

Sean Scully Man of the North

I travelled up to Newcastle in September 1968 from London, to start my Fine Art course in Newcastle University. My mother was born in Durham as was my Grandfather, who was a coalminer. My Grandmother was a woman of sour disposition since she came from a great family in Scotland and had married for love instead of position. Now my Grandfather was a sweet man who had his left arm on backwards from a mining accident, and they had no great house, no servants, no car and one outside toilet, which one could reach with the help of a flashlight during the night. And that's where I stayed, 54 Hallgarth Road, Durham City, which was opposite the University where Ian Stephenson went to study art, when it was more solidly attached to Newcastle University.

Of course, I didn't know all this when I arrived. I had heard of Richard Hamilton, and was happy he wasn't there. But, I didn't know much about Ian Stephenson until I arrived. But when I found out what he was doing, I was excited.

He seemed to be sweetness personified. Tender, yet absent. He wore a white jean jacket, usually, and matching jeans. He was 10 years older than me. This is important, because he was older than us students but

not much. So he, in other words, was cool. Ian was the famous artist, who was an artist first and a professor second. And, he was the one, who was somehow of his own world, and was allowed to be: because he had the paintings to back it up.

He was especially famous, and still is, because his paintings were used on Antonioni's highly successful film *Blow-Up*. At that time, London was the centre of 'cool'. David Hemmings played the sexy photographer who accidentally shoots a corpse in a park and Vanessa Redgrave played the sexy woman who tells him. There were other films made around that time like *Performance* that starred Mick Jagger as, more or less, Mick Jagger. All this contributed to the image and attraction of London as a centre to rival New York. So, by extension, this aura of hipness was transferred onto Ian Stephenson, who strode gently through the corridors of Newcastle University Fine Art Department as a person who seemed to be unaffected by any of it: and interested only in his dots.

The reason for the inclusion of his paintings in the Antonioni film made him fashionable: but it is also profound. The film is haunted by Ian's paintings, because it is a story of uncertainty. The point and atmosphere of the film is that visual evidence creates as many mysteries and problems as it provides answers. The paintings are

transformed into the medium of film and they represent enigma, though the artist who makes them plays the opposite of the superficial fashion photographer who stumbles across a possible murder. The systematic sfumato of Ian's paintings is transferred onto the photographs that are thought to maybe show a shadow lying under a tree in a park. The technique of photography and film and painting becomes intertwined in a plot of 'hard to decipher' surfaces. The uncertainty and the authentic mystery of Ian's paintings become the psychological background for a very important film. Filmmakers have made films of artists before. But here was a film, of the first rank, whose theme was underpinned by a painter's content, though not by the painter as subject.

Ian started to come to see me after I started making my paintings. I didn't have to ask him. He was a hunter who knew what he was interested in, and what he wasn't interested in. He never told me what to do. But, he used the term beautiful as a kind of indicator of wrong direction, right direction. Not unlike the way kids play hot and cold, when they hide things. Hot being right, cold being wrong, and warm being not bad. Ian would say 'that's beautiful' if he liked it a lot. And, if he liked it less than a lot he'd say 'it's beautiful but not as beautiful as the other one'. And, if he didn't like what I was doing

he'd stop coming for a while, until I'd got over it: whatever my infirmity was. He was once talking to me about the work of a 'Dada' art student in the sculpture department, and he told me he thought that his apartment was too beautiful, in relation to the kind of work he was doing. Thus he seemed to measure, good, suspect and negative by the use of the word beautiful. His own work was famously beautiful. The mystery of beauty, and what beauty was when it was beautiful and what it was when it wasn't beautiful, seemed to colour his world.

He gave me a lot of his time but it didn't seem to have much to do with his parents and him coming from Durham or my mother and grandfather coming from Durham. I would say it was exclusively connected to the paintings and what we were mutually interested in.

He had gone to Newcastle University himself and his contact with the analytical and circumspect mind of Richard Hamilton, had probably given him a kind of counterweight to the emotionality of his nature. Kurt Schwitters had worked in Ambleside and we had the Merzbarn reconstructed in the Hatton Gallery. So I saw it everyday. So did Ian Stephenson. Thus the influence of another tradition, as a way of asking questions about the validity of abstraction, was ever present as a curtain of scepticism. I personally wasn't interested in

the scepticism, but I was interested in overcoming it. As, I suspect, was Ian Stephenson. William Feaver was there too in the Art History department, and was the incandescent rising star of the British critical scene. He wrote very well on Ian Stephenson, and subsequently on me. It's important to have someone around who can put the whole thing into words, and just as importantly - get those words published. It gave us our Newcastle Word Window onto the world. That time, which was of Tim Head, the memory of his friend Brian Ferry, the departed but somehow present Stephen Buckley and Mark Lancaster, with the shadow of Victor Pasmore, made Newcastle classy. It gave it weight. A counter weight to the much heavier endowed London. We didn't have the Tate, but we had a history of distinction, and close by, the long spectacular beaches of Northumberland, that nobody wanted to visit. Thus, their majestic loneliness was permanently uncompromised.

Ian had his swansong exhibition in the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle in 1970, and inevitably I was asked to write on it for the student review. The critic was a good friend of mine, who was a sweet girl, who had no idea how to handle the work of Ian Stephenson. This is largely the case today, though now there are perhaps ten people who understand it instead of three, that being possibly William Feaver, Kate Stephenson

and maybe me. A Romantic conceptualist, working towards such extreme states of visual denseness, is destined to leave the majority of the public bewildered. However, the paintings are undeniably beautiful, and they should slowly move from the margin to the centre of the page of painting in Britain, and take their authentic place among the images that we see constantly.

Ian said his goodbyes to Newcastle Fine Art Department in 1970, to become head of postgraduate painting at Chelsea. There, our paths crossed yet again, when I became a lecturer at Chelsea Art School at the tender age of 27 in 1973. I used to see Ian from time to time. He liked to ask me to drive him around in my van, if he needed to go somewhere. And, I liked it when he asked me. I always admired him, and I always, like a protégé, wanted to make him happy.

One day we were interviewing the applicants from all over Britain for the places available in the postgraduate school at Chelsea. And, competition was tremendous. A fairly aggressive, cool looking young guy, who had certainly been told he was very, very good, arrived from Sunderland, with his enormous paintings on top of his car. He strode into his interview inhabited in equal measure by the forces of confidence and fear, which resulted in a mistake that he maybe regrets to this day.

His paintings were slick, taped up and

sprayed, and visually declarative and powerful. A kind of abstracted Pop Art, one might say. I made the cavalier remark that they, like a beautiful Italian suit, were 'snazzy'. This was an unfortunate choice of word under the stressful circumstances, since he had driven all the way from the 'proletariat' North to the 'corrupted' South, and was no doubt tired and 'young bloke' defensive. He subsequently launched a tirade of rebuke at me, since he objected to my remark. This was sad, since I was more than inclined to vote him in.

Ian, however, stood up, walked towards him, and told him to wrap up his work and get out, and never talk to a lecturer like that again. The cool young guy from Sunderland, left robotically, far too stunned to either protest or say thank you or ask where the nearest petrol station was. He simply exited, never to return. I sat, amazed, having witnessed the absolute transformation of Ian Stephenson; gentle and sweet into Ian Stephenson; tiger. I realised that day that Ian's relationship with me was protective. I have never quite understood that, and since hardly anybody was ever protective of me before: it touched me deeply. It also demonstrated that there was something fiercely ethical in his nature. That disrespect was unacceptable: and furthermore represented a force to be knocked down. So, behind all the poetic discretion of those

modestly patient surfaces: there was a man who knew how to fight, once he'd identified a clear ethical issue. The character of his paintings, of his method, is driven by a constant obsessive fidelity. He rains down his colour with the even-handedness of nature, and the endurance of a farmer.

'The details are the paintings' he said. One can say this about all human endeavour and all human relationships, not just the natural world. For in its details one can understand and see demonstrated the truth of everything. What lies behind, and causes form, shape and appearance. What the thing is really, in its symphony of elements. Eventually he discarded the forms, the buried shapes, and showed what he was destined to show all along: detail exclusively. The paintings arrived at their inevitable destination, and became detail as monumental blocks.

Air, Earth, Water. Britain being a land of coast, where the elements of Air, Earth and Water struggle against each other every day, and have done since Britain was made. This has given Britain its character. In Europe, out of Europe. Desirable but difficult to invade. The Spanish Armada was chased all around the coast of Britain and Ireland, by sailors who understood that navigation (the ability to blow with the wind) was more important than big guns. It was that chase that caused the great Armada to incrementally self-destruct:

detail by detail. And, it is this space that exists between the border of things that has made the British character. It has given the British character its patience, its tolerance, its sense of independence and its Romanticism. Ian is the exemplar and the heir, made visible, of all this. The eternal emotional space between the land and the sea and the sea and the sky is responsible for Romanticism. It is the space between things that represents eternity, and gives us the luxury to fall into it and feel profoundly. It is no accident that *Wuthering Heights* takes place on the rain soaked moors of Yorkshire or that Wordsworth, the great Romantic poet, wrote in the Lake District, where water, air and earth are visually mixed up for most of the year. Ian Stephenson is a Romantic. But, he is a systematic Romantic. An artist who understood conceptual art, as it related to painting very early on and this was manifested with great beauty by the relationship between process, and its own strange ritualistic dance, and visual result.

'I insist on the details in a picture'. The paintings are made by details. But, they are also made by gravity. The force that holds all our world together, is what carries the drops of paint vertically down onto the horizontal canvas, from Ian's hand and brush. The paint falls to the canvas in imitation of nature as rain would fall evenly, and without favour, onto a deserted sandy beach off of the North

coast of Britain. Everything arrives as it should in an even, measured, dance that covers what arrives first. So time is represented by layering and what ends up on top is what arrives last. It is a picture, a perfectly true mirror, of process. Just as the rain is what it is, and not other. A strip of land being as wet, exactly, as the amount of rain that falls onto it. A painting by Ian Stephenson is a mirror of adding and covering, until what is covered cannot exist as a clear visual reality. Then, the painting is full up. Then the painting is detail laden, to the point where it can take no more. Then it is free of him, and ready for us: as a clear, conceptual conundrum. Because the systematic painter has, by simple addition, made the Romantic inscrutable. Ian has made a painting that begins to empty itself out of specific narrative and meaning, whilst simultaneously being made of inestimable detail. But detail in this work contradicts describable content, just as the Romantic urge is not to articulate emotion, but to provoke it.

He talked of the macro and micro. In other words of opposites, and by compressing two traditions he arrives at originality. Georges Seurat declared that he had found an entirely new way of painting. He had made painting 'artificial' again. He had taken it out of nature and put it back into the artificial world of the studio. And, by

putting paint down systematically, in small dots, he had got rid of gesture and the hand's direction. He would stand painting in front of the painting for hours without having to step back to look at it. His work was above mere appearance, and, in fact, had become conceptual. One could argue he was the first conceptual artist, because the theory determined precisely the result. Although this doesn't explain the poetic charge of his smaller paintings.

I had an exhibition once in a museum in Graveline on the North coast of France, which is where Seurat comes from. Now it is famous for having a nuclear power station, which gives the place a slightly creepy quality and makes me wonder about the influence of Seurat's scientific particles. There you could see the famous lighthouse that appeared in his paintings. However, when I looked across the inlet to the jetty on which the lighthouse was planted, the air was vibrating with dots. They say it's a phenomenon of the place that there are dots everywhere, and that it is impossible to see the air as empty. And, that the explanation lies in the way the light is reflected off of the water. So, everything comes from something. Or nothing comes from nothing. Goethe says that nothing can come out of darkness.

My father was a barber, and outside of his barber's shop he had a barber's pole:

striped in red and white. I used to visit him, a lot, when I was a child and now I'm painting stripes. That seems weird.

Ian Stephenson painted watercolours with his father when he was a boy. And, he painted standing on the sandy particles of the beach of the North East coast of England, where the horizon line is a blurred strip for half the year, and every colour is fluctuating between definition. The light of the North East is clear and bright and closer to Scandinavia than Cornwall and the weather is thunderous and unstable. If you stare into the yellow green grey mist that is the colour of Ian's paintings, you can feel the ships cutting the waves in the distance. You can feel what the mist will not allow you to see. So, the mist holds, obscures, shelters and endangers, and is the teacher of the Romantic spirit.

Jackson Pollock, the great American Abstract Expressionist painter, developed a style of combining rhythmically circular motion of dripping paint onto canvas that was lying on the floor, while he was walking around on top of it. He was therefore literally in the painting. He, like Seurat, dispensed with touch, but he replaced it with drip. This created distance and movement. Pollock achieved a very great body of work made of swirling rhythm, and in Number 32, which is in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf, he closed the gap ferociously

between process and result. It is a giant horizontal rectangle, where black paint is dripped rhythmically and evenly onto raw cream coloured canvas. In this work, Pollock achieves the ambitious power of a painting with the brevity of a drawing. This accounts for its impact and its conceptual elegance.

Ian Stephenson was a man from the North East of England, but he was a man who understood the past and the present. In addition, he was sophisticated internationally, and he knew all about American Art of the 20th century.

When the influence of Jackson Pollock rubs up against a Romantic spirit, like Ian's, who is steeped in the history of fairly recent French painting: the result is easy to see in retrospect. However, the accommodation of this influence (and I talk of action painting) pushed through the net of his own European tradition yields a fascinating result. Ian Stephenson pushes together two opposites, where they meet on his own clouded horizon. There he combines the sky and the sea. The systematic structuring impulse of Europe dissolves into all-over painting. So that freedom from description is achieved, without denying the supremacy of detail.

In preparation for his Retrospective at the Laing Art Gallery, Ian painted in the huge rooms of Newcastle University Art Department during the summer of 1970. The bright Northern light was filtered through old

windows. The result being old bright light. The stretchers were beautifully made as huge horizontal rectangles. The linen was the best: all the way from Belgium and it was stretched to perfection, with the attaching staples put into the wooden frame at exactly regular intervals. And, since the dots of paint on the front side were going to be a paradigm of evenness: the back, in attitude, was the same as the front. The paintings were made with utter commitment from the moment they were conceived as paintings to be. Every action was a deepening component in what led inevitably to the clouded rectangle: that was an unnameable colour made of thousands of particles of nameable colours. Detail heading towards oblivion.

Ian walked around steadily flicking and dropping the paint from above onto the huge rectangle, horizontally below. Not unlike the seed-sower in Millet's great painting, *The Sower of 1850*.

One day the paintings were gone and there was a negative rectangle on the floor where they had lain receiving their dots. Around the rectangle on the old wooden floor was the necklace of dots that had missed the canvas and now faded out into the space of the room. The students all loved Ian, because they recognised him as a true artist, and what they all wanted to be. I was thinking later that we should have kissed

what was left of him on the floor, but being
British art students and disobediently
opposed to idolatry: we didn't.

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