

NEIL STOKOE  
ALL THINGS MUST PASS

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Catalogue essay by Conor Mullan

**THE PIPER GALLERY**

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## Neil Stokoe: All Things Must Pass

The art critic Herbert Read once wrote, “the vicissitudes of the art world are such that it is possible for an artist of great talent to work for a lifetime in obscurity, and only towards the end of his career find the recognition that is due to him.” Although these words were in reference to Durham-born painter John Cecil Stephenson (1889-1965), they could just as easily be applied to the Durham-born Neil Stokoe. There are certainly similarities in the career choices made by the two painters, not least in their apprehensions regarding the mechanics of the art world. Is there some geographical or cultural characteristic within that part of the world which ingrains a belief that to hone one’s skills is nobler than to tout one’s wares? Although Stokoe agrees that there may be a good deal of truth in this, we have no need to elucidate such an aprioristic consideration. This exhibition is about what Stokoe is doing now. It celebrates an artist reflecting, still searching and still developing.

Although Stokoe’s scholarly and invariably adroit understanding of painting may be informed by Modern painters, only Francis Bacon – a friend of his through the 60s – is a recurring influence. His predominant influences are the masters: Goya, Velázquez, Rembrandt and Titian. Stokoe’s natural inclination is to paint, rather than talk. His view that “the only thing worth saying about a painting is not worth saying” reveals more about his own reluctance to over-examine his own work than a capricious refusal to engage with art criticism. He describes his own inability to articulate on the themes within his work as “trying to describe a type of smell, in a foreign language, when you don’t have the grammar in the first place.” Essentially, he does not *want* to explain: his apprehension to intercede on the viewer’s behalf gives him the power to heighten each painting’s sense of ambivalence and ambiguity. Although each painting has a strong visceral feel to its action and situation, it is mainly unclear as to what we are viewing: an act of sex, or an act of violence? Do the recurrent images of bandages give a sense of healing or an impression of

pain? He wants the viewer to read the work more than once, each time revealing another layer.

In conversation, the central themes within Stokoe’s work do begin to reveal themselves, but only when he talks about the influences of philosophy, poetry and literature. His recollection of reading Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* and its themes of despair give a greater insight to his work than he is ever likely to consciously communicate. Although Stokoe off-guard has described his work as fatalistic, one can certainly gain a more accurate understanding by exploring the recurring themes of mortality, pain and suffering within. Though he is aware that the viewer may recoil from what appear ostensibly to be the macabre elements of his work, it is important to him to remind us of the daily reality of pain and death. The circumvention of mortality in Western culture has left us with a feeling that death and pain only happen to others. We have lost our sense of life’s fragility - how suddenly pain can possess our lives and we can find ourselves made vulnerable. It reminds us that the strangest and most poignant aspect of pain is how little of it we actually remember.

Although there is a conscious ambiguity within his work we are occasionally, by way of a painting’s title, nudged towards what Stokoe wants us to see. In titling a painting *Shrouded Figure* he exploits our associations with death, and on this rare occasion manipulates our relationship with the painting. Harnessing the title’s obvious associations and our knowledge of *The Deposition*, one might even read its compositional arrangement as that of an altarpiece. The black panels to either side, whilst modulating our response, offer the viewer space to expound what we believe has come before and what may follow after. These devices lead us straight to the essential theme, that of suffering. We see an apparently physically strong man who exudes only resignation, his introspection reduced to a morbid curiosity about his own wounds. This heightens our perception of vulnerability; we sense he has yet to react. There is still the

unknown and the unresolved. Our feeling is that something has still to play out in this story.

*Renunciation*, with its compositional components and leading title, again seeks to manipulate our awareness of religious themes. Its immediate sense of tragedy quickly creates an ambiguous relationship with the viewer. The visual metaphors of suffering associated with the cross are employed here equally alongside the crucifix's steady compositional but ambivalent armature. The dynamics of the vertical element and the static calm of the horizontal halt our visual process, alerting us to other possibilities. Our instinctual sense of tragedy is called into question once we allow our eye to be drawn across the canvas. Here, what lies within the shadows begins to alert us to our own sense of vulnerability: is that a cloven foot or simply a trick of the falling light? Our discomfort intensifies as the image's Rothko-like colour-fields pulsate anxiously, uneasily. *Ritual* initially confronts us with an image of a blurred, rather domestic scene. Once again, almost immediately, what is ambiguous becomes chilling. The figure in the foreground's apron adds an almost workman-like calm to what has now become possibly perverse and, after re-reading, almost certainly obscene.

In *Presence*, as with *Renunciation*, Stokoe employs relationships of form with the dynamic but uncertain characteristics of the vertical. The spindly, unreliable, almost prosthetic nature of the synthetic apparatus is loosely but uncontrollably (nearly intangibly) attached to the bandaged figure. This is not a strong structure, not something the viewer would choose; it is flimsy, untrustworthy, inhibiting, irritating. This is a visual metaphor for the lack of control within our own lives. It considers the imposed trust we are obliged to place in those on whom we do not choose to rely. It comments on how these relationships can place us in positions which we understand but are unable to change.

The immediate nature of the situation in *Encounter I* is unclear. The perspective we glimpse, although only momentarily, is one

we associate with security cameras. This triggers our instinctive curiosity. Compositionally, the essential theme is one of a clambering, rushed panic heightened against the formal organisation of encompassing architectural features. The controlled geometric formality of the lift's decor sets its occupants at odds with their surroundings. The decoration on the floor compresses the space left within the lift, again heightening the tension of what the viewer can only guess will happen next. *Two Figures Within A Conservatory* says nothing of what is actually happening here. Are the figures in the middle of a sexual act or is something violent about to be witnessed? Each time we try to peep over the top to gain a better view of what is happening we are obstructed by a barrage of spiky foliage. The human instinct for voyeurism is impeded by a dream-like inability to reveal what is right in front of us, almost within touching distance.

When first viewed, *Encounter II* invokes the reportage imagery of war and political protest we associate with the work of photographer Robert Capa. We are also programmed to read it like a detail from a religious painting, such as Caravaggio's *Taking of Christ*. This, however is not necessarily a political or religious work. It is seen rather as a visual metaphor for man's ability to pull other men apart, our vulnerability to the will of other men. This theme is explored differently in *Tattooed Man*: again we see a physically powerful figure, but his stance is that of a man weakened and now vulnerable. His tattoo may speak loudly but its power has long since forsaken him, amplifying our sense that what was once perceived as strength now reveals weakness.

*Triptych*, with its visual imagery extracted from Claes Oldenburg's *Snapshots from a City* and its centre panel from Jim Dine's *Scene from a Shiny Bed*, might lead one to believe Stokoe is engaged with conceptual art and influenced by the immediacy of that medium. Nothing could be further from the truth. The aesthetic considerations of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* have a more important relationship to this work than the

contemporaneous ‘Happenings’ across the pond during his time at the Royal College of Art. Stokoe is simply extracting the aesthetic possibilities from a form of art where realism had begun to miss reality. *Lying Man*, although a variant on the theme within the central panel of *Triptych*, works on a different level emotionally. It is the most intangible and ambiguous of all the paintings in the exhibition. The necessity of the bandages is unclear: they are not applied, and they do not reveal. The intonation of light increases tension but does little to illuminate the nature of what we are witnessing.

In *Whither from Whither to*, we see Stokoe again use the compositional arrangement of side panels. Other than an obvious aesthetic enhancement, the panels open up new possibilities of how to read the work. One might certainly interpret the outer panels as a reference to life’s voids. Stokoe assents to Gauguin’s deliverance, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Although we can see movement, there is no particular indication as to the direction or impetus behind it: are the figures running or dancing? Are we witnessing a scene of panic, elation, violence? One might draw from this the conclusion that any of these feelings or situations are preferable to that depicted in *Presence*, the sensation of an inability to react.

The dominating, brooding presence of *Requiem*, with its spiralled monolith, purveys not a misanthropic visual metaphor but a compunctious comment on life inescapably turning on itself. The genus of *Requiem* can be traced to the indelible mark left on Stokoe by his first encounter with George Stubbs’ *Hambletonian*, whose dark, sculptural mass of equine form stretched silhouetted across the canvas has a complex emotional range far transcending its subject matter. *Requiem* does not seek to distil *Hambletonian*’s aesthetic possibilities, as with Stokoe’s treatment of Oldenburg’s ‘Happening’ in *Triptych*. The objective has now been inverted, the formal power and arrangement of *Hambletonian* extracted for its emotional rather

than aesthetic possibilities. The central visual metaphor, which Stokoe succinctly relates as “rats chasing their tails”, is distended from the banality of its domestic surroundings. It heightens our sense of entropy, reducing our ability to care as we look on. The bloodstains on the ground leave the viewer in no doubt that there is a human cost here.

This exhibition shows an artist firing on all cylinders; unapologetic, unafraid to engage with the iniquitous and unaffected by the ephemeral demands of the art world. It takes more than just technical ability and a visual sensibility to be a great artist. It takes fortitude and dedication. The work of Neil Stokoe deserves greater attention, as he has for over 50 years uncompromisingly and consistently beaten his own path. The public’s awareness of his work is not yet reflective of his talent; the apogee of his previous accomplishments, yet to be reappraised. Future exhibitions will explore the reach of his oeuvre but again, the focus here is on what he is doing now. *All Things Must Pass* signals an artist again on the move, restless, cognisant of human disposition and its inherent contradictions. Stokoe’s undiminished resolution and vitality enable him to penetrate areas from which we naturally shy away. The equivocal becomes manifest in our interpretation of each painting’s meaning. This is an artist with the ability to precipitate and translate our reactionary process. He is at the height of his creative powers and his achievement should be celebrated.

Conor Mullan









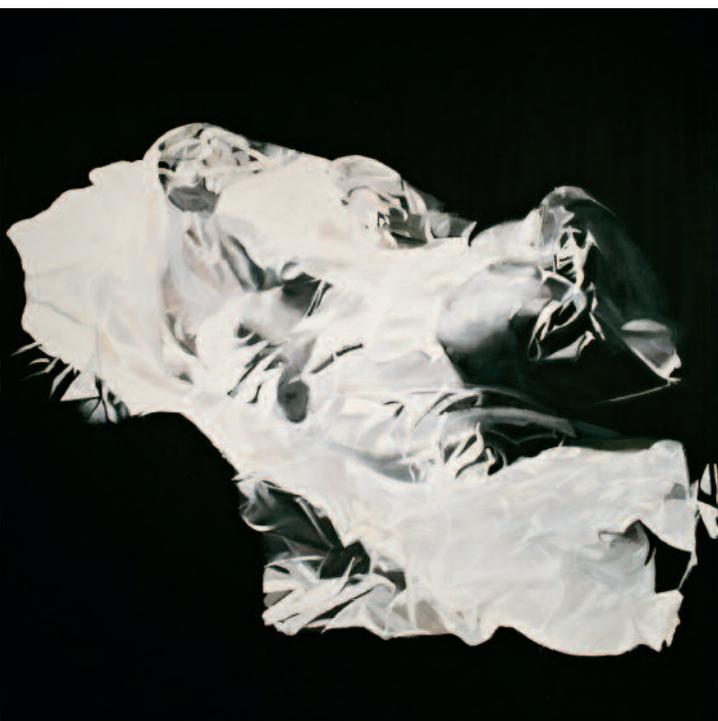


















# NEIL STOKOE

Born in 1935 in Bowburn, County Durham. Lives and works in London.

## EDUCATION

1963-64 Continuation Scholarship at the Royal College of Art, London  
1959-62 Royal College of Art, London  
1953-57 Sunderland College of Art, Tyne and Wear

## TEACHING

1966-2000 Part-time Lecturer in Foundation Course at Wimbledon School of Art, London  
1972-89 Part-time Lecturer in Painting at Portsmouth Polytechnic, Hampshire  
1964-66 Part-time Lecturer in Painting at Wimbledon School of Art, London  
1963-64 Part-time Lecturer in Art History at Wimbledon School of Art, London

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2012 Langham Gallery, London \*  
2011 *In this Vale of Tears*, Langham Gallery, London  
2004 Pilgrim Gallery, London \*  
2003 *Death, Sex and Ageing*, Pilgrim Gallery, London  
2002 *Out of a Clear Blue Sky*, Pilgrim Gallery, London  
1994 *Summer Exhibition* (invited artist), Royal Academy of Art, London \*  
1993 West London Artists' Registry, London \*  
1988 *London Group Exhibition* (invited artist), Royal College of Art, London \*  
1986 Concourse Gallery, Barbican Arts Centre, London \*  
1976-77 Art Basel with Nicholas Treadwell Gallery  
1976 Apex Gallery, Portsmouth \*  
1972 *Industrial Sponsors: First Contact*, Lord Petty's offices, London  
1970 *Solo Exhibition*, Clytee Jessop Gallery, London  
1967 *John Moores*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool \*  
1963 *John Moores*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool \*

\* Denotes a group exhibition

## COLLECTIONS

Arts Council Collection, London  
The Reynolds Foundation, Menorca

# CATALOGUE

Dimensions show height x length

All works are courtesy of the artist

p. 6 Encounter I (2011)  
Oil on Canvas  
101.5 x 101.5 cm

p. 7 Encounter II (2011)  
Oil on Canvas  
127 x 127 cm

p. 8 Lying Figure (2012)  
Oil on Canvas  
91.5 x 91.5 cm

p. 9 Shrouded Figure (2012)  
Oil on Canvas  
182 x 212 cm

p. 10 Presence (2012)  
Oil on Canvas  
212 x 182 cm

p. 11 Renunciation (2001)  
Oil on Canvas  
213 x 188 cm

p. 12 Requiem (2013)  
Oil on Canvas  
198 x 198 cm

p. 13 Ritual (2012)  
Oil on Canvas  
76 x 76 cm

p. 14 Triptych (2007)  
Oil on Canvas  
152 x 152 cm (x 3)

p. 16 Tattooed Man (2010)  
Oil on Canvas  
153 x 121 cm

p. 17 Two Figures in a Conservatory (2012)  
Oil on Canvas  
152.5 x 152.5 cm

p. 18 Whither from Whither to (2012)  
Oil on Canvas  
106 x 106 cm  
106 x 20.5 (x 2)