

Sarah O'Kane Contemporary Fine Art
sarahokane.co.uk | sarah@sarahokane.co.uk
07777 691 050

Julian Le Bas: A Studio Visit by Geoff Hands

For the uncompromising *en plein air* painter the idea of the studio is, potentially, a notional one, as four walls do not restrict the site of production. So when I visited Le Bas' studio in the back garden of his home in Seaford I was not sure what to expect.

Julian Le Bas is a painter, perhaps *the* contemporary painter, of the Sussex section of the South Downs. His work bears witness to this characteristically splendid and captivating geography of chalk hills, meadows, woodland and the adjoining coastline.

If you know Sussex reasonably well you will be aware of Chanctonbury Ring, Black Cap, Mount Caburn and Firle Beacon, and will recollect on how these geographical landmarks change in mood and appearance depending on the weather, the season and the time of day. On a more micro-level you will know that as you travel around, away from the A roads, you will expect to see characteristic churches in the villages, such as at Berwick and Southease. You will also know that there are marvellous trees in the various churchyards, or alongside the fields that produce crops or are home to the cows and the pigs. Look closer still with this consummate painter and, depending on the time of year, see the bluebells, snowdrops or a defiantly red rosehip amongst the winter brambles. In other words, there is no hierarchy of place or incumbent: be it animal, mineral or vegetable.

These many places visited by Le Bas, often with the imperative ritual of walking to them, are invested with powerful colour effects and combinations of brush marks too. The viewer might be convinced that they are as improvised as much as they are consciously planned and

controlled. Le Bas balances these two complimentary aspects of the act of painting, which is so important for what I interpret as *reflection in action*, as a matter of course. He produces visually potent and efficacious oil paintings that retain this sense of having a heart beat, of being visually fixed but alive somehow and which have to be authentically realised in situ. These studies can only be so faithfully achieved, by necessity, out of the studio environment.

At 12 X 10 feet the space was significantly more than big enough for the lawn mower, gardening tools and cracked flowerpots that one might normally expect to come across, although thankfully there were no such items stored here. But this was more than simply a storage area for dozens of canvases of various sizes. The wicker chair and cushion, just the one, was evidence enough to reveal a space for the artist to sit and ponder on his latest day's work. Space too, to rethink and assess the necessity to return to a particular location to complete a canvas not yet considered fully realised, hence the provision of three viewing walls. I asked Le Bas if he sometimes continued the paintings here, away from the subject. A simple 'no' was the answer. I need not have asked, for his many collectors and supporters will know that he is a purist of sorts; passionate and uncompromising in the most positive sense and completely at one with the traditions associated with the landscape/seascape painter who will go out in all weathers to attain their goals - and to constantly surprise themselves at the inexhaustible range of subject matters and moods that wait to be seen and experienced. Such an approach is Le Bas' unspoken manifesto. The work is so memorable that it speaks not only for itself, but also for the inexhaustible landscape related encounters that somehow await the viewer's comprehension, though intriguingly via the work itself. The paintings may well function as signposts, imploring the viewer to get back out there and look again, but they are more than mere signage of course. The canvases, as carriers of physical imagery, embody lived experience and a sense of time, where to pin down the visual realisation of a particular place, set in some notion of the abstractness of duration, is reliant on the paint medium and its expert treatment.

Time and light is fluid too, which poses a contradiction to the solidity of form, of the interaction of colours and the myriad relationships that constitute fixed composition. Le Bas' works bring the observer and observed together so that the works also realise the shared experience of seeing, through the manifestation of consciously formulated structures constructed by this communal gift of sight.

Interestingly, the historical *picturesque* can be discounted in his approach to composition and content, as there is an honest acceptance of what is simply there. What lesson we might learn from Le Bas' life-long project is that every day and every scene presents a seemingly revived landscape offering a new vista, and a fresh encounter, with the apparently commonplace.

Le Bas' paintings celebrate, exalt and revere the various locations and unequivocally express awe at the natural world. The role of shamanic consort, expressing the elevating metaphysical aspect of the everyday through the ordinarily magical presence of the landscape is his task. The work continuously appears to convey this sense of the uniqueness of the quotidian and the local which changes in appearance, not only due to time of day or season, but is subject to the artist's own crucial engagement at any particular time.

Geoff Hands 12.22