
Johnnie Cooper

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Interview

Johnnie Cooper | throe on throe

Jenna Sachs, The London Magazine, 2 May 2019



THE LONDON MAGAZINE
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Pearl City, Shanghai, 2007, acrylic on paper, 53 x 73 cm © Johnnie Cooper, Courtesy of the artist

A new exhibition at Saatchi Gallery sees a major survey by the acclaimed British artist Johnnie Cooper. Spanning two galleries, *throe on throe* comprises over 50 paintings and sculptures from the 1970's – a time when Cooper appeared alongside Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth with his own solo exhibition to mark the Wakefield Silver Jubilee Festival – to his most recent atmospheric large-scale oil and acrylic paintings.

The show comes at a heightened time of interest in the artist with the recent publication of a monograph by Black Dog Press, and further exhibitions in store. Jenna Sachs caught up with Cooper to hear more about his Saatchi Gallery presentation – his first in London in three decades.

You kickstarted your career as an artist creating sculptures and later on expanding your practice to painting. Can you elaborate on how this transition is reflected in your work today and how these mediums interact with each other?

My early sculptures were more about the suggestion of other things that occupied the space around the sculptures

rather than the volumes of the actual sculptures. The bird skull motif was more about the associated imagery of trees, mortality and external worship, as most of the work in that period was inspired by the culture of the indigenous people of North America that I grew up amongst. Similarly my paintings are suggestive of a physical dimension beyond our vision but not our intuitive emotions.

In 1981 I embarked on a series of drawings that were very architectural in their structure. I introduced some primary colour taken directly from the tribal sculpture I was working on. It was this series '*Tarzan of the Bars*' that was responsible for my transition to painting.

throe on throe features both sculptures and paintings created from the 1970's up until today. Can you describe your painting process from start to finish and whether or not these works are influenced by past sculptures?

All my early paintings were collages either executed with found objects or paper. The physicality and my interest in textures that I was exploring in these pieces was of course a direct connection to my period as a sculptor.

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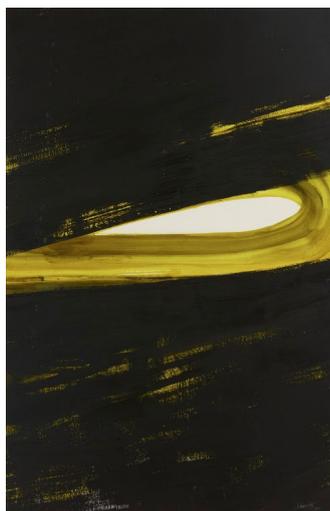
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Chained To The Nest, 1974,
Bronze On Wood Base,
Bronze 74 x 41 x 22cm, 18.4kg
© Johnnie Cooper,
Courtesy of the artist

Hyrst, 2018,
oil and acrylic on canvas,
152 x 122 cm
© Johnnie Cooper,
Courtesy of the artist



The Eye of a Needle, 2018,
acrylic on paper,
145.7 x 94.5 cm
© Johnnie Cooper,
Courtesy of the artist

You have a passion for natural landscape, which is evident in your work. How does throe on throe particularly draw upon the essence of nature?

Living on the summit of a rural hill amongst woodland has a profound effect on one's senses: not just the impact of the beautiful vistas. It is impossible not to be constantly aware of the changing light values and how this imbues its way into the subconscious. The east face of the Malvern Hills looms just across the river valley. Depending on weather conditions and the time of day the flanks can appear to be iron hard and almost menacing but when the day drifts on and the sun begins to lower the hills take on an ethereal softness and the summits defuse and merge into the distant sky beyond.

You describe your approach to painting as three dimensional and a quality of physical surfaces are evident on your paintings. What do you hope for people to take away from this experience?

I hope that I have managed to communicate some shared experience of the human condition. I hope the viewer reacts to the hues of lightness that I used in my earlier paintings or to the darker moods evoked in the more recent listener series. The sculptures perhaps have a more immediate message with their association of ancient cultures and or the aspirational desire I hoped to convey in 'Chained to the Nest' and the figure of 'Isaac'.

You have worked in art education throughout your career including lecturing at Oxford University and as a cultural ambassador in Shanghai for Oxford International College, how do you feel these experiences have shaped you as an artist?

Lecturing in European Romanticism at Oxford made me realise the influence of artists such as Blake, Constable and John Martin had on me as a student and inspired me into following art as a career. Living in the densely populated city of Shanghai (on a four month residency) reinforced my love of the British landscape and my need for living in an isolated environment. I completed almost forty paintings whilst in a Shanghai and although the vivid neon of the city had an impact on the colour palette the evocation of illusory space was a nod to British landscape.

This past year has been monumental for you, with the launch of your debut monograph published by Black Dog Press and your first major London exhibition in three decades. What do you have coming up next?

There are small elements in the last few paintings I have made that are exciting me in an unexpected way. I hope to continue working on the large format canvasses and exploring the moody atmospheres that I have been exploring...

throe on throe is on display until 4 May.

For further information see:
www.saatchigallery.com/art/throe_on_throe.php