

## Clive Head

### The Parlour Paintings: Working During the Lockdowns



Angling in a Narcissistic Landscape 2021 oil on canvas 34" x 48 ½"

On balance, artists are better suited to work within the constrictions imposed by lockdown than the rest of the population. The majority work on their own, often in studios in their own homes. That is my situation, my studio is the former billiard room in an old manor house in the English countryside. My daily routines of domestic and studio life were largely indistinguishable in 2020 from those of 2019. But my creative practice was affected in no small way by the lockdowns.

Of course, beyond the studio, the visual arts were greatly disrupted by the cancelling of art fairs and the closures of galleries, and without the usual channels to generate sales, it was a worrying time for many painters like myself. I had an exhibition scheduled in the spring of 2020 in Boston, for which I planned to travel out to the US. This was postponed and finally ran in the summer, but it was impossible for me to travel, and all the events that surrounded that exhibition were cancelled. Restrictions worldwide in travel and prohibitive shipping costs inevitably saw the explosion of online exhibitions. For the most part, these platforms for contemporary art were assembled from digital images of artworks that remained in artists' studios.

Over the past 3 decades that I have been active in the commercial, contemporary art world, I have seen many changes in the forums for art sales. The decline of gallery shows, with less and less footfall in recent years has been countered with larger and more diverse art fairs, some rather more viable than others. And with the digital revolution, the shift towards virtual exhibitions has been touted as the future of art sales by many. By default, this became the only means to present art in the past year, with varying levels of success. But entering 2021, there was a tangible degree of fatigue with viewing art solely online and precious few sales. Perhaps, with some return to normal life, at least in the UK, we shall now see a greater appetite for visiting galleries again, and that decline in attendance which forced many to close long before the pandemic, will be reversed. I hope so. Living artists need commercial spaces where they can put on experimental and complete exhibitions. Fairs don't offer these opportunities to the same extent. During the lockdown, I resolved to put on an exhibition of new work as soon as the galleries were permitted to open. "The Parlour Paintings" is an exhibition of all the paintings made during the lockdown in a new space in Fitzrovia, London taken on by the Pontone Gallery. Behind the scenes, in the depths of the pandemic last year, I introduced the gallerist to the landlord and am delighted to be able to support this venture through this solo exhibition. My hope is that this is one new space that emerges amongst many which returns the art lover to the gallery.

"The Parlour Paintings" were begun at the end of 2019. My initial thoughts were to make paintings that could hang in a domestic setting. The nature of my paintings demands that the viewer spends time with the work, and that they are gradually unpacked over months, if not years. I wanted to ensure that their final resting place would more likely be on a wall where they are frequently seen, than a warehouse from which they get the occasional outing. The series consists of 22 paintings, the largest being less than 130 cms in its longest dimension. The previous series consisted of pieces that were more than 3 metres in length.

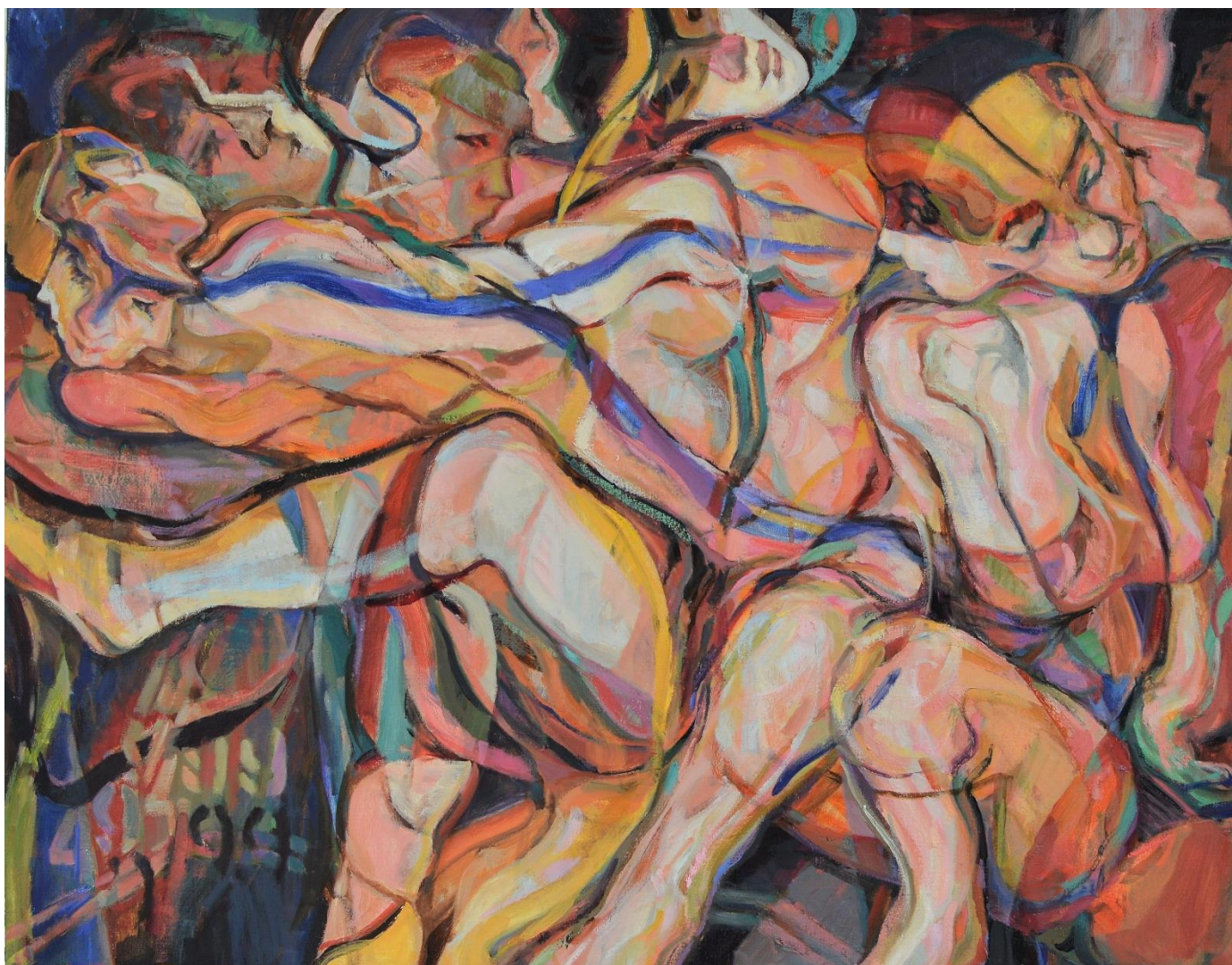
This emphasis on painting for a domestic space gained greater significance during the lockdown. For nearly all of us, our home environment became our total universe. And the very notion of a "Parlour Painting", an artwork not just for decoration but to be the subject of discussion, more fully extends the role of the art museum into our homes.

The first Parlour Painting is very different from the last, revealing a development throughout 2020 and into 2021 that can be accounted, to some extent, to the lockdowns. Although my routines did not substantially change, the orientation of my life in relation to the world beyond the studio was fundamentally altered.

As with my former Marlborough colleague, Frank Auerbach, I paint every day. Auerbach has spoken of how the regular visits of his sitters to the studio connects him, through their stories, to ordinary life. The norm of Auerbach's routines though is not ordinary life. The activities of the studio have a unique and extraordinary function of giving voice to an artwork. As with Auerbach, I would not regard the studio as just a workshop for manufacturing art. It is a distinctive chamber that is separate from ordinary life, but that very distinctiveness is clearly conditioned by whatever is defined as ordinary life. And of course, during the lockdowns, life beyond the studio became anything but ordinary. The media were quick to talk about the new normal, but there is nothing normal about measuring a safe space to stand from friends and strangers alike, counting the seconds as we wash our hands or not knowing what day of the week it is.

For a painter fascinated by the creation of unique spatial and temporal frameworks in each work, such anomalies in the actual perception of time and space changes the relationship between painting and reality. Changing the constants of life will inevitably alter the resolution to life discovered through painting. As a broad observation, pieces made early on continued my dominant theme of the figure moving through the urban landscape; towards the end, the spaces became vast open landscapes, more dream-like, and the temporal frameworks coloured by the changing of the seasons.

I would contend that there is a distinctive psychological tension between the figures in many of the paintings from the series, as well as a desire to escape and find salvation. This escapism has echoes of an exodus in “Headland” and the last painting “Prayer Tree”. That psychological tension of course may well be accounted to a new fear in encountering people that has developed during the pandemic. It exists in the space in front of the painting, but it is undoubtedly evident in “Postman’s Knock” and “The Sirens of Hopper’s Crib”.



Postman’s Knock 2020 oil on canvas 30” x 40”

My studio overlooks the front drive to the house. Often, the only person who I would see during the lockdowns, apart from my family, was the postman, running the gauntlet to keep us going with necessary supplies. In “Postman’s Knock” (the postman is recognisable with his cap on the left), the form is simultaneously abstract, muscular, fluid, gravitational and psychological. The innocence of a kiss in a childish game; the mundanity of a parcel delivery, becomes a new foreboding space/time figuration.

“The Sirens of Hopper’s Crib” is rooted in reports of the crisis in New York; in particular, a letter received from a friend in New York of the eerie silence in the city after the authorities decided to turn off the ambulance sirens to let the residents escape their relentless noise. The painting amalgamates this theme with the ancient sirens, and the devastating fallout from congress.



The Sirens of Hopper's Crib 2020 oil on canvas 40" x 30"

This is one of the few urban landscapes in the series. The vista is no more real than the figures. It is all imagined. But the development towards rural landscape painting is surely a reflection of my environment immediately beyond the studio. I was no longer travelling to London or cities abroad and recounting memories from those trips. The furthest I would travel would be into the garden, sometimes drawing directly from nature. Not that any of the Parlour Paintings appear to be directly concerned with the Vale of York, which lays beyond our garden. Many of the landscapes are evidently fictive, and of distant lands. And through connecting with the natural world, I reconnected with an earlier interest in landscape painting.

I go into the studio and paint. I might begin with a few lines taken from a drawing. That drawing might be as simple as a study of some gunnera leaves growing in the garden. This was the beginning of "A Tall History of Sussex", an imagined landscape of the south coast of England where I spent many of my summers as a child. As with all my work, the painting is in constant transition, revealing a profile of my father. This is one of several paintings made during the

lockdown which recall my past and a very young version of my creative self, for as a child I was a prolific and precocious landscape painter.



A Tall History of Sussex 2020 oil on canvas 40" x 30"

It may well seem that the lockdown intensified a more introspective approach, reflecting more on the self. The dangers of slipping into a disinteresting narcissism is at least acknowledged in the painting "Angling in a Narcissistic Landscape" but the pro-active struggles of the angler in this painting symbolises some resistance to this indulgence. This aside, a more important realisation was that through concentrating on the act of painting as a process of finding material and spatial forms from within (from within the activities and substance of the studio, from within the existing state of the painting and from within the endless imaginings of the mind), the possibility of a completer and

more authoritative figuration could be achieved. Increasingly banished from the studio was any form of material images brought in from outside which could be used as reference.

This process had begun before the lockdown, but many of the drawings made in 2019 were based on photographs, although any obvious reference to a single photograph was largely subsumed in the layering of re-worked structures. 2020, and the lockdowns marked the end of my use of the camera. The reasons are many and complex. The isolation imposed by the lockdown highlighted for me, at least, the absurdity of any form of photorealism as a meaningful surrogate for understanding the world through painting and drawing. Bombarded with life, perhaps photorealism provides an opportunity to distance and reflect, but when we are in isolation, unable to see friends and family, the disengagement from the subject imposed by any kind of photocopying just struck me as perverse. Art can never be just an exercise in illustrating the world, but it *is always* a means of making sense of experience. For many, the lockdown resulted in a loss of human contact. Given the insight into how that really feels, can we then argue in any way that painting a portrait from someone in front of us has any similarity to copying a photograph of that person? Many realised for the first time what it meant not to witness life unfolding, and only see it on a screen or in images in the newspapers. For me, it answered in a very guttural way, the end of using surrogate images of any kind in my work.



Flora's Animalier 2021 oil on canvas 41" x 36 ½"

I continued to draw from life throughout 2020. Some of those drawings are in my exhibition. But the relationship between the drawings and the paintings developed to the extent that in the final works, the drawing functions almost entirely as an organic and chaotic structure to unlock new realms, rather than being an image of something to be painted. In this respect, even my own drawings made in the garden and brought into the studio to kickstart paintings, do not have the status of imported material *images*. For example, the painting “Flora’s Animalier” began with some lines and shapes taken from “An English Country Canyon” which was drawn in the garden.



But the drawing was inverted so the lines no longer constitute an image of a tree, or leaves. Instead, the structures of nature give birth to a new panoply of motifs and narratives. The flora of the drawing becomes a wealth of animals: horses, cattle, dogs and people. Such figures are the consequence of painting and belong almost entirely to the process of painting. An image of a subject, let’s say a particular person, whether it be in a photograph, or drawing, or a painting from art history, can never become a representation of that person within the painting, no matter how much it is assimilated through pushing the paint around. It will never belong. The form that the subject takes, its being in terms of that photo or drawing, is so overwhelming that it can never be separated or distanced and it will never be compatible to the structure of a unique painting. Recognising this, the subject in my painting must be born from the form of that painting. To paint is to find form and to find subject, and to give material presence to thought. A pre-existing image of that subject brought into the studio has no place in this process.

This is the conclusion of The Parlour Paintings and working throughout the lockdowns. In hindsight, it’s a purification of practice that this unprecedented chapter in recent world history has helped me to arrive at. The work is now *freer* to be accommodating of any experience beyond the studio walls. A new series is underway as we emerge from lockdown called the “Ab Initio Paintings”. It’s a new beginning, where each painting must begin without favour to any existing image, a new figuration from nothing about everything.

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The Parlour Paintings

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