

FRESTONIAN GALLERY

ADRIAN BERG

WORKS ON PAPER



Private View: Thursday 27th April, 6-9pm
Exhibition dates: 28th April – 3rd June 2023

Scan code to view exhibition works

Frestonian Gallery is delighted to present its first major exhibition of works on paper by Adrian Berg RA (1929-2011).

One of the most innovative and ultimately influential British landscape painters of his generation, Berg had long been underserved by recognition outside the circle of those variously inspired by or taught by him. Berg dedicated a great deal of his professional life to education – serving as a tutor in painting at London art schools such as Chelsea, Central and Camberwell, as well as – most notably – the **Royal College of Art**, his own alma mater, where he was a mentor and champion of such key latter day figures as **Chantal Joffe** and **Tracey Emin**, as well as a respected colleague of significant painters including **Paul Huxley** and **Peter Doig**. It was in his years at the RCA in the tumultuous period, for British Art and society in general, in the early-mid 1960s that Berg first found attention as an artist of rare talent and vision – and was also a prominent influence on his peers, including **R.B Kitaj** and **David Hockney**. In Hockney, Berg found a close friend and a mind receptive to both the importance of culture (Berg introduced Hockney to the poetry of Cavafy and Whitman, whose works inspired many of Hockney's earliest etchings) and the primacy of painting. The friendship and respect endured a lifetime, with Hockney and Berg both citing each other as influences – especially in the rendering and re-imagining of the English landscape – and Hockney, at the last, giving the eulogy at Berg's funeral and memorial dinner at the Royal Academy of Arts on London's Piccadilly.

This exhibition centres on perhaps the most free and vitally immediate output of Berg's career – the sketches and watercolours that he produced *en plein air* whilst immersed in the parklands, gardens and coastlines that were the entire object of his life and work. Berg's well-known grand scale compositions in oil on canvas (examples of which can be found in every major museum and institutional collection in the UK) were constructed meticulously at his studio often well after the initial contact with the subject – much in the manner of Pierre Bonnard, one of the great pillars of Berg's extensive artistic frame of reference. The watercolours thus provided the visual and sense memory for the latterly realised output in oil.

The exhibition majors on works from the late 1980s – following Berg's move from his home and studio on one of the Nash Terraces overlooking Regent's Park. Having held Regent's Park as his sole subject for nearly 25 years, Berg moved to Hove, in Sussex, and was half-inspired, half-forced to refocus his artistic lens on fresh subjects – an initially dislocating experience that quickly became a joyous one, and ultimately resulted in the entire body of extraordinary late works for which he is now as well-known as for the intricate Regent's Park works that reside in the Tate, Arts Council and Government Art Collections.

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The two great gardens most accessible, and most often returned to, in his later years – Sheffield Park in West Sussex and Stourhead in Wiltshire – are well represented here, as are the Arcadian English landscapes, of Highdown, Wakehurst, and Kew Gardens. Outside these sculpted pastoral idylls, we also glimpse hints of architecture – both manmade (Brighton Pavilion) and those forged by nature (the striking white cliffs of Beachy Head).

The works themselves are a testament to Berg's love for both the landscape itself and his craft as a painter. Delicate under-drawing in pencil is occasionally visible in the tighter compositions, but by and large it is purely the fluid and fickle watercolour in suspension that Berg employs both to carefully map (he was a cartographer in his youth whilst serving in his National Service in the British Army) and lyrically convey the sense of light, air and colour in the landscape(s) before him. In all of these works, which were accompanied by copious written notes describing the quality of light, the weather and time of day (to inform any resulting major canvases), Berg sought to balance the extraction of the maximum fidelity to the landscape itself and the true power and range of colour available.

In the summer of 1888, almost exactly one hundred years before Berg settled with his palette at the lakeside of Stourhead, **Paul Sérusier** had painted 'The Talisman' under the friendly tutelage of **Paul Gauguin**. Gauguin instructed Sérusier to paint not as one would expect to 'explain' a landscape but as the eye truly saw it – and thus where a bank of trees may appear, in early dusk light, to be a counter-intuitive blue rather than a more 'sensible' mix of brown and green then blue they would be. If a particular bush or rock appeared to be aflame in crimson as the sun caught it, then Berg – as Sérusier before him – would let it be thus. The resulting works, captured in the seemingly genteel yet stubbornly difficult to master medium of watercolour, leave us with the most remarkable record of Berg's own vision for the breadth of exuberant colour, light and beauty in the English landscape – a series of jewel-like works in their own right, each a celebration of a life's work and dedication to the act, and the possibilities, of painting.

Adrian Berg (1929-2011) – Notes on the artist

Adrian Berg was born in London in 1929. He studied art in London, first at Central St Martin's, then Chelsea College of Arts and finally at the Royal College of Art. Later he would go on to teach at the Royal College, becoming senior tutor in 1987. Berg's paintings have been exhibited in all major UK institutions including, amongst many others the Tate, Hayward Gallery, Royal Academy, Victoria & Albert Museum, Fitzwilliam and Pallant House Gallery.

In 1986, Berg was given a major retrospective at The Serpentine Gallery and with the Arts Council that subsequently toured the country, with a further retrospective at the Barbican in 1993. He has also exhibited extensively internationally. In 1992, he was elected as a Royal Academician, and in 1994 he became an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Art. His work is held in many private and public collections, including the Arts Council Collection, the Tate, the Government Art Collection, the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum.

For further information on the exhibition please contact gallery@frestoniangallery.com