

INIGO BATTERHAM. HORSE GALLERY 2022

By
Neal Brown

These paintings by Inigo Batterham are the first to be seen in public since 1995, when James Moores presented the artist's work in a small and beautiful London show. Decades later, after a long resistance to surrendering his work to exhibition again, Batterham's highly personal and sensitive paintings, and their depictions of his private cosmological vision, can be seen here in Dublin's Horse gallery. Batterham's work here is facilitated, for a second time, by Moores. Moores himself has his own resistance – his being against any description of him using the word 'curator'. However, it is art historically necessary, for completeness of record, to discomfort him, by correctly describing him as an important curator of Batterham's work, for which we are the beneficiaries.

Certainly, it was Moores who encouraged Batterham to move to Ireland in 1997, after Batterham's well-being and health had run into a headfirst destruction in London, and Moores' prescription for restorative health has proved successful. Separated from London's pubs and clubs, and the festivities of its psychoanalytical psychotherapists and psychiatric hospitals, Batterham awoke to consciousness in Ireland – birds singing – and now resides in Ireland's Burren area.

As a child Batterham was surrounded by the visual imagery contained in the rare art publications his father stocked as a specialist book dealer. The family home and its ground floor business premises were dense with antiquarian and obscure books, periodicals, catalogues, folios, and mysterious ephemera, sought from all over the world, whose subjects and magnificent plates included the fine and graphic arts, industrial manufacture and trade design, ornament, ceramics, folk art, stained glass, jewellery, photography, ethnographical art, illustration, craft, textiles, tiles, and anatomical and medical illustration – including illness and disease. The logic of this great variousness was not only as a valuable design reference for professionals working in these subject areas, but also of the pleasure they brought to collectors and other persons who admired their wondrous, unusual, or sometimes compellingly horrifying imagery. It is difficult not to imagine that this universe of rare imagery contributed to Batterham's formation of his intense personal cosmology.

A perhaps significant publication for Batterham from his father's stock was a *View* magazine from 1945 – his father had many identical copies of this edition – with front and rear covers designed by Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp employed a surrealist, collage technique in this design, which was more elegantly sparse than the surrealist, collage precedents of Max Ernst. Duchamp's use of the visual device of situating an image or object within an expansive colour field (or sparse gallery space), is one shared with a profound religious painting lineage, where placement of an image in a colour field accords it an intense contemplative value. It can be seen in Indian miniature painting (Hindu and Muslim) and South East Asian (Buddhist) painting. It can also be seen in some Abstract Expressionist art, Minimalism (where exact symmetry was a high virtue), and which was brought to a highly excited, theatrical epitome by Francis Bacon and (in a slightly less excited theatre of painting), by Craigie Aitchison.

Batterham's paintings are in a relationship with all these art traditions, with Batterham placing important signifiers of personal meaning in a place of reverence or adoration, or more anxious contemplation, so creating the mood states of his cosmological universe. There is ambiguity, with themes of obliteration and incompleteness. Some of the figures have recognition and are even almost identifiable as forms of portraiture; goddess femininity, spirit landscapes, Buddhism (including Tibetan) and its bodhisattvas, and planetary orbs. Colours are analogous to moods, and include delicate lilacs, indigo, and softened blues, but which may also be bold and even strident. Human and other creatures become muted and compromised, with incomplete physicality, and their distinguishing features are often in an enigmatic disappearance (Batterham's friendship groups include many people painfully lost to addiction, depressive illness, and suicide). There is eroticism, including what may be the discourses of hermaphroditism, and there are Gnostic and meditative mysteries.

Sometimes Batterham's ambiguity is resonant with promise, and sometimes with regret, like a mood altering remembrance, or a depression. Sometimes there are things that are prenatal; foetal or womb expelled, with limb truncation, and which have dysphoric threat. Sometimes there are what might be cosmological bad spirits – demons. There is the perfection of geometric absolutism, amounting to a totalising mathematical holiness. There is also joy, and the recall of intoxicated happiness, all to a Van Morrison standard – an almost incoherent, euphoric delirium.

The Burren itself is a constant background presence in the work, represented in the paintings as a place of wondrousness – its glacial era limestone, and its rock puddles, caves, fossil forms, and erosion textures and decay all being seen in Batterham's work. There are what may be fossil corals; sea urchins, sea-lilies (crinoids) and ammonites. This geological mineral beauty is given colour intensity by the increased refractive index caused by rain, mist and atmospheric humidity, such as occurs on the Burren (wetness and coldness always a hearty virtue, for their experiential truthfulness). Lichen and moss happily (or unhappily) disport themselves, and delicate flora – ferns – thrive in the small micro-climates within the pavement surface of the Burren's glacial-era limestone. It may be noted that Batterham has a large body of a highly contemplative Burren landscape photography, which may be viewed on social media.

Finally, attention should be drawn to a joker, trickster element in Batterham's work. This, at its most subtle, may be beyond usual thresholds. These prankings may be manifest as design jokes, visual puns, or as actual comic incident – funny characters, postures, droll references, and other witticisms. It is another disobedience for our consideration (one that may possibly be more apparent in the smaller paper works, than the larger paintings). It is a theme that should be viewed within the context of Batterham's whole career, which itself can be described as a sort of disobedience. It is a rebellious act for Batterham to have so successfully ignored the criteria – fashion, money, status – that so often drives artists to success, or drives them to insanity.

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