

KATHERINE HAMILTON

LANDSCAPE JOURNEYS INSIDE AND OUT 2013 – 2016

12 NOVEMBER – 11 DECEMBER 2016

EXHIBITION OPENING TIMES – Wednesday to Sunday 10.00 am – 5.00 pm  
or by appointment

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**Katherine Hamilton**  
*Night Waters, Southern Arctic*  
oil on canvas, 2016  
70 x 155 cm

# The Drama of Shape

Andrew Lambirth

Katherine Hamilton is a dedicated traveller, pursuing her wanderlust as far as New Mexico and Guatemala, but also traversing the British Isles in her search for places which move her. Yet however far she roams, it is always with renewed enthusiasm that she returns to her Suffolk studio, invigorated with the spirit of new places. She reminds me of GK Chesterton who famously maintained that the whole point of travel was to be able to come back home refreshed, to see the familiar with new eyes.

When she finds a subject she wants to paint, she makes pencil drawings of it with copious colour notes, seizing that particular moment of discovery in a sketchbook. She needs to impress the look of a landscape onto her mind, so that it may be recalled later in the studio with exactitude and with the emotions she felt when first regarding it. Inevitably, it is the parade of shapes she falls in love with – the roads, walls and trees that articulate a stretch of countryside.

The genesis of these paintings tends to be protracted: on average, a painting will take two years to reach resolution, and in the process may well change dimensions before it finds its final form. Hamilton paints on ready-primed unstretched canvas, deliberately cutting out a piece that is larger than the image she has in mind. She then draws out the composition in charcoal, and puts a wash of burnt sienna over the top. She builds the image slowly with much scraping back of paint with palette knife. As she excavates the image, it may become apparent that it needs to be larger or smaller than originally intended, but working on unmeasured pieces of canvas allows for this kind of development. The unstretched half-painted canvases lie about on the floor of the studio, acclimatising themselves. It is as if they have to become part of the fabric of the place before they can be of any value or meaning, and an aspect of this rite of passage is being walked upon by the artist as she moves around her working environment. Hamilton is refreshingly un-precious about her work.

She thins her oil paint with turps and aims for a lean look. Hers are not surfaces heavy with impasto, rather they appear scrubbed and chalky, possessing something of the fragility of pastel. The paintings are only stretched later, when the image is achieved.

The smaller works tend to be stuck down on board, or marouflaged, the larger canvases put on stretchers. Most of these paintings are worked on a substantial scale, but when Hamilton paints smaller she is no less effective. Look, for instance, at *Valley, North Yorkshire*. It is simply composed of trees, houses, roadway, light and weather, yet it radiates mystery.

Whether it's the cut-out profile of the mountains in the Lofoten Islands, or the blocky, Cubist-faceted houses round the harbour at Staithes in North Yorkshire, Hamilton orchestrates flat patches of colour like battledress camouflage, playing out a complex exchange of surface pattern and depth. Occasionally her streamers of colour have a jagged awkwardness that is startlingly effective, as when she paints the Blythe estuary under a sunrise as hot as a volcano, or a cotton tree aflame in *Autumn Desert*. For my money, Hamilton is best at landscape, though the three interiors she painted of the deserted diamond mine towns of Namibia, all stairs and lines and shadows, offer as weird an ambience as you might find in the haunting images of Edward Hopper. Again, it is the drama of shape which attracted her to the subject.

The most impressive painting in this body of new work is *Autumn Marsh*. The crispness of design in Hamilton's best pictures, and sometimes the pale but lambent colour, unexpectedly recall the intensely English vision of Eric Ravilious. In *Autumn Marsh*, Hamilton has achieved a pellucid panorama of the North Suffolk landscape as seen from the bell tower of St Michael's Church in Beccles. Two Yorkshire winter paintings employ tracks in the snow to help delineate the terrain: *Winter Dale* (note the poignant gravestones) and *Winter Landscape*, with its circumscribing river and building blocks of farm sheds. Another Yorkshire subject focuses on a waterfall as it spills over a great bowl of rock and vegetation, eloquently foregrounded by the bare branches of a tree.

Katherine Hamilton is well aware of the central importance of being open to what her painting might want to say, and that this will only be discovered slowly, through the process of making. Her chief aim is to simplify and distil her imagery, and she achieves this through a dialogue between description and abstraction. These luminous new paintings are some of the finest she has made.

Andrew Lambirth, author and art critic, whose latest book is *Brian Rice Paintings 1952-2016*

## Dick Pope writes of Katherine's work:

As a cinematographer, exactly what excites and attracts me to Katherine Hamilton's paintings could be perceived as fairly obvious... they are most cinematic. Bathed in beautiful and apt light whether it be twilight, night, dawn, sunrise, sunset or that 'magic hour' following the setting of the sun, her perfect compositions captured effortlessly within the frame are always quietly observed from a very natural point of view.

But the other reason I so admire her work is because the films I shoot are about storytelling and Katherine is certainly a very fine storyteller. Each and every one of her paintings confirms this. They all tell a story, lightly atmospheric in tone here, mysteriously and darkly brooding there, fleetingly observed or meticulously studied but always reeling me in with their underlying narrative, their calming affirmation and global celebration of people and places across the planet.

Captured through a lens, this marriage of narrative, light and composition is what I strive to achieve when I photograph a film for cinema. But this is not at all the way Katherine paints because there is no camera involved. Pretty extraordinary really, for much of her work appears at first glance to evoke the briefest photographic moment, seemingly frozen by the opening of a rapid electronic shutter. The reality though is very different because when approaching a subject, first she simply observes, while patiently waiting for 'it' to happen, totally immersing herself in her subject and allowing the experience to completely absorb. She sketches and makes detailed notes. Then later, often much later and back in her Suffolk studio, she begins her arduous process of bringing her paintings to life as oil on canvas. Here embarking on a further painstaking journey of rediscovery, but now distanced from the reality of the original experience, her memory and senses re-kindled, she re-imagines, and dreams again.

And indeed her work does emerge dreamlike, a greatly heightened and tilted reality, often virtually surrealistic, hyper in colour, light and deep shadow, playful and ominous. Now distilled to the essence, landscape or interior stripped back of all unnecessary embellishment, they do become dreamscapes, putting me the viewer right there. They can be lonely, almost post-apocalyptic, as if no

ne's left alive or I'm the very first or very last to see this, to be here. I am alone. Observing the work feels very personal, like an early explorer's 'first contact'. She is that explorer.

For Katherine has a restless 'traveller' spirit and will suddenly take off to very far away, remote and inaccessible lands. One of the extraordinary things about these adventures is that she always travels rough and always travels alone. It's a personal journey. She's a loner, driven and very courageous. For her, she simply cannot share the experience and has to suffer alone to achieve that which she's seeking. This struggle both out in the field and back in the studio is all one to her, a totally and intrinsically necessary part of her life journey. Viewing the paintings I can certainly often sense the hardship she must have endured to achieve her vision. She really puts herself through it. She has to, and that applies to all her work whether it's Southwold, South America or the Southern Arctic.

This struggle, the constant reaching out for new horizons, the journeying and sketching, the re-imagining, the slow working up of many paintings at the same time, all remind me of another painter. Because for me Katherine embodies the feminine spirit of a thoroughly modern J.M.W. Turner. Forever drawn back to the English coast, he to Margate, Kent, she to Southwold, Suffolk, both so obsessed by sea, sky, land... and light. Surely also for Katherine... 'The Sun Is God'.

Dick Pope, Cinematographer, 2016. Nominated twice for Academy Awards Oscars: *The Illusionist*, 2007 and *Mr Turner*, 2015

