

Greenham's Masterpiece



Portrait of Sheridan Russell by Peter Greenham

Discovering a masterpiece can be rather like falling in love: it is liable to make us talk in a way that would otherwise seem embarrassing. In both experiences there is a kind of exaltation involved which is hard to keep to yourself, and although neither experience is easy to explain to other people, we often (sometimes unwisely) feel the urge to try. Where paintings were concerned Kenneth Clark was better at these kind of explanations than most, and some years after producing his *Civilisation* series, he returned to the theme of those programs in a Walter Neurath memorial lecture with the title 'What is a Masterpiece?' Clark, who in his autobiography described his 'basic incapacity for abstract thought' and talked about reading his old notebooks on aesthetics 'with a kind of compassion', wisely doesn't try to answer his question in abstract terms. His point though is that the idea of a 'masterpiece' implies a kind of objective valuation which we would be foolish to discard. However private and personal our aesthetic judgements may seem to us to be, there is more to them than that. When we think that a work of art is good, a part of that thought is the desire that other people should agree with us.

I thought about this last year while standing in front of Peter Greenham's portrait of Sheridan Russell, which was included along with thirty three other of his paintings at a New English Art Club exhibition. The last time I had seen this painting was in an exhibition at the

Ashmolean, held shortly before Greenham's death in 1992, and then as now I had found myself wanting to announce in a loud voice to the people standing round me that this was an unquestionable masterpiece. I would certainly have had a better chance of being persuasive with the picture in front of me because reproduction hides at least part of the reason for my feeling. No photograph of the painting really conveys the almost magical way that the solid appearance of Russell's head arises out of such fleeting evanescent touches of oil paint, or the way that Greenham's ability to draw in paint and his iron grasp of underlying structure enables him to freely extemporise his brushwork without for a moment losing touch with reality. If drawing is 'putting lines around an idea', then Greenham's painting is a nice demonstration that the strength of an idea and the means necessary to convey it can be inversely proportional.

The same evening that I saw the painting of Sheridan Russell I also heard the painter Peter Kuhfeld lecturing about Greenham's paintings. Like myself and a number of others in the audience, Kuhfeld had been a pupil of Peter Greenham's during the latter's long reign as Keeper of the Royal Academy Schools, and listening to the talk was a vivid reminder of the kind of thing that Peter himself had used to say to us. It was in other words, very much a painter's talk: full of admiration for the skill and craft of painting; and it was of course within this world of craft skills that the whole concept of a masterpiece has its origin. The OED traces the derivation of the word to the Dutch *meesterstuk* or the German *meisterstück* and quotes a text from 1579 which describes 'the person creven to be admittit free of his craft first compone with said deinis of gild ...the maisterstik of the person to be admittit being exhibit'. A text from 1658 describes how 'Taylors ..suffer none to set up his Trade unless he has made first his master-piece'. Already though, by the beginning of the 17th century, the term had begun to expand beyond this trade guild origin. Mankind was often referred to as 'God's masterpiece' and the word was being used in a more general sense to mean 'a consummate example of some department of art or skill'. The idea of a 'department of art or skill' is the idea of an evolving tradition of doing something, which we may add to and develop but do not usually invent for ourselves. Clark suggests that a masterpiece should not be 'one man thick, but many men thick', and Greenham's own work was an organic development of a long tradition of painting (the portrait of Russell contains a strong reminiscence of Rembrandt's portrait of Mrs Tripp in the National Gallery). This sense of being inducted into a tradition of painting skills was, in the Greenham era, almost part of the fabric of the Academy Schools. New students coming into the wonderful life drawing theatre (which had been transported from the Academy's original home in Somerset House) were shown the places where in their day Blake, Constable and Turner had used to sit, and this idea of valuing and passing on a tradition of skill had indeed in some sense been the premise on which the Academy had itself been founded. Famously Sir Joshua Reynolds had ended his final Discourse to the students of the RA by declaring that 'I should desire that the last words which I should pronounce in this Academy and from this place might be the name of – MICHEL ANGELO', at which point, dramatically enough, the floor of Somerset House suddenly collapsed and the hapless Academicians were left clinging to whatever would support them. These things were perhaps a parable of what was to come. In the last decades of the 20th century there was a sense in which the bottom had fallen out of the market for passing on the skills of the past, and in heroically continuing to try to do so, the Academicians which Greenham gathered around him seemed at times to be clinging to the tradition by their fingernails. Yet if the Academy seemed odd or exceptional among late 20th century art schools it was not because there was anything very odd or exceptional in using the heritage of the past to stimulate or challenge contemporary students, but rather because something very odd indeed had happened in the surrounding culture.

The inevitable controversies surrounding the Turner prize, come each year as an annual reminder of this cultural oddity. Because the prize is awarded for progress and innovation in art, controversy is in one sense part of its remit. Yet even when the particular controversies surrounding individual artists (whose merits inevitably vary from year to year) are put aside,

there still remains a perennial oddity in the fact that a prize named after Turner should be regularly awarded to artists who do not practice the art of which he was the supreme British exponent. It is rather as if the Chopin international piano competition were to be regularly won by trombonists. Odd though this may be it is not inexplicable, and one way of explaining and justifying the policy of the judges is to point to the developments that occur in all art forms. It is for instance certainly true that modernist experiments across the board - in music, literature, architecture and painting - began around 1900 to create a radical separation between the art of the present and the past. What would Dickens have made of *Finnegan's Wake*? What would Beethoven have made of Boulez? If *per impossibile* they could read or hear them, it seems likely that the radical shift in sensibility, which took place over a fairly brief passage of time, would render the work of these successors incomprehensible to their 19th century ears. And yet although that might be true it is also true that Dickens and Joyce share a mastery of words and that Beethoven and Boulez were both trained as musicians. There is, that is to say, a kind of continuity between the skills practiced which is not often present between J.M.W Turner and many of those who have won the prize named after him. The visual arts do in this sense seem to stand alone. There may be many cultural causes for this but there are also material ones, and many have argued that the most significant cause has been not philosophical but technological: not the growth of modernism but the invention of photography.

In 1860 throughout Europe and America there were studios of wood engravers whose sole task was to produce illustrations for newspapers and books. They worked first from drawings and later from photographs, and though journeyman work it was exquisitely skillful. In 1880 however the invention of photo lineblock reproduction rendered the whole technique redundant and the studios emptied almost overnight. The impact of photography on painters was not so devastating but was almost equally profound. The movement away from realism and towards ever greater degrees of abstraction cannot be precisely correlated with the development and spread of photography, but certainly cannot be separated from it, while the move to step outside the traditional materials and practices of painting and sculpture and to find 'art' wherever one chose to look for it, seems to have followed on from this with a kind of inevitable logic.

If as positivist historians liked to imagine we could stand outside the current of history and examine ourselves with the objectivity of a scientist examining an amoeba, it might perhaps be possible to avoid making judgements about the history of art. As things are it is an unavoidable part of being human to evaluate the events of history and to see them in the manner of *1066 and all that* as 'a good thing' or 'a bad thing'. There is no shortage of events in the last century that would fit into the latter category, but only the most diehard conservative could fail to acknowledge that in any reckoning of aesthetic profit and loss, there is a great deal to place under the heading of profit. It seems to be an abiding characteristic of humanity that we can discover aesthetic dimensions in almost everything we make or do. As soon as we discovered how to bake clay we started molding it into sculptural shapes, and as soon as we discovered how to fix photographs on paper or how to project sequences as moving images, we began to develop these abilities into aesthetic skills. Despite a certain amount of initial prejudice the development of these new skills and their recognition and acknowledgment went hand in hand, so that now barely a century and a half after the invention of photography, it seems perfectly intelligible to refer to the photographs of Cartier-Bresson or some of the great works of cinema as 'masterpieces'. To acquire a new art form is a fairly straightforward kind of aesthetic gain, but insofar as photography turned painters aside from the goal of realism it also had the indirect effect of opening up a whole new field of aesthetic exploration within painting itself. As Monet's water lilies were transformed into nearly abstract webs of colour, or Mondrian's paintings of trees mutated into wholly abstract grids of lines, the aesthetic horizon of painting and sculpture seemed to dramatically expand. At first this expansion was limited to subject matter, while the traditional materials of oil and canvass or marble and bronze remained the same; but soon

enough this expansion migrated from the message to the medium. Although Michelangelo had once made a sculpture out of snow and Hokusai had once won a painting competition by dipping a cockerel's feet in red paint making it run around on a blue painted screen and calling the result 'The River Tatsuta in autumn', gestures such as these were isolated jeux d'esprit. When however Braque and Picasso started to include newspapers and other bits of everyday flotsam in their pictures they discovered a way of exploring the poetry of everyday objects which has been followed ever since. It is true that it is not a path which has always led to poetic results, and Marcel Duchamp's signed urinal and other 'ready mades' do tend to look today like rather one dimensional gestures. But where there is a genuine imaginative transformation there is also genuine poetry, and there are surely few who can fail to see something joyous in for instance Picasso's transformation of a bicycle seat and handlebars into the head of a bull, or his ability to make a monkey out of an ingenious arrangement of toy cars.

All this and the multitude of possibilities that flowed from this, could fairly unambiguously be entered under 'profit'. Yet if only the most diehard conservative could fail to acknowledge the gain, only the most implacable modernist could fail to recognise the loss, and one of the most obvious things to enter under 'loss' is the erosion and devaluing of the kind of painting skills that made possible the achievements of a painter like Turner. If asked to provide an example of that devaluing I would point to the fact that outside a small circle of painters and connoisseurs the name of a realist painter like Peter Greenham is hardly known; if asked why that should matter I should start by pointing to a picture like the portrait of Sheridan Russell. What is it that is given in a painting like this that is different from the work of a great photographer? Partly it is time. Where a photograph records a momentary appearance in the blink of a shutter, in a painting that same appearance is slowly recreated by means of a patient and hard won technique; and while the result takes longer and is in many ways less accurate, it nevertheless somehow dramatises the whole nature of that encounter. So that where, as here, the appearance recreated is the appearance of another person, then what is dramatised is the meeting of two people. A mechanically accurate painter with no gift of conveying feeling in paint can depict a person's appearance with no real sense of having met them. A more expressive painter can become so preoccupied with the emotions expressed in paint that the person who is their source fades from view. Where, as in Greenham's portrait of Sheridan Russell, the fragile balance between these two things is miraculously attained, the result is something uniquely and luminously human.

It is not, to put it mildly, an easy thing to achieve. When I first started at the Academy Greenham warned me that if I wanted to get anywhere as a painter I would have to do nothing else. His own favourite ambition was to produce one really good drawing in his life, and to that end whatever else he was doing he would draw every day. His favoured method of teaching was to take a drawing you were doing and to do a drawing alongside it that brought out something you were missing. Many students used to collect and treasure these drawings, and as a gauche new student one of my most shameful memories is, rubbing out one of these drawings, which seemed to me to spoil my own (when I once told this story at a Reynolds club dinner faces blanched and there were sharp intakes of breath all round the room). When, after his death, I had the opportunity to look through the piles of drawings in his studio, I found that he had in fact not merely produced one 'really good drawing' but hundreds; and on the back of a piece of Academy notepaper I found a small drawing of my father (done I think before I was born) which was not only instantly recognisable, but achieves the same miraculous feat as the portrait of Russell, of making both men vividly present.

Turner's dedication to the art of painting has been compared to the dedication of a saint to his religion, and it was a kind of dedication that Peter Greenham certainly shared. Both men would have felt some sympathy with Turner's great Japanese contemporary Hokusai, who describing himself as an 'old man mad about painting' said in his ninetieth year that given ten years, no even five years more he might have become a great painter. Picasso, though less

modest, exhibited a similar kind of commitment, saying in his last years that there was 'a work of painting still to be done', while Lucien Freud or Frank Auerbach perhaps provide contemporary examples of the same kind of painterly dedication. When therefore Waldemar Januszczak wrote an article a few years ago predicting the 'death of painting' it might seem that he was wide of the mark. Certainly it seems unlikely that a skill which human beings have been practicing for the last 30,000 years or so will suddenly disappear. Januszczak's point however was not that people would stop drawing and painting but that with the passing of the generation represented by Freud and Auerbach this activity would gradually become marginal to our culture: the province of amateurs and Sunday painters but not of serious artists. While there is nothing inevitable in this prediction neither is there anything to say it could not happen. The recognition of a masterpiece, as Kenneth Clark pointed out, is a social recognition, so that when the kind of skills that produce particular kinds of masterpiece cease to be cherished and rewarded by a society, it is a reasonable expectation that those skills should in time cease to be practiced, and those kinds of masterpiece cease in time to be produced.

In an introduction to the New English Art Club catalogue Jane Greenham writes that Peter, though rapturous whenever he sold a painting, endorsed the remark of his own teacher F.E. Jackson that 'you can't do things and get the credit for them. Getting the credit is a full time job'. While in one sense he coveted the applause received by musicians, in another and deeper sense he was almost indifferent to how he was received (when he went along to the Palace to paint the Queen, dressed in his usual somewhat shabby suit, the doorman thought he was a tramp and tried to turn him away). Yet while such indifference to applause may be a necessary attribute in an artist striving to produce a masterpiece, a society which values such masterpieces would be unwise to permanently sit on its hands: a major retrospective of Greenham's work at the Academy or the Tate is long overdue.

Roger Wagner