

Studio International

June 1972

Journal of modern art

90p \$2.50



John Walker on his painting

The more you get into painting the more you – I don't know, I just enjoy painting. I enjoy looking at paintings. The more I paint, the more I tend to want them round me – good art to look at. In other words there aren't any good reproductions... I need it to look at it, to feed off it. You see, I enjoy the sort of monastic clarity paintings give me. They are looking inward, and I enjoy looking inward. I'm going into painting, and they are going out of it.

I'm a painter, and I respond. You know, Vermeer's view of Delft has been with me for ten years probably – it's a huge thing, it's always there. And likewise, you just name it. If you commit yourself to be a painter then you're open to painting. And it takes those people on. They don't get excluded. You name it, I can talk to you about two hundred paintings intimately... I enjoy the whole idea of painters. I enjoy the whole activity of the thing. It means a lot to me.

At the moment I like bad art, and I like bad paintings. You know, I'm in love with painting. I can say that at the moment, I'm unashamedly in love with painting. So I can even enjoy bad paintings. By saying that, I don't know whether that's anything to do with the clarity of what I think I'm thinking when I'm in a studio situation. But it seems fundamental. If you're going to get into painting then you're going to get into El Greco, and you're going to get into Matisse, and you're going to get into – you name them. They're just there, and you just need them sometime. You really do. This is your only occupation and they are the only people you've got. This may be a fault, most of the people you've got are dead people. It's dead art. Well, the best artists are generally dead. That's the terrible thing about it. That may be the difference. That may be why Barry le Va, or Terry Atkinson, do keep on wanting to confront you with a living situation. They're asking someone to get involved. I don't ask that. All I'm asking is to be allowed to paint, to make paintings. I'm not asking for any involvement by anyone. I'm just asking that, you know, just leave me alone. I tend to watch the paintings much harder than ever, recently. This has happened over the last 8 or 12 months. This is it. Suddenly I find myself watching the paintings more than

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it. It's instead of asking someone else to decide what's good or bad after producing the things. I'm not interested in showing them to someone, I'm not interested in what people want to look at, I'm interested in what I see. And so forth. I'm watching them all the time. I find it harder to paint now.

I'm not so much interested in phenomena at the moment, in that I'm not looking for something to happen. I don't know what ambition is. What do you mean by ambition? And the part about the New York situation. What I found about New York was – and we come back to this idea of being not approximate – is that the Americans were and are beautifully articulate. They have ideas and they're articulate about them. And I don't think anything that has been painted in this country has been less in idea but just in the articulation of the idea. I think that's the differential, that's all. And you realise when you're there and when you're painting in New York that you cannot be approximate. Someone'll grab you and honestly take you apart, if you are less than that. And less than truthful, about what you want to paint. When you paint something it has got to be perfectly honest and perfectly truthful. And that's the only way. And that's what New York taught me. That you can't get away with fudge. All the time you've got to be right on the edge... you've got to be screaming, almost. Well, I don't mean screaming as such. I mean it just as a word, the way it sounds.

I didn't meet most of the people, that wasn't the idea of my going to New York. The idea of going to New York was to meet people who were sort of with me, within the, at the same time, the same age, more or less. The people who had been confronted by the problem of making pictures in 1972.

I never did get to meet people that I knew made good paintings or were making good paintings. It's like Noland you know, I saw the paintings, but the people... I met Ray Parker. I said to myself, I think he's a much better artist than people think. I didn't like the last Noland. I thought they were prematurely shown. They weren't resolved. They were too approximate, they weren't familiar enough. There wasn't enough mileage of paint. There wasn't enough doing of them.

At the moment I don't find it an easy thing to paint paintings. It doesn't come joyfully to me. It has done, and I'm sure it will again. For the last six months, or something like that, there's not very much in it that's come without a lot of perspiration or agony or whatever you want to call it. That's to do with the articulation of the problem. I mean I've got the problem, and the agony's become that I've not been able to put the thing there.

You know? I see it, you know. I can see it when I go to sleep at night – what I want. And I've got a head full of dreams – but how do you make sense out of them?

Some of the Venice pictures are of the last

six months. They go back over two years, actually. The green one was the most difficult. That's the painting with a lot of history in it. And it took a lot of painting. When I look at it I see a lot of ghosts of other paintings underneath it. And I've got a real thing going for that painting, because of that, because it took so long – because it was a lot of paintings which would have produced that painting. It wasn't a hit-it-and-leave-it picture. I went through a lot of paintings before I got that. In an abbreviated form it was going to be an orange painting. I couldn't get orange together, and so then it became a blue painting on top because blue can kill the orange. The painting was worse after about four months. It never got left alone, it was wet constantly. It was a case of watching it and waiting for it and then holding it. And it's when you hold the painting, when you walk away from it, it's a critical moment.

It's not a planned situation, though I know that I'm going to walk into the situation, the studio situation, in the morning, and I know at a certain time it's going to let me go at night. That's the situation. It's no more than that. That's it. It's a life-style really rather than a painting.

I don't make plans I sit down and I make, you know, I've got notebooks, and notebooks and notebooks full of paintings, but somehow they never get painted. They're just there to clear the shit. So you can penetrate to the paintings. You can't programme it. I do try to. I mean I've got this painting, and I've got that painting. And logically this painting should come now. And so I – the notebook gets rid of it. Or the drawing gets rid of it. It gets rid of it and it gets me into a different situation. I'm always repeating myself, you know.

I came out of making very figurative paintings. My hero was Goya, when I was a student, and he still is. I made a lot of paintings about the first war and autobiographical paintings, using my father's experience of the First World War and then I felt inadequate that I didn't know more about it, and the only way I could relate to it was through his experiences. So I painted a lot of paintings which were about those kind of things that went on for individuals who were involved in the fighting in the First World War. And because of that – of course Goya was very important – because I was an artist and he was an artist and he endeavoured to convey the kind of feelings about war and I'd been painting these pictures for a long time, I began to change. Why do you change painting? You change because you become, you know... why do you change shapes, or why do you change images? You change because suddenly one day you realize you're repeating something. It's not carrying the powers that painting can have, because you've done it once.

One of the first showings of American painting that I'd seen – other than the show in 1959 at the Tate – had in it the painting which held me the most and is still very relevant. It's a Pollock painting, called *Number Twelve* –

and I think it's been destroyed now. Those paintings meant an enormous amount to me. It may be because of my training that I felt there was a very strong reason for figurative painting, that you couldn't give it up lightly, that there was a real reason to be doing these things. And then I saw this Noland exhibition at the Kasmin and I got very strong feelings for the first time ever, about abstract painting.

That was in 1965. It was the diamond-shaped paintings. I went in there and I had a bellyache, which can happen very rarely. I'd seen the Rembrandts in Amsterdam, and I'd seen van Goghs in Amsterdam, and I'd been ill, physically ill, looking at those paintings, and then I got this thing and that was traumatic for me. It was a big thing that there were paintings that bold and that abstract. In fact it went beyond being abstract. You can't look at those paintings and call them abstract paintings. You know, those were the kind of terms we looked at paintings in years ago; there was abstract painting and there was figurative painting. Some words. But you can't talk about abstraction in those terms any more when you look at paintings. That made me sick, and I went back into my studio and somehow had to resolve shapes that were meaningful for a particular kind of *angst*. That I felt. A bellyache, if you like, at that time.

At that time I was doing the grid pictures. Like the John Moores paintings for instance, in 1967. I still tried figurative painting. I still do draw figuratively, but that was a turning point for me. But if I was going to make non-objective art, the shapes I was going to use would have to have a dignity, if you like. They would have to have a presence, always, which made them into some sort of a phenomenon. They conveyed feelings. They could not just be a red shade next to a black shade.

I wouldn't want to paint a picture without those shapes in. It would be easy to paint a picture like that. But I would want to give it enough feeling. And it just happened at that time and, because I was moving that way, I looked at a lot of art, you know, contemporary art. I didn't know I was going to take on that problem. Or it didn't look that way. People didn't think of colour as three-dimensional or that it could have shape or a meaningful presence. It was a hard time; it was the time of hard-edge painting after '65. 'Illusionistic art or painting, or illusionistic shapes' was a dirty word. You weren't supposed to use those kind of terms. Colour was one colour next to another colour, aggravating another colour, and making colour problems. When colour could be to me at that time three-dimensional.

I don't see my shapes as illusionistic shapes. But that's how they've been described by one or two people talking about them. I see them as coloured shape, which has form. Does that make it illusionistic?

I didn't move the shapes around on the surface until they then reached their most critical position, you know, their most

meaningful position. We were talking about shape and we were talking about style. But what I find interesting about painting, when I was introduced into painting at that particular time, people had abandoned... people weren't looking at shape in painting as a three dimensional, suggesting three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional plane, with illusionistic shapes, shapes that can have that kind of three-dimensional structure within a painting. That was the area. It makes a hell of a lot of common sense to be in, really. People weren't used to tackling that problem. And it was a question of trying to use shapes which had a peculiar sensation from the beginning, to record scale, if you like.

When I was making the pictures it was impossible to stand back and look at the whole picture anyhow. The pictures were of a scale almost larger than the room I was painting them in. I was painting them across the room, so it was difficult to see the whole thing. And from a straight head-on position, you couldn't possibly see the painting. But, I mean, what is equally important is that only ever did the painting work well when the two shapes conversed with each other. The things I use within the paintings have to be to the scale of the paintings. I mean, I can *not* paint small paintings with the same subject matter. That's an impossibility. Drawings, though, are suggestive material. Drawings grow big, they are big, they are suggestive, you know, out of scale, you can make a line 40 inches or you can make it a mile long within six inches. It is a suggestive medium. I can make a line. I can make it an inch or a foot even though it only covers a fraction of the space of the painting. You can actually suggest all the space you want in a small area within a bigger drawing. It's funny that you can't do that with painting—or I can't anyhow.

When I choose shapes it involves a lot of hard work before I get there—it's that they should have the possibility of form. When they become boring or when they become usual or something they get out of the way. I'm trying to think of a situation when I know when it's no longer viable, when I know they've got to be sacked, and that's usually the best time. That's usually when you're feeling really good about your painting and it's looking good, articulate, honest—right on the edge.

But it looks too good. It doesn't have that abrasive quality in it, and then you've got to look for something else, got to introduce a problem of some sort, just throw it in somewhere, throw something in. At that point you throw a lot of things in. Then you choose, you know. You throw them in your note books and choose.

Looking at Matisse is not something I've lived with for a long time. I've always admired certain Matisse paintings but over the last, say, twelve months, I've been feeling, or knowing a lot about Matisse which can help me. You know which Matisse paintings, which I

probably wouldn't have looked at. Perhaps I'm just getting an art education.

As for Hofmann, he's a great painter, isn't he? I don't have any problems with him—he's just a great painter. What do you want me to say? He made some incredibly good paintings. What else can I say about him? I haven't any problems—he's easy. He follows in a tradition. He's probably the one American artist—or, he's become American, in his late life—that's really understood Matisse. I don't think anyone else has.

I don't think he has, actually, meant a lot more to me than being a good painter. You know, he's a great painter. And I don't have any problem. So you're there. Hofmann wasn't in that exhibition I was absolutely sold on. And then, because I was interested in what I'd seen, I started researching, and found catalogues and things and Hofmann came up. Always the painting seemed difficult, in that they looked trivial, they looked less than what I'd been looking for. After looking at a Rothko or a Still or a Kline, at that particular time the Hofmanns looked less, because more gestural paintings were relevant. Hofmann's looked pre-planned. Pollock's were within the act of painting—it's corny—and there was a fluid rhythm about him. But the Hofmanns were always pre-planned, out of scale, and there was something in his paintings that I didn't understand, ever. And it was because I didn't understand it that I wanted to know about it. They were an irritant and I really wanted to know about those paintings. I think that's why, because I thought they were bad, but out of the badness of them there was a goodness. You know, I could see the goodness but all the time I was thinking, oh God, this is awful, because it was so obvious. And subsequently what Hofmann taught me was to have a look at Matisse. He really understood Matisse.

Your finding that yellow picture difficult to get into, well, you know, that's your problem. It didn't take that long for me. It was just a hunch, and I took it, and I knew it was believable. I was working on a series of grey pictures. There were three paintings, which were the grey, the green, and the yellow painting. They were all grey pictures. Believe it, they were all grey pictures. And the only painting that stayed that way, totally, tonally, was the lighter painting. And that's got yellow. Er... introduced into it, actually. Of the other paintings, the one aggressively went darker and went dark greens, and then this other painting, almost in the same moment the other ones were concluded, became what it was. It was a sort of instant recognition of a possibility which became a reality.

Usually when I'm unsure of the possibilities of the shapes I collage them. When I can make them articulate, when they become as one with the painting then of course they're painted on, but when they're collaged it's usually at a stage when I'm trying to find a meaningful introduction for them. It's that they're painting



outside of the painting and introduced into the painting. It's that they're totally painted outside of the painting on a separate canvas and almost rushed into the painting—as an irritant, sometimes deliberately as an irritant. Sometimes I enjoy it, I enjoy the buggery of them. It doesn't always work out that way because sometimes they're made. I think as collages they always look additive, an additive process to the painting. When they are collages they're always that way. It's that I enjoy the idea of cutting out and then smacking on, producing, or throwing into the painting in a way. I enjoy that soreness, the whole idea of cutting and then pushing in to a particular moment of painting which you think's good, you know, then fucking it just at that moment. I enjoy that. The soreness of it—I enjoy it.

The wire netting's just to suspend colour, usually; it's that I really want to suspend that kind of phenomenon on the surface of the canvas. That's what it's for. It's there to hang on to the canvas surface. To literally hang on. I cannot make with the brush strokes the kind of suspension I want with the paint. I want the paint to be beyond the canvas surface and that I cannot do with the brush. So it's the way to suspend colour. The only way I can make it hang on the shapes, above the shapes, across the shapes makes it, as a colour, a physical reality. Then it becomes a pickable object almost. And I can't do that with a brush. I wish I could. The desire is to suspend paint—it's to get it up front. It's like in that particular picture you're talking about—that you were talking about before—it's not a very thick painting. It's just thick in moments where the paint is suspended. That's the clarity in the dark green picture. The paint's got to be thick. I think that's because of the history of the painting rather than in the intention of the paint.

The grids were to create a non-illusionistic space to bring the canvas up front. Well, there

you are. A device to do that. I wanted it all on the surface. They were simply that. That was the whole reason for it, to get them really up front, to mark with surface wires, and that was the canvas surface, and make it an obvious point of reference, then to push anything else forward that could be in front of that. That's all it was. *Touch* has a residual grid in it, which came back into the painting at a certain point. It's only in a portion of the painting. It was just an attempt to re-establish the surface of the painting.

Drawing is too thin, usually, drawing is to get rid of the shit before I can get to the painting. Or drawing is looking at the painting after. I do a hell of a lot of drawing of the painting after I've finished it to know what I've got. And usually the more the painting is obviously colour, colour chromatics, usually the drawing's more tonal. I want to know what I've got. I don't want to let it go away until I know what I've got. And drawing helps me to understand. So I tend to draw a lot after the painting, after the painting's finished.

I don't see it as preparatory to the next painting – I see it as an explanation for me of what's there at that particular moment. It's very often not for the next painting because the next painting goes off somewhere else. Because I've done that kind of painting and explained through drawing that it's going to become a certain kind of painting. I tend to go the other way then.

At the moment, I'm much more interested in paintings that don't succeed than paintings that do. I'm interested in irritants and things that don't look right, aren't right and give me a bad time. I can paint a good picture, I can paint a handsome painting, but I don't want to do that.

I want to paint a very honest painting, something that's direct, that's a piece of me, whatever I'm into at that time. My understanding about what art is and all the other things besides. I mean, what screws me at the particular moment. I'm very interested in painting something like a bloody bullet out of the blue, so it comes direct. I'm very interested in that. I don't want to fuck it up by painting shit, something that produces good handsome paintings, or can do. The more you get screwed by this idea of painting the more you realize that what you've got or what's there for you, it's just for you and what's there for anybody else is them. The idea of teaching painting – someone to paint – is irrelevant really. All you can possibly do is to tell them that they're okay. It's what they've got, is important. You may not agree with that.

At a time in America I was having a bad time, and I thought it was something to do with getting into painting. I did a lot of painting when I was travelling. I painted and did a lot of notations of landscapes and it was an easy transition from the studio back into landscape. But then coming back to the studio again became a very difficult transition and every

time I touched the canvas I had real problems just with touching the canvas. That really can hurt sometimes. And a friend of mine, Alan Cote came in, and he said something like 'Wow, the colours are naturalistic'. And I hadn't thought of that at the time. Someone else had to tell me. Because I was trying to just put colour down. It was hurting to do it. It was blues and browns. Normal old colour, all the landscape colours, and that. But I wasn't putting them down that way. I didn't think I was putting it down that way. So I just did the pictures. I just ploughed into it. So I've got a couple of paintings which I'm taking to Venice. The one painting is a sort of darker version of the painting I showed here last summer. I felt I wanted to have a link between five months before, when I was trying to bridge the gap between those months of travelling and painting in a studio situation. So that's the painting I'm going to show. Then I'm showing the very light one – the painting's a better painting – light

(Above left)
Sometime II 1971
2.44 x 6.1 m

The artist, by courtesy Reese Pallev, New York

(Below left)
Untitled 1972
3.05 x 2.44 m
Acrylic on canvas

The artist, by courtesy Nigel Greenwood Inc

(Above)
Untitled 1972
The artist, by courtesy Nigel Greenwood Inc.

bluish, you know there's a lot of blue – it's a very naturalistic colour situation. And it's got a lot of depth in it. It moves, it can run about a mile if you want it to. I've got to choose between the other pictures. The other picture can be a red picture, it's a picture that's about two years old. And a light green picture. When I get there I want to see the light. □

[From a conversation with Tim Hilton.]

