there is a lamp standard like a sentinel, which although it signals life, here also seems to suggest mortality. (The light can so easily be snuffed out.) Perhaps the memories of the place, the wartime flying missions so often ending in violent death, have soaked the land with melancholy.