

"LIFE SEEMS MORE COMPLETE WHEN THE
MYSTERIES ARE WELCOMED IN":
AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN HARWOOD



FUTURE GHOSTS II (2020) OIL ON CANVAS

Stephen Harwood is a painter who lives and works in Hackney, East London. His work is concerned with a London that exists beyond the rhetoric of politicians and the calculations of financiers, but which is scarred by their machinations. It is a London that shimmers with a makeshift intensity, and gestures towards a haphazard mythos. It is the best of times, it is the worst of times. Peter Ackroyd has said of Harwood 'There are few painters who have so well divined the true life of the city and, by an act of astonishing intuition, have been able to unite the past and present, mythology and reality, in artistic communion.' Stephen kindly agreed to be interviewed for this issue of *Undefined Boundary*.

UB: Your work is intensely focussed on a sense of place but I don't sense that you operate within a hierarchy of place (e.g. that the pastoral is valued more than the urban). Do you consciously have to dispel certain preconceptions when embarking on a work, or do you naturally approach places with a sense of openness?

SH: I do try to approach and deal with the landscapes of east London with a sense of openness, and I very much hope that I am generally led by the place itself, rather than by a literary idea or someone else's invention or mythology of it. I believe places claim certain people – I just ensure that I am around to be claimed, meaning I am active in the landscape, and free to observe and explore it. I suppose 'open to it' is probably the simplest way of describing how this process starts.

I often don't know the full story of what I am making an image of, and I prefer it that way. I recently received an email from one of the last surviving squats in Hackney which, unbeknownst to me, I had painted. I had no idea of what lay behind the brick wall and mysterious little door, I was merely painting a location I was attracted to and I wanted to say something about it. It's very difficult to explain that kind of pull

I experience from somewhere; it sort of reaches out... Anyway, he told me that he had come across a postcard reproduction of the painting, and that they all loved the picture in the squat - it was a very emotional email. Of course, had I knocked on the door and ended up chatting, it would have opened up a whole backdrop of stories and personal connections that I would have no choice but to consider when painting the picture - I therefore think sometimes the less I know the better because then the fabric of the place is able to work its curious magick upon me and I can examine it and pick it apart or build upon it. Of course, my own stories and history become enmeshed within it, but I generally think the work is stronger when I am free, as far as possible, from the stories of others.

Graffiti plays an important part in your work. These strange writings and symbols seem to take on an almost oracular importance although their meaning is often not clear. Are these strange daubings a type of instinctual magick carried out by those who have no place in the official metaphysical order?

I often recognise the same markings and signs - the same names, which crop up again and again in varying locations. In many ways, it's the reverse of what I am doing. The landscape claims me, and I record it - I almost do its bidding, in that way; the graffiti writer works in the opposite direction, by seemingly attempting to claim the place for themselves by branding it with names and tags. I think it is important to include the tagging because it carries a tremendous weight of memory and experience of the lives of people passing by and through the place; the tags appear to me like scars or bruises upon the landscape - evidence of lives lived. Some are years old and barely visible, still inscribed on the place but faded - somehow lost in time; most are new and ever changing - layers upon



STROUDLEY WALK, BOW (2020) OIL ON CANVAS

layers. Often a landscape will look very different a few weeks or months later simply because of the changing graffiti and street-art.

Beyond this kind of claimed ownership of place, it is interesting to think of tags and graffitied markings as being magickal in some way... as active shapes that may bring about change or focus concentration. Thinking of it in that direction, many certainly look like sigils or as though they may carry some kind of occult significance; I agree – they are not part of anything we might recognise as occult or metaphysical in any organised sense, but they undeniably carry their own power and potential for meaning.

It is a curious compulsion, to make these signs out in the

landscape - to mark upon it. I do sometimes wonder who made them, and where they are; I am aware that the markings are deeply personal - certainly when I am painting them I feel as though I am copying somebody's signature. I try always to remake their signs in paint as correctly as I can, because although they are totally unknown to me as individuals, and its language is somewhat closed to me, I have no wish to be disrespectful.

**Is there an esoteric class war taking place in your paintings?
Or in the country?**

My work is underpinned by what I think of as a network of tensions, which pervades much of Hackney and east London. In recent years I am aware that property developers contribute to this tense atmosphere in no insignificant way, and that such development sets up dynamics and situations in and around the place, on ground that is already loaded by change and history. Hackney Wick in particular, once full of factories and businesses, and artists' studios, in cheap, unused industrial buildings - had its first wave of gentrification for the Olympics, and has changed further and more dramatically still in the last ten years. It is now almost entirely residential, rather than the working place it once was, and it naturally follows that the only people who can now live there are those with adequate funds, certainly in the new apartment blocks. Interestingly, in recent times it's also become a nightlife hub, where once it was almost entirely deserted, other than for workshops and artists and others who needed inexpensive space, particularly at night. Now, people from Essex and the outer-reaches of east London, actually from all over London, practically pour into it at weekends: it's a fashionable destination.

From my perspective, these conditions seem to press down on the place, like some kind of enormous, inescapable

BECK ROAD (2020) OIL ON CANVAS



psychic compression, yet the atmosphere in east London is compressed already, having endured more than its fair share of movement and history. For me, the area has always felt more active than other parts of London – more vital, if that makes sense. Psychically of course the place is tumultuous, crashing, full of chaos and collision – but full of colour, humour and life too, and something of that music hall jollity will always remain – it is the backbone of the place, as well as much of its heritage.

My predicament in my work is to try to capture these tensions – both the more obvious bricks and mortar, concrete changes and processes we can all see on the ground, as well as the hidden, less tangible eddies, that swirl and pull beneath the surface of the place and that ultimately make it so persuasive.

In the paintings, it seems to manifest in the sense that something is about to happen, or is already happening beneath the surface. I am interested in the area very generally but I am attracted to specific locations in the midst of change, often that's why the skies are in flux or turmoil - it suggests movement and atmosphere. A sunny day or a blank blue sky just doesn't have that same level of drama; there are sunny days in Hackney of course, but I'm not interested in painting it like that – it just doesn't come anywhere near to what we might call the truth of the place. It doesn't begin to suggest the sort of energies playing out in places undergoing change and gentrification. I see it as my job to try and reach the truth of the place as far as I possibly can.

I always think I'm on the edge of failure with it, that it can't really be done; but then someone will tell me how much a picture means to them, like the email I received from the squatters I mentioned, and suddenly it all makes sense again. And I suppose that is a kind of success. But in art it's probably better to be fighting and searching rather than merely coasting - it generally means there's something important to say and it matters how it is said.

I'm fascinated by the way your work depicts painted surfaces and other painted glyphs. In a recent work, *Martello Street* (2022), there seems to be an upward rush of yellows, from the double yellow lines, through the painted fence and the graffiti, to the tower block. A similar movement occurs with the whites of *Make The Rich Pay for Covid 19* (2020), from the zebra crossing, through the graffiti and the black and white striped pole, to the window frames. Each of these elements belongs to a different category of public and private ownership and each has a differing legal status. Do you think of colour as being a unifying element that can transcend mundane distinctions?

Yes, very much so. Colour can unify and impose a balance, and something like a pattern or movement, on what looks to be rather dull and familiar; and although I am making paintings of everyday places, there is a transformative process. It also, rather prosaically, has to be visually interesting, meaning I very much hope my work captures the eye and helps it to move around in the space of the picture, spending time with it. Of course the colours are heightened, often reinvented entirely – but hopefully it works when it comes together in the painting.

Many painters make their work deliberately unclear, so that it becomes a sort of intellectual challenge, and I'm very much against this. I want my pictures to be as easy to read as possible, clear and recognizable, so that it doesn't matter who or where you are you will see something there; whether you know about art or not, whether you are a tramp, a drug dealer, an MP or an art critic you can have a dialogue with it. I never wanted to make pictures where the technique, handling and surface is foregrounded, so that the subject melts into the background. The result would be that only people who know about art, the look and feel of contemporary art, could engage with my work, and I see this as deeply limiting.

Many of your paintings depict buildings that are boarded up, shuttered, or fenced off, as though you as artist and we as viewers are obstructed from the subject of the work. Is this a constructive obstruction that should alert us to the ongoing transformation of public spaces?

I am led to such places because these locations are often the focus or subject of change or will be in due course because often the buildings are dormant or awaiting redevelopment. As images they are quite suggestive and aggressive - we are obstructed, as you say, by gates and chains - and these boarded up buildings, which are all over east London, do contribute to



MARTELLO STREET (2022) OIL ON CANVAS

what I call an air of agitation.

London is constantly changing - the east end in particular rarely stands still for long, and you can't say you love London yet also be against its transformation. There are many London commentators and artists too, for that matter, who prefer to live in the past; constantly battling for a rose-tinted east London that never existed, even portraying it as though a veil has been thrown over the realities of the place. Technically it may look like east London but it's not: it doesn't have the life of it, either on the surface or what we may call its inner life. I want my pictures to show the dirty corners, the weeds and the dogshit, but also the beauty, the mystery. Also, something of the past should be detectible in the present and the future should look as though it's about to pounce on the image and hijack it.

When places change, there are winners and losers. I always say I am not using my work to make a comment on whether change is good or bad - the paintings are not political in that way, I merely present the landscape as I find it.

There is often a lack of human presence in your work, but the human traces can always be found whether through residential buildings, graffiti, or road markings. Did you become more aware of this tendency in your work during the Covid lockdown when the streets became eerily empty. Is there anything to learn from lockdown?

My lockdowns were filled with walking, for many hours, many days; somehow the quietude of lockdown, and the freedom of its silence, with less of the usual patterns and distractions of life, brought the place more into focus. It became more keenly-felt, perhaps. It also felt like an opportunity to do things differently and I enjoyed straying from my usual haunts and well-trodden paths. For no reason at all, other than some sort of inner compulsion of course, I would wander down through

Victoria Park to Bow, past the old Bryant & May match factory - now, like so many former industrial spaces, an apartment block; or The Greenway, if the mood took me, with its high vantage point and views of changing industrial east London.

Sometimes I would head in the other direction; I become very interested in Commercial Street, where I drew and photographed the lonely facade at the corner of Elder Street and Bishopsgate Goods Yard several times, encased in scaffolding like a condemned prisoner and now smothered by acres of new development. Or the Hackney Road, where the former shell of the Joiners Arms pub caught my eye; now tattered and forlorn, covered in graffiti - a former late-night dive that was once gloriously alive. Importantly, one of the great things about lockdown was that with little traffic I was able to draw and record details of buildings standing in the middle of the road which I am not usually able to do very easily.

Looking back, I can see that I became more interested in forgotten and undiscovered places: hidden corners and forgotten backstreets; previously in my work the buildings were more central and the area surrounding them perhaps less defined, less examined.

The series *Journey to Avebury* was inspired by the Derek Jarman film of the same name. There is also a side-project to this series inspired by the opening titles of *Children of the Stones*. Both films were shot at Avebury in the 1970s and in very different ways they each attempt to explore a speculative mysterium around the stones. There seemed to be a very intense engagement with these subjects in the 60s and 70s but I feel that some of the intensity was dissipated with the explosion of punk. Jarman was obviously keen to incorporate magick into punk and there were other associated groups (Current 93, Psychic TV) who were also trying to revive/

preserve magickal ideas and practices. But I can't help feeling that we have lost a 'naive' openness to occult ideas. Do you think we could benefit from a revival of popular esotericism?

Yes, I do occasionally divert to other locations. I haven't really thought about it too much, but I think it is probably useful to sometimes escape the chaos and entanglement of east London, but also the entrapment of an obsession. I enjoy shifting the lens slightly – and transposing it to other landscapes, other worlds – and often it is this reverse side of my engagement with east London that allows in the stories and influences of others.

The *Journey to Avebury* series actually started as a tribute to Derek Jarman. Derek liked my work, although this was years ago so it was in a very early stage then; that said, I was painting about London in the early 90s, Hawksmoor churches and Spitalfields and so on – which I was led to by the fictions and mythologies of others - so he was familiar with some of my early London pictures and very encouraging. I wanted to show the *Journey to Avebury* series somewhere appropriate, and Geraldine Beskin at Atlantis bookshop, where Derek was a regular customer and friend, agreed to host a show in their basement; I called the show *Visions of England*, and also included scenes of Dungeness and paintings made from Derek's film *The Garden* and his wonderful Super 8s.

I have also made pictures of Beachy Head, that beautiful suicide spot which also connects to Throbbing Gristle's *20 Jazz Funk Greats*, although I've never been there. Also The Devil's Chair on the Stiperstones, near where I grew up in Shropshire – folkloric ghosts and Mary Webb's *Gone to Earth* which was set in the area and later filmed there by Powell and Pressburger – and a number of paintings and drawings of the captivating landscape of Dungeness, again in homage to Derek and his influence.

Certainly I think some esotericism has become quite



JOURNEY TO ANEBURY 346 (2013) OIL ON BOARD

popular – particularly since the 80s – where the only place I could get information as a teenager was the Sorcerer’s Apprentice occult supply / mail order shop in Leeds, and 1970s witchcraft books at the local library. But it all seems rather thinly spread and a bit cosy, and a certain kind of wicca-lite seems to be the order of the day, but I suppose some dissipation of originating energies is inevitable on a large commercial scale. That said, on the flipside I think darker, more searching energies are thriving; Coil’s music has never been more popular and it’s being looked at again and again – there is probably more information available on Coil now than there ever was when they were with us in body; independent publishers such as Strange Attractor are going from strength to strength, publishing Austin Osman Spare and Ithel Colquhoun, and there is an enormous cult around walking and landscape / place, which I think has grown steadily in recent years, much of it in

the mainstream of things but at least it brings about an awareness of looking and the atmospheres around us. So perhaps there is more than one revival happening it's just that the frequencies differ?

Like many people, I think life seems more complete when the mysteries are welcomed in because asking questions and thinking about what is real and what is not is more interesting than living without some sort of added awareness. Surely the more crazed and fractured the world becomes the more we will look to ourselves and our place / position within it. And really, ultimately, I think this is what exploring landscape and place is all about – our situation in the world.