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# EXPERIMENTS IN THE FIELD

While his London contemporaries were painting gritty metropolitan subjects such as Tube trains and building sites, Adrian Berg was focusing his artistic gaze towards the lawns and trees of Regent's Park. But thanks to a background in science, his pictures were anything but blandly bucolic, involving daring time-lapse effects and chemistry-set colours. Like his hero Monet, he was attempting to capture mutable nature in permanent form, as a new show reveals. Text: Charles Darwent

This page: Adrian Berg in his second flat at Gloucester Gate, Regent's Park, c1969-75. From his studio window, the young artist watched the seasons unfold with an eye at once Romantic and precise. Opposite: Berg's fascination with time can be seen in *Gloucester Gate, Regent's Park, May* (1982), in which he distils a whole month into a moment. All the hues of May are compressed into the acid red of the central tree, all possible views of the park into a central, Josef Albers-like square



*Second Lake, Sheffield Park Garden, Sussex Weald, Late Summer (2002)* sees Berg at his most Hockneyesque – or rather, the relationship should be seen the other way about, since Berg was painting like this before Hockney was. For all the prettiness of its colours, the four-part work is strictly formal – the two lower panels reflect the two upper, the left-hand panels balance the right. Indeed, although Berg's subject is ostensibly nature, he rarely attempts to be natural



**IN 1949**, at the age of 20, Adrian Berg went up to Cambridge. There was nothing unusual about this, except that Berg – a noted painter, who died in 2011 – was initially going to read medicine, not art. An early yen for doctoring clearly didn't stick. He left Cambridge with a degree in English in 1952, and three years later signed up as a student at St Martin's School of Art in London. After that came Chelsea, then the Royal College of Art, from which he graduated in 1961. In that same year, he moved into a flat in Gloucester Gate, Regent's Park. Other than moving upstairs in 1969 and then next door to Cambridge Gate in 1975, he would stay put, painting, for nearly 30 years. Medicine was firmly behind him.

Or was it? Let us look at one of the many pictures Berg made from the windows of his north London eyrie. *Gloucester Lodge, Regent's Park, March, April, May & June (1976)* is, broadly speaking, a landscape, in that its subjects are trees and lawns; not things for which Camden Town is known. To see how unusual a choice of subject this was, we need only compare Berg's painting with those of his contemporary, co-north Londoner and fellow descendant of Russian/Jewish immigrants, Leon Kossoff. While Berg was musing on blossom, Kossoff painted the things that the 20th century demanded: Tube trains, swimming baths, building sites, soot. Modernism was an urban phenomenon, and Kossoff was, par excellence, a Modernist. This may explain why his name is well known to fans of Modern British art, Berg's less so.

And yet, and yet. Look again at *Gloucester Lodge, Regent's Park*. The first thing that strikes you is that it is not one view but four, or rather one view four times, one for each titular month. Berg, a psychiatrist's son, appraises nature with a cool doctor's eye, noting its symptoms, observing its changes. The better to compare these, he sutures his vistas together: the knife-sharp edges of his joins contrast with the fragility of the things he sees. What at first glance looks like a whimsical work, a paean to petals, is actually something very steelier. And then there are Berg's colours. His subject may be nature but his palette is anything but natural. The acid blues and yellows of his paintings look more like the kind you might see in a laboratory than in a park.

This, I think, is precisely where Berg's genius lies. We tend to assume that the eye can be either artistic or scientific, but not both: Berg shows that it can, in the way that parks can be both rural and urban. Six years after *Gloucester Lodge, Regent's Park*, we have *Untitled (Regent's Park Dusk)*. Now the gloves are really off. Rather than dividing them into individual panels, Berg folds his seasons into one. Leaves fall from trees even as they bloom; flowers bud, blossom and wither in a glance; the lamps around the Outer Circle come on and go off and mutate into trees. It is as though Berg has walked around Regent's Park carrying a camera with the shutter left open, time blurring into colour and vice versa.

A work like *Regent's Park Dusk* makes you wonder why Berg's is not a household name in the way that David Hockney's is. The two have much in common. Both were students at the Royal College at the same time, both gay men in a day when such things were difficult. Hockney, eight years younger, was a frequent visitor to Berg's Gloucester Gate flat. They would remain friends until Berg's death. In his eighties, Hockney is painting the kind of things Berg painted in his forties: locked down in Beuvron-en-Auge, Normandy, the Yorkshireman set to recording the blossom of the orchards around him. If those images are winning in the way Hockneys are, they lack the ambiguities of Bergs; their tensions; a hint of darkness. The Londoner's unobvious pictures need looking at, thinking about. In our Snapchat age, that may have done them few favours.

Berg didn't limit his eye to Regent's Park, or even to trees. In 1988, he and his partner, Mike Osmund, moved to Hove in Sussex, from where he painted *Beachy Head, 7th September (1994)*. Like his hero, Claude Monet, Berg was fascinated by the way art could render the temporary permanent. And like him, he rose to the challenge of painting the changing sea. Here, Berg takes on the English Channel by painting what may be his most abstract work, with grass, chalk, water and sky reduced to flat planes of colour. It is not so much a depiction of nature as a synthesising of it; a reducing to an essence.

Then – back to London and trees again – there is *St Giles Churchyard, Camberwell, May (1977)*. This shows the influence of another of Berg's heroes, Van Gogh, and in particular his self-portrait, *Painter on the Road to Tarascon (1888)*. That picture has always fascinated artists, among them Francis Bacon, who painted several versions of it in the late 1950s. At least part of the pull of *Painter on the Road* is that it no longer exists, likely burned in the wartime fire-bombing of Germany. Berg cannot have seen the original, but he will have seen Bacon's reinventing of it in the Tate. Where Bacon replaced Van Gogh's image of himself with one of his trademark animal-men, though, Berg removes the figure altogether. It becomes a self-portrait with no self, Berg represented by nothing but his extraordinary way of seeing the world ■

*'Adrian Berg: Paintings 1966-2010'* is on display at the *Frestonian Gallery, 2 Olaf St, London W11 (020 3904 1865; frestoniangallery.com)* until 3 July. *'Adrian Berg'*, by Marco Livingstone with contributions by Paul Huxley RA and Samuel Clarke, is published by Lund Humphries, rrp £40



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Opposite: *Beachy Head 7th September (1994)* is the most abstract of Berg's works, its precarious balance of flattened forms calling up the endless instability of the sea. Its vista looks across the Channel to Normandy, home of Berg's hero, Claude Monet. This page: Berg's father was a psychiatrist, and it's hard not to see the four panels of *Gloucester Lodge, Regent's Park, March, April, May & June (1976)* as a painterly Rorschach test, each panel defined by its difference from the others