
Johnnie Cooper

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Johnnie Cooper: throe on throe. Exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery

Ground Impressions, 20 April 2019

GROUND IMPRESSIONS

ART REVIEWS AND ART HISTORY



Johnnie Cooper, Saatchi Gallery

A survey of Johnnie Cooper's work has recently opened at the Saatchi Gallery. Cooper came to prominence during the 1970s when he exhibited in London alongside his contemporaries Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. After a while the artist disappeared from the art scene and devoted himself to teaching, but he kept producing art. This is the first opportunity to see the work by the acclaimed British artist exhibited in London after almost three decades.

Entitled *throe on throe*, the exhibition includes early sculptures and works on canvas and paper produced over 50 years, charting Cooper's artistic development. The artist gradually moved away from figurative art and sculpture towards more and more abstract two-dimensional works. Those later ones are arranged in series, including the most recent *The Listener Series* (2018-2019). Many works on display bear very evocative titles, such as *Aefensteorra* (2018) ('evening star' in Old English), or *Ozymandias* (2018), the latter referencing the 1818 poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

I met the artist during the preview at the Saatchi and I asked him about his early sculpture titled *Isaac* (1977). Once I learned the title I made an instant connection to

the biblical story of Abraham and his son Isaac. The little boy stands tall with his hands tied at the wrists, looking up to the sky and awaiting his fate as a human offering. The story behind this particular artwork is actually more complex. The life-sized statue is that of the artist's own son, then five years old, and it conveys the message about repression of children. From the young age children learn and subsequently embrace the worldview of the adults, such as western systems of values and the way some non-western cultures are perceived.

This whole package is ingrained in us through our upbringing, and the artist believes that it is not right. Born in the UK in 1950, Cooper spent his childhood in Canada where he was first exposed to Native Canadian art, which influenced some of his early sculptures. There is a visible connection between Cooper's bronze sculptures and animal figures from wooden totems found today across Canada. Isaac was the last piece of sculpture representing a human figure that Cooper produced. Gradually abandoning sculpture he started moving further and further away from representative art. His painting formally resemble American Colour Field painting or Abstract Expressionism, but nature remained a constant element in his art.

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Since 1980s Cooper has been working in his rural studio in Worcestershire. There is a short video in the gallery showing the artist in his studio, illustrating how his paintings are rooted in nature and landscape. *Henge* (2018) is a good example of such work, a tall monolithic structure is pierced by a beam of light. Similarly, *Squalls of Rain from the West* (1996) or *Day Break* (2018) evoke light and colour sometimes found in nature, but are heavily abstracted into strokes of pure colour.

Cooper once said that he 'always had been intrigued by the interaction of the edges where the two colours meet.' [1] Interestingly in his later works bright colours are replaced by more muted palette. Gradually, the colours seem to dissipate, overtaken by layers of black paint. Perhaps this has something to do with throes or suffering that comes inevitably with artistic process.

This is a timely exhibition as there is a recent surge in interest in Cooper following the last year's publication of the artist's monograph (*Johnnie Cooper: Sunset Strip* (2018) by Black Dog Press). If judged only by the crowds at the opening night, the exhibition at the Saatchi is bound to be quite a successful one. Definitely worth visiting for any art lover.

Johnnie Cooper: throe on throe is at the Saatchi Gallery, free of charge (19 April – 4 May 2019).

Sources and further reading: [1] exhibition catalogue, p.22

Exhibition website:
www.saatchigallery.com/art/throe_on_throe.php

Artist's website:
www.johnniecooper.com/