

A New Look at Adrian Berg

Adrian Berg: Paintings 1964 - 2010, **Frestonian Gallery**, 2 Olaf Street, London W11, (5 May - 3 July)

Painters often go in and out of fashion over the decades, and some suffer a period of neglect after their death. Much depends on what sort of representation their work has: whether their posthumous reputations are properly nurtured by a commercial gallery can be the decisive factor in how well-known they remain. Adrian Berg (1929-2011) had a long exhibiting history with London galleries, showing consecutively with Arthur Tooth & Sons, Waddington Galleries and the Piccadilly Gallery. But he had his last solo show with the Piccadilly in 2002, after which the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition was his principal shop window. Other galleries made overtures, and Berg did show his work in various venues, but until recently there was no dealer to represent him or look after his Estate. Although Pallant House Gallery mounted a memorial show in 2012, and there was a provincial retrospective in 2017, there was a crucial gap of too many years (2002-2018) when Berg's work was in danger of slipping from the art public's consciousness.

Thankfully, this has now changed and the hiatus is over, and Berg is once more strongly in evidence in the English art world. The first book on his work has been written by Marco Livingstone (Lund Humphries £40), containing over 200 illustrations, most of them glorious reproductions of paintings: the book sings with colour. And this welcome monograph is being launched with a choice exhibition of Berg's landscapes, from the earliest to the last, at the Frestonian Gallery in Holland Park. In fact, this is the second exhibition of Berg's work mounted by Frestonian, the first was in 2018 and was accompanied by a handsome hardback catalogue with text also by Livingstone. So Berg is once more registering on the London art scene and it is time to take another long look at his remarkable work.

I knew Adrian well for more than twenty years and we met regularly and corresponded. I admired his work before I met him; knowing him

only deepened my appreciation and understanding of his achievement. He talked or wrote about all aspects of his life and work, covering early influences as much as late enthusiasms. Although very far from being an Impressionist himself, Monet was for Adrian one of the most crucial artists. In a letter to me (dated 2/V/99), he recalled visiting the 1957 Monet show at the Tate when he was a student, describing it thus:

To my horror here were the most beautiful paintings, painted yesterday and not yet history, yet of the most taboo subject imaginable: that favourite of amateurs, such as my father's sister, prettiness itself, the garden. All of my ideas about modern art were turned on their head. What was so novel and challenging was the subject.

He was to embrace that subject with real passion.

Berg had a very personal sense of colour, design and touch, and his paintings, which are about man's journey through the landscape, man's mark and trace, man's structures, are more about art (specifically what painting can do) than about content. He said: 'the better the picture, the less likely it is to depend on the subject.' (June 1983, interviewed by Helena Drysdale.) Two years earlier he admitted: 'I paint in the English landscape tradition. I paint landscape because what I see outside sometimes looks unimaginably beautiful.' He thought art should be truthful, but he was not a naturalistic painter, he was too abstract and involved with the decorative for that. 'Decorative,' he said, when discussing colour with me, 'if it means anything, must mean what keeps you looking, what holds your attention, what gives pleasure.'

His paintings are full-blooded emotional statements, in which the emotion is at least as tightly-controlled as the paint. He approvingly quoted Vita Sackville-West writing about her garden at Sissinghurst: 'Profusion, even extravagance and exuberance, within the confines of utmost linear severity.' His imagery is imbued with a great generosity of spirit, with a sensuous enjoyment of beauty, and a constantly surprising ability to reinvent appearances. His best work has the compression and structure of poetry, and uses colour with wonderful precision to achieve exact effects

which are both visually and emotionally convincing. We experience the landscape anew through Berg's eyes, and we are enriched by his vision.

For much of his career Berg was the quintessential painter of London's green spaces, focusing in particular on Regent's Park, which he could look down upon from the flats he rented through the 1960s and '70s and into the '80s. Then in the spring of 1988 he moved out of town to Hove in Sussex, next to Brighton on the south coast. From there he planned his forays to explore the surrounding countryside, and to visit other great parks and gardens, always a cherished subject. Stourhead in Wiltshire was one of his favourite destinations, though to get there by public transport presented certain logistical problems. But Adrian liked trains and buses for the opportunity it gave him to look at the countryside. As he said to me once: 'It really sinks in when you're travelling and there's nothing else to look at.'

Berg was brought up in comfortable circumstances and his father, an eminent psychiatrist and author, funded Adrian's early continental travels and made him an allowance into his twenties. His father also encouraged him to be a painter, for which he showed considerable aptitude from school days on. In the late 1940s, during his National Service in the army, Berg learnt about mapmaking and how to construct a 360 degree panoramic view. He became expert at diagrammatic note-making which he found invaluable for collecting information on site to be used later in the studio. After National Service Berg read English at Cambridge (1949-52), studied for a Diploma in Education at Trinity College Dublin (1952-3) and worked as a schoolmaster for two years before he attended his first art school. He was thus a mature student, and one who had already been painting seriously for several years, when he first went to art school.

His formal study encompassed three London schools: St Martins, where he spent a year (1955-6); Chelsea, where he spent two years (1956-8); and the Royal College of Art, where he spent three (1958-61). In 1961 Berg moved to a flat at Gloucester Gate, overlooking Regent's Park, the gardens and trees (and occasionally buildings) of which became his principal subject for almost a quarter of a century. But he didn't paint it exclusively to begin with, exploring various other subjects to do with geometry, figure painting, mathematical pattern and board games. He gradually realised



*Adrian Berg, Gloucester Gate, Regents Park, Summer, 1981,
oil on canvas, 101.5 x 101.5cm*



*Adrian Berg, March Landscape, 1966,
tempera & acryla on canvas, 56.2 x 76.8cm*



*Adrian Berg, St Giles Churchyard, Camberwell, May, 1977,
oil on canvas, 46 x 61.3cm*



Adrian Berg, Beachy Head, 6th May, 1995, oil on canvas, 76 x 122cm

that what he most wanted to paint was his *rus in urbe*, this countryside within the town outside his windows, and that by restricting his subject he was actually offering himself the chance of achieving greater variety and richness within a supposedly narrow compass. Eventually he explained his preference for landscape as a mature taste: 'People were logically of more pressing interest to the young than to those who had more experience of life.' In 1969, on his fortieth birthday, Berg became tenant (rather than subtenant) of the flat, and was able to move to the floor above, which gave him a balcony and access to the roof, with far better views across his chosen landscape. His paintings grew wider and more panoramic as a result.

He painted multiple images on board or canvas, assembled in a grid-like arrangement or strip format that enabled him to depict the same scene from a fixed viewpoint over different seasons. He aimed to get not just a specific view but nature as a whole into his paintings, bringing fragments together, and creating an integrated universal image. Leaf growth on trees is a succinct indicator of seasonal change, and also offers great potential for different coloristic effects. By these strategies, Berg managed to incorporate the passage of time and thus a suggestion of memory into his work. He was, in effect, painting the flux of life, not a series of static moments.

Adrian painted many of his most celebrated early paintings from the windows of his top-floor flat at Gloucester Gate. Later he lived for three years at Cambridge Gate before being compelled, by financial considerations, to leave his splendid eyries in central London and decamp to the seaside. But while he was still in the metropolis, there was his subject, spread out before and below him: the paths and trees and flowerbeds of perhaps the greatest of London's eight Royal Parks, the 395 acres of Regent's Park. At times he would take small canvases down into the Park and work on them among the trees and borders, but usually he worked from high viewpoints.

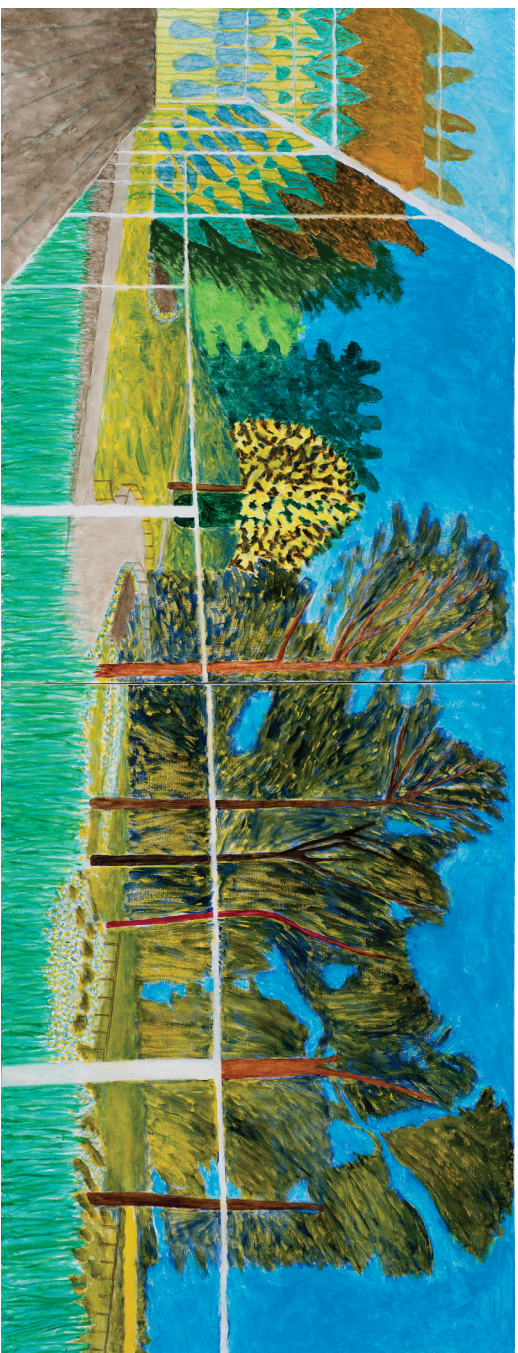
Traditionally the garden is a place to stroll and ponder or sit and think. Berg's garden paintings are the fruit of much thought, as well as much planning and consideration, and when he moved to Hove, this procedure only became more sharply defined. Paintings were made in the studio

from material gathered on research trips into parks and gardens or along the coast. As this process became more established, Berg found himself able to take more risks in his interpretation of his subject matter. There was a new boldness to his pictorial design and pattern-making, resulting from this increased distance between the experience of the subject and painting it. The paintings were now composed of semi-abstract blocks of strong colour and (often) reflections. The paint became ever more present in audacious streaks and runs of colour.

I first wrote to Adrian Berg in the summer of 1989 about an exhibition I'd been asked to organise and select (we didn't talk then about 'curating' an exhibition, life was more modest and unassuming) for the following year at Bristol City Art Gallery. As an enthusiast of Adrian's work, I was very much hoping to include and indeed feature his paintings in the show. I wrote him a letter care of The Piccadilly Gallery, which at that point represented him, and Adrian replied from his home in Hove with an invitation to dinner. I went down to Brighton in December of that year for the first of many suppers with Adrian, initially with his partner Mike Osmund. After Mike's death in October 1996, the visits continued but dinner got later and later and I was often just in time to eat something before leaving to catch the last train back to London.

We also met in London, where I then lived, at exhibition openings and suchlike art world gatherings. Adrian would come up to London with a knapsack, fully equipped with bottle of gin and all the mixings for Pimm's (his own recipe). He resented paying the prices in London pubs and the barmen never made the drink strong enough. The rucksack was also, of course, to hold his painting gear: a folding seat, his watercolour paints, watercolour crayons and pencils (to be dipped in water), his Walkman and cassettes of music by Bach, Chopin, Rachmaninov. When he was out on a reconnoitre he would typically work for four or five hours on a single drawing. He tended to wear combat gear and a forage cap, even when attending Royal Academy meetings. (He was elected RA in 1992 and loved going there; he called it 'the club'.) John Hoyland, a fellow RA with whom Berg endured an uneasy sparring relationship, nicknamed him, with deliberate provocation, 'the backpacker from Hell'.

Although Adrian only occasionally painted in oils in front of the motif,



Adrian Berg, Enter The Garden, 2010, oil on canvas (dipych), 91 x 244cm



Adrian Berg, Stourhead 25-27 June, 2000, oil on canvas (trippy), 188 x 396cm

he enjoyed making topographical watercolours in the Lake District (and I've seen a long aquatint he did of this subject too), and was reliant on watercolour notes to provide him with the precise information he needed to construct his large paintings back in the studio. Drawing, under which rubric he included watercolours, was central to his work. He continued sometimes to make small paintings on the spot, for instance in the summer and autumn of 1984.

As a young man Berg was the uncredited artist of Lady Beeder's watercolours in the film *The Horse's Mouth* of 1958. Famously, John Bratby did the wilder paintings purporting to be by the film's artist hero, Gulley Jimson, but it was Berg who received the compliment from Alec Guinness who played Gulley. He quoted Joyce Carey, an artist himself and the author of the novel on which the film was based, saying of Adrian's watercolours: 'They've got that accidental look of when the cat spills the milk.' Natural, then, but also artfully contrived. There's a lot of art in Berg, as you'd hope.

The painter Jeffery Camp (1923-2020), who knew Adrian for most of his life, called him 'the most beautiful boy in London'. Later, when Berg started painting Beachy Head, Camp was less generous, and felt that Adrian was encroaching on his territory. Camp lived for years at Hastings and painted all along that stretch of Sussex coast, but made Beachy Head very much his own, peopling it with entwined lovers and hang gliders, depicting it in hallucinatory close-up and vertiginous 'cliffs of fall'. Camp guarded his territory jealously and resented Berg's temerity in painting it. The initial focus of Camp's ire was Berg's exhibition of new watercolours entitled 'The South Coast', held at the Piccadilly Gallery in Cork Street in March and April 1993. This was followed by exhibitions of inventive Beachy Head oils. I loved the work and found it wholly different from Camp's, but Jeffery was only assuaged when Adrian moved on to other subjects.

Early on he had experimented with tempera and acrylic, but gave these up for oils – finding that oil paint was for him better suited to capture the movement and fleeting effects of vegetation upon which his work focused. In his mature pictures, human presence is implied rather than stated. His subject, which he once pithily described as 'what man has made

of nature', was still mostly parks and gardens, though the wildness of less tamed nature featured in some of the Lake District and south coast images. Revealingly, although he made oils of Beachy Head, he never did of the Lakes.

Most of the runs and trickles of thinned paint were applied to the lower portions of his paintings, where the foliage of the top half of the image was reflected in water. These vertical seams of dribbled paint became a feature of his later work, and the use of liquid pigment and the white of the canvas owe much to the practice of watercolour painting, in which, of course, Berg recorded his most direct observations. The best of the watercolours were exhibited as paintings in their own right, not just as preliminary studies. Strategic deployment of areas of bare canvas added greatly to the luminosity of his oil paintings: the white of the canvas or board brought a flickering internal light to the imagery. Sonorous colour and the vibration of light brought a real radiance to Berg's paintings.

Mike Osmund had also trained as a painter at Chelsea but abandoned his career to be Adrian's companion and assistant. After Mike's death Adrian complained that too much of his time was taken up with admin, and such basic things as stretching canvases. He liked gossiping at length on the phone (I often spoke with him late at night), and was an excellent and conscientious correspondent. In a letter he would mention in passing that he had another dozen to write, and you knew he would stay up much of the night thinking, scribbling and drinking. His burden of studio tasks was lightened when his friend Alister Warman (director of the Serpentine Gallery when Adrian had his 1986 exhibition there) found him a studio assistant, in the shape of Sam Clarke, who began working for him in the spring of 1998.

Occasionally a sense of grievance would surface. Adrian told me about the occasion when the late Peter Fuller, influential art critic and founder of the magazine *Modern Painters*, and, incidentally, already a vociferous supporter of Berg's work, had accepted, at short notice, a commission to write an essay for Adrian's Serpentine catalogue. To have Fuller on your side was a bonus, but what upset Adrian was that when the show was hung, Fuller came over to him and said: 'Well, it looks OK. I was worried it wouldn't.' Adrian took this to mean that the critic had doubted

the painter's abilities even when accepting the task of writing about him. It was not very subtle of Fuller to admit his reservations, but perhaps he never realised how paranoid and full of self-doubt artists can be. Almost as bad as writers.

Perhaps Adrian had good reason to be paranoid. He told me that he had wealthy Ukrainian antecedents in Czarist Russia, running 'the Selfridges of Sebastopol', but that both his grandfathers were murdered. One, he said, was shot in the back, the other poisoned by his cook in India. Certainly Adrian registered all slights, whether real or imagined, and bore grudges with genuine enthusiasm. He never forgave Maggi Hambling for persuading the curator of a mixed exhibition she and Berg both featured in, to take his painting down from the favourable spot it had originally been hung in, and substitute her own. This piece of artistic one-upmanship rankled.

Adrian in later years was hunched over with arthritis of the spine, and to see his bent figure approaching across a room, it was hard to believe that this was a painter at the top of his game, who could move with such apparent ease and fluidity over large canvases. He was the leading artist in his field, and I can't think of anyone who was painting landscape better for the half-century of his career. The only artist whose work reminds me slightly of Berg's is the Dutch painter Jeroen Krabbé (born 1944), who is also deeply absorbed in passionately coloured landscapes and the patterns to be found therein. But Krabbé is not interested in capturing and recording the passage of time in his paintings, which is a key feature of Berg's art. Nor does he take the formal risks that Berg did with long horizontal formats like cinema screens, exploring the lateral unfolding of foliage and space through his pleated and slatted forms.

To turn to the new monograph, it's a splendid publication, but it looks more substantial than it actually is. The first five chapters of Livingstone's concise text deal chronologically with the work, but then the book's structure breaks down into tributaries. There's a passage of biography titled 'Awakenings 1929-1956', followed by 'Inspirations' on the artists Berg enjoyed, and 'Poetic Inclinations' about his early poetry. His writings (on his own work, on other artists, random musings) are also quoted from, which is more of a pleasure as he was highly articulate and usually had

interesting things to say. A selection of texts about Berg by other writers closes this section of the book. In addition there is a short but revealing chapter on Berg's late working methods by Sam Clarke, his last assistant, and a section on Berg and teaching by his fellow tutor Paul Huxley. This arrangement of disparate sections (14 major ones and various subheadings) sadly vitiates the unity and coherence of the monograph, and leaves the reader wishing for rather more of Livingstone's cogent commentary.

For instance, Livingstone is spot on when discussing the large square paintings Berg made in the 1980s which were so constructed that the image could be rotated and any of the four sides could be at the top, so balanced and intermeshed were the quarters of the composition. Each edge offered a different take on the subject, and none was especially privileged, though Berg tended to indicate by means of inscriptions on the back of the canvas which could be thought of as 'the right way up'. Livingstone writes perceptively: 'The strategy carried risks of gimmickry and wilfulness, yet succeeds precisely in conveying the ecstatic disorientation and discovery that one might undergo when wandering through new or unfamiliar territory.'

One thing I found myself in disagreement with. Livingstone makes the odd assertion that in a series of transcriptions in the Indian and Egyptian styles made in 2010, Berg reinvented himself as a narrative painter. Really? That seems rather extreme. Perhaps he doesn't make allowance for Berg's vivid sense of humour. Adrian had always made transcriptions, it was one of the ways in which he explored methods of looking and interpreting he could subsequently make his own. I remember a luminescent version he painted of Eric Ravilious's *Train Going over a Bridge at Night* (1935), and several transcriptions of travel posters advertising Kew Gardens, by the likes of Clive Gardiner and Spencer Percival. Unlike so many artists, he was always prepared to learn from others and to break new ground in his own work. To this end, he accessed a great range of visual reference material from photographs of turf mazes and labyrinths to paintings by Andy Warhol and Keith Haring, tapestries and carpets, Chinese scrolls and Islamic art. He found the design principles behind Persian and Mogul carpets particularly inspiring, with their need to interrupt the symmetry with a flaw in the otherwise perfect pattern.

Apart from the paintings, what do I remember most about Adrian? His laughter – which his friend Paul Huxley rightly calls ‘the laughter of camaraderie’. He was such good company that time fled when you were with him. He was indeed ‘a very witty fellow’ who ‘knew a thing or two’; Adrian’s phrases to describe friends were equally applicable to himself. Like his much-admired painter-friend John Craxton, and indeed Noel Coward, he believed that life was for living. ‘The most important thing is enjoying where one lives. Work is really subservient to life.’ (An observation he made to me in 1993 when talking about Pissarro.) He tended to shun publicity. He wrote in another letter that he was ‘delighted not to be spotlighted yet to live very well thank you, do what I please as and when I please, life’s not perfect but it’s never been better.’ (5/IV/99)

At the time of writing I haven’t yet seen the exhibition at the Frestonian, so will confine myself to commenting on the reproductions in Livingstone’s monograph: some of the watercolours are ravishing, but it is the oils that are so often a knock-out (a favourite word of Adrian’s). Of the Regent’s Park paintings, there’s a marvellous early one from January and February 1963 in tempera, an impressive Summer, Autumn, Winter of 1977, now in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, and a group of night paintings from 1981-2. St Katherine’s Precinct was another recurrent subject well-served. There’s a terrific flame-like evocation of Cambridge Gate from early September 1977, and any number of fine paintings of Kew Gardens. The billowing quilted forms of the early 1990s in paintings of Stourhead and Leighton Hall reach a tremendous climax in the series of Stourhead paintings of the summer of 2000. These are some of the best, most ambitious and sheerly transcendent paintings that Berg ever attempted. And they are gloriously successful.