

JEREMY GARDINER *ATLANTIC EDGE* Paintings from the Cornish Coast - St. Agnes to The Lizard

10 - 31 JULY 2010 | Mon - Sat 10am - 6pm | Admission free

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Catalogue essay by Charles Darwent:

I first saw Jeremy Gardiner's work in a show called *A Panoramic View* at Pallant House in Chichester. This ran alongside another, larger exhibition of pictures by John Tunnard, a vaguely overlooked English painter who started life in the 1930s as a Surrealist and ended it in the early 1970s as what I suppose you might call a Cornish Modernist.

From what I had read of Gardiner, the pairing of the two men's work seemed apt. Towards the end of his life, Tunnard painted vast, dark hymns to technology, the most memorable being of the radar station at Goonhilly Downs. Gardiner, I knew, was a senior research fellow at Birkbeck College, London, with a long interest in computing and computer art. What linked the two men in my mind was arcane overlap of art and science. On the train down to Chichester, I imagined Gardiner's work.

What I found at Pallant House was not what I had pictured. The pairing of the two men was still apt, but Gardiner, surprisingly, seemed much more closely tied to the early Tunnard than to the late – to pictures such as *Phi = 0* of the 1940s, say. Accidents of topography apart – Tunnard was painting in Cornwall, Gardiner in his native Dorset – there was in both men's art a dramatic engagement with the painted surface. Tunnard incised what looked like pencilled lines into his gessoed board, Gardiner had done the same with acrylic and jesmonite on poplar panels. Tunnard had discovered a semi-illusory finish, made by laying layer on layer of fresh paint on plaster and then sanding them down. In a parallel but quite different way, Gardiner's surface hinted at three-dimensional topography while remaining firmly flat and abstract: the ambiguous, drapery-like cliffs of *Summer Storm* and *Sunlight*, *Old Harry* are an example.

Of the two men, oddly, the term "English Neo-Romantic" seemed better applied to Birkbeck's techno-boffin than to Tunnard, a one-time fisherman and coastguard. Having made the mistake of assuming that Gardiner would make computer-based art, I now saw his work as historicist. There was something wilfully anti-technological about painting on poplar, particularly on panels with irregular edges. The titles of Gardiner's pictures, too, smacked of another time, of Alfred Wallis and Ben Nicholson, of the 1940s. The names of this current show and the works in it – *Mellow Sun*, *Wheal Coates*; *Moonlight*, *St Ives* – continue this archaism in sounding postcardy, even a little twee.

Which, quite intentionally, they are. A useful word to keep in mind when looking at Gardiner's work is "geological". In a literal sense, his art concerns itself with geology – with the landscape of the Dorset coast, or, here, with Cornish topography. But a work such as *Mellow Sun*, *Wheal Coates* (cat 1) doesn't merely illustrate the outcome of a geological process. It imitates it. The landscape around *Wheal Coates* was formed by convulsions of the earth's crust, by tectonic rise and fall, erosion, by the intrusions of tin-seeking man. It is, both literally and historically, an accretion of strata and a grinding down of those strata. As with much British landscape, it is the product, at least in part, of technology. Gardiner's *Mellow Sun*, *Wheal Coates* is shaped by a parallel violence.

There are other histories in it, too. Where the work in *A Panoramic View* mined Gardiner's own past – he spent his childhood in Dorset – the pictures in this show, *Atlantic Edge*, from *St Agnes* to *The Lizard*, mine the history of art. It is impossible, as an artist, to look at the landscape of Cornwall without seeing the story of Cornish painting. (Or perhaps the even older one of British coastal painting: when I eventually speak to Gardiner, he owns up to an unlikely fondness for William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay* of 1858.) Embedded in *Mellow Sun*, *Wheal Coates*, like tin in earth, are Gardiner's local heroes, John Tunnard and Ben Nicholson. The question, though, is how?

I've said that Gardiner's latest work is shaped by the history of art, but I should maybe have said by the history of representation, or even of seeing. Picture postcards, too, are embedded in the way we see – that an artist sees – the landscape of Cornwall. That is quite a different thing from saying that Gardiner, with his postcardy titles, is trying to paint postcards, or even Tunnards or Nicholsons. Being a painter of histories is not the same thing as being an historicist painter. The palette of Gardiner's *Summer Storm*, *The Lizard* (cat 20) has something of the over-heightened contrasts of commercial imagery, and even some of its visual prompts. And yet the work's juggling of colour is also intensely painterly and intently modern, neo-expressionist rather than romantic. *Summer Storm*, *The Lizard* feels like a sum of many parts, and, as we shall see, that is precisely what it is.

If an interest in the past seems to sit oddly with Gardiner's day job as a technoculturalist, then an idea of how his works are made helps square the circle. His choice of poplar as a support is based not on tradition but on practicality: Gardiner's paintings start life en plein air, which means they have to be portable. (His deckle-edged panels are cut from random shards of plaster, projected onto the wood as a template.) The pictures in this show were made over a ten-month period, Gardiner working on all of them at once, cross-fertilizing from panel to panel, constantly shifting his viewpoint, layering his paint and sanding it back down, glueing on slivers of wood and ripping them off again. Unlike Dyce's cliffs, frozen in a significant moment, Gardiner's are built up of ten months of such moments.

Recently, at The Lighthouse arts centre in Poole, Gardiner installed a large-scale digital projection called *Light Years: Jurassic Coast*. Driven by changes in light, tide and weather, this had the luxury of running in real time which paint on wood does not. And yet the work in this show refuses to take that impossibility lying down. Pictures such as *Mellow Sun*, *Wheal Coates* and *The Lizard* invent what you might think of as non-linear real time, or real time compounded. They are, in that sense, entirely modern works with entirely novel aspirations. And yet Jeremy Gardiner's art also recognises that modernity is cumulative, that newness is built up of oldnesses; that digital art begins not with Bill Gates, but with Apelles.

Charles Darwent is art critic of the Independent on Sunday.