

INTRODUCTION

Already Nicolas Granger-Taylor's work is quietly distinctive, and decidedly not by employing any of the kind of gimmickry that we so often see masquerading in place of genuine individuality of style. There are no short cuts in work of this quality. The image in a Granger-Taylor painting is powerfully constructed, with a sure sense of form. The technique with the brush creates a contrastingly sensitive surface, exploring fabric and flesh in their infinitely subtle gradations of hue and tone. His characteristic nudes are not 'academic' studies, if that term is taken to suggest a clinical absence of emotional or erotic engagement. Far from it. In an extraordinary still life, a clementine in a bag is subjected to the same searching intensity of vision as a nude. The emergence of such a serious young artist is the more remarkable as it represents such determination to avoid the flashy and fashionable path to temporary success that has lured so many of his contemporaries to their ultimate destruction.

The fact is that the establishment of art history as an academic discipline this century laid a curse upon aspiring artists. In particular, the prevalent idea of the existence of a 'Zeitgeist' – that one form of art is 'true' to an age and that others are somehow not – became the excuse for the modernist tyranny. From the 1950s onwards art critics identified as worthy of note those artists who fitted into the preconceived scheme and condemned to darkness those who did not. In practice, it meant that abstract art was 'in', while figure painting, landscape and still life were not.

All 'modern art' museums (a peculiarly 20th-century idea) have functioned on this premise. And so have most art critics, journals and 'modern art' academics. But, as the century draws to a close, it has become plain that the haruspices of the art world read the entrails wrong. The game of proleptic leapfrog which they encouraged is ending in a series of collisions against a brick wall. Conceptualism, minimalism and the other pseudo-'movements' are merely piling up on the scrap-heap. In contrast, representational art has remained vigorous and fruitful, to the extent that the truly original artists of the second half of the twentieth century can be seen to have remained within the tradition (as, of course, did the earlier giants of the modern period such as Picasso and Matisse). Whereas, after the First World War, America threw away its heritage to embrace abstraction, British artists were less tractable, more wary of an art led by theory. As a result we can now point to the true originals of the age: Spencer, Bacon, Hockney, Freud, Wonnacott, Uglow. It is this remarkably varied company that Nicolas Granger-Taylor keeps – and he can bear the comparison.

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