

AN ESSAY BY IAN RITCHIE
FOR THE JOHN HOYLAND EXHIBITION
MYSTERIES
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Night Sky (2005), John Hoyland

I waited for the cosmic wind
to touch my face,
when it did I looked again
into a different place.
The starry sky is fleeing now
to stage a dance
in deep blue, beyond the Plough
another chance to glance.
John imagined the waves of time
as blue swept spaces
that curve deep into the mind
to race to other places.
I dived to join the dancing lights
to hold one white
star of fiery ice by rights.
Ah, Vincent, coloured night
of crescent moon, clouds roll,
from star to star,
an unlit dark cypress hole
stretches space. Au revoir.

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I live with some of John Hoyland's paintings. They are fugitive images that evoke worlds other than the physical ones that we have been taught exist. They imitate nothing and I cannot walk past them without looking. They are deep. When I look I feel I am privately interviewing John, not with questions and words or through conversation, but soul to soul - a language of the spirit. There appears to be no difference between his life in colour and his paintings. He seems to exist to paint.

I visited his studio for the first time just three years ago, and I saw the evidence of a creative journey compressed into those boards beneath his feet, his shoes walking through his past self, on his own memories and travails. Outside, below is a railway cutting and a squint of the London sky

above. This is an urban studio, not a romantic studio bathed in light. His notebooks are his aide memoire - containing both visual impressions alongside his own, and others' written thoughts. He is an incisive writer.

John Hoyland's paintings are a celebration of colour - the life and the language of colour through which we see the world - colours that coexist, jostle, some that live with each other easily, and others that appear unable to be together but cannot be apart either. This is tension that gives the energy in John's work. Neuroscientists can explain that we all inherit the concept of colour through the way that colour is constructed by the brain, and even the colour of the 'after image' after the colour is constructed. Few artists, very few, have taken colour as the raw material of art, and fewer still have magically given it its own life on canvas.

To choose colour is surely to choose the most difficult of mediums. It needs a master craftsman to take acrylic paint - that industrial synthetic polymer from the 1950s carried and bound by water - and give it its own character and vitality. His painting has been a relentless practice, searching for better ways to marry desire with technique, to transfer those bottled colours, shaken, stirred, sometimes diluted, to transform the white canvas.

There are moments of figuration, not too overt, which bind John's work to the world in front, behind, above and below us - a world which can hurt as well as love. In Joyce's words "He found in the world without as actual what was in his world within as possible." He is a painter working with and against nature - a poet whose pen is a brush, sometimes a knife or a tube, and his ink the rainbow, and whose imagination battles existence beneath his silver crown. Hoyland is a painter's painter, a warrior, tenacious and audacious - littering his own autumn trail with broken frames and bleeding heart, but finding new air, new clearings in which to experiment and flower.

In recent paintings, the void, near the centre, occupies an infinity into which one can dive, discover the beauty of emptiness, and float. Then the eye can settle, as a butterfly might, upon a flying fragment within the painting - a glorious moment to feast on blue, orange and yellow, or red, white, black and yellow. These fragments seem as free inside the painting as the butterfly or bird or fish outside; and then imagine the musical journey deep into blue space, or trace a line, gloriously thick, round, red. "The void is Zen's great penetralium: the mind is a void in which objects, stripped of the objectivity, are reduced to essence."¹ This essence can be found as the undivided moon close up in a dew drop, or divided on the waves - a sensation.

"The void has collapsed upon the earth,
Stars, burning, shoot across Iron Mountain.
Turning a somersault, I brush past."
(Zekkai Chushin 1336-1405)¹

It is Hoyland's use of colours that will resonate forever. Hans Hofmann, a particular inspiration to Hoyland, wrote, "In nature, light creates the color. In the picture, color creates the light." Hoyland's paintings illuminate new worlds. He recounts his appreciation and acknowledges painting's history through colour - particularly Van Gogh and Gauguin, Matisse and Miro, Nolde and De Staël, and the Americans - Newman, Rothko and Motherwell. America was vital to Hoyland's progress. It gave him the freedom to measure himself, to question and expand scale, space and thought. John did not stay long in America. His short sojourn reminds me of a conversation I had with Joe Doyle, Brendan Behan's best man, who asked the great writer on his return from honeymoon in America, "Brendan, so how did you find America?" Behan replied, "It'll be great when it's finished!" A couple of years ago he travelled with Tony Caro to Bourbourg in northern France to see Caro's work in the Chapel of Light. A simple pleasure which radiates delight across John's face as he recalls the visit. He misses his close friend Patrick Caulfield and comments that there was more generosity between artists in the past.

Hoyland senses the utter joy of life, and his maturity now allows him the freedom to value and select carefully from his instincts and emotional knowledge. He recognises and admires this in the work of Picasso, Matisse and Miro. They were not handicapped by style or ideas.

When I first saw his work in his studio I sensed a free man, yet without knowing it he was scrapping with death and that a short while later he would have major heart surgery. When I knew I wrote him a letter about how his work mattered in our thin age. Behind a star (exploding) may lie a black hole, to suck in the loneliness of the long distance painter, but once out through the other side.....still the painter and so relevant to others.

Now he is producing paintings impossible to recognise from those of his youth. He knows his boundaries and he is bursting through them. He is flying beyond. He has no truck with fashion and can be outspoken against cultural decadence and selfish exaggerated hyperbole, and nods to no-one but his own spirit. He is a river of interrogations, of listening to his soul, expressing his spirit of adventure in the face of death and his delight in being truly alive. His recent paintings tell you so.

Hoyland is a giant among painters. He has not wasted his talent, but proved and honed it over decades and, through his natural integrity and modesty, remains humble and generous. Words cannot hold John or his work.

The idea of the cosmos, the idea of the ocean, the idea of fish, of butterflies and of vortexes, these ideas have universal resonance which John invokes, although he paints with only the merest suggestion of them.

He may love the light and intense colours of the Caribbean, but his painted spaces are real spaces that John discovers from within. He allows us to share them.

Drop by drop, seventy seven winters,
Water's turned to ice.
Now this miraculous stroke -
I draw water from the flaming fount.
(Keso 1352-1428)¹

He told me that sensations come from without, and emotions from within. His paintings are translations of his take on the sensations of our world reconstructed by his brain filtering his instincts. Hoyland is at his best right now. He may have always been at his best.
The other day he told me that "He'd like to be able to paint anything!" He can and he should.

I wrote him a birthday poem.

"Colour is like love,
it chooses you."*
Nothing is more true.

Inside to outside,
a sensation?
He's for emotion.

He put on his shoes,
they disappeared.
And that was weird.

Faced with a canvas
what does he see?
A Caribbean Sea?

And what do we hear
in those colours?
Musical shores.

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*JH - a quote from John.

¹ The Awakened Self, Lucien Stryk, Kodansha International 1995 (1981) – a book in which John has highlighted a number of phrases. Perhaps this is a subtle reference by John to sacrifice, training and hard work.