



Beyond the horizon

When Welsh painter **Iwan Gwyn Parry's** work hit a rut, he embraced a more representational style – and scrapped 10 months work. “Every painting is a step closer,” he tells Jenny White

A year ago, Iwan Gwyn Parry decided to lay aside his oil paints and embrace water-based media. He also adopted a more representational style of painting; an approach he had resisted since his college days.

For an artist whose style was already well known, this was an especially bold move. He was inspired by the memory of his former tutor, the late Peter Prendergast. “He was a beacon of light not just for me but for a whole generation of artists in North Wales,” says Parry. “I looked at his paintings again in great depth and I realised that his voice was still like a clear bell in my mind telling me what he told me 20 years

ago: that I had this illustrative ability and I should always think of it as a strength.”

It was a timely realisation, because Parry had painted himself into a rut. “My oil paintings were becoming a bit sterile and muddy and I just couldn’t find a way out of it. So I listened to Peter’s voice and decided to scrap ten months’ work, change medium, and just start again.”

Looking at his latest paintings today, there is no doubting the wisdom of his decision. They have a visionary quality that goes beyond topographical representation. At first glance they might depict the northwest coast of Anglesey, but Parry’s real subject is not the landscape but a state of mind. “I think my ▷

ABOVE *Cymyran Estuary After Rain, Ebbing Tide*, oil on canvas, 46x61cm. All images courtesy of Martin Tinney Gallery, Cardiff



ABOVE *Holyhead Bay, Distant Rain*, oil on canvas, 41x51cm

painting is a really a quest to understand a kind of absence that I've felt since childhood. I seek a solution, or answer to this absence in the landscape, and especially in Anglesey."

Asked to define that feeling of absence, he adds: "It's a connection with something that's ever-reaching. In all the paintings, distance is where I start and where, ultimately, the painting is resolved. The space beyond the horizon is the place that I try to arrive at in my mind. It's a destination I didn't really have, a full stop. Painting is a process of attempting to understand that space. And that space is where my absence is."

Immersion in the landscape

While marked by man, Parry's landscapes are never tame. Each one is bravely beautiful, bearing their post-industrial scars with pride. Their light is no insipid springtime glow; it's a defiant blast of autumn sunlight. Rather than faithfully recording certain views, these scenes are constructed from present day observations and memories of Parry's childhood, which was spent near a lagoon between the main island of Anglesey and Holy Island that is known, poetically, as the Inland Sea.

"It's important for me to spend time just looking at things... I rarely work from photographs because it stifles my imagination"

"It's a windswept, muddy estuary full of the remains of human activity: old dykes, embankments, sluice gates, fence poles, structures which no longer have a function and are left as monuments in the landscape. These are deep-rooted preoccupations in the work, as they mark the passage of time, the passage of land from one generation to another."

Like the work of another outstanding Welsh landscape artist, David Tress, Parry's paintings spring from a long and intimate acquaintance with the land.

"It's important for me to spend time just looking at things, rather than hopping out of the car for

two minutes and taking a picture. I rarely work from photographs because it stifles my imagination."

Parry's is a harder but more rewarding route: endless walks, plenty of sketchbook drawings, and large helpings of memory and intuition. "I walk a lot. Many of the places I frequent are difficult to access, it's a headache to get to certain things, and also I

have to take into account the time and the practicalities of working outside. It can be cold so I tend to work on quick drawings."

Informed by tradition

Back in the studio, Parry's working methods are informed by a long tradition of landscape painting. The Romantic masters, JMW Turner and John Constable are particularly strong influences. "I start all my paintings in the centre, at the horizon. Sometimes there is no obvious horizon line, but the paintings are all composed from a central viewpoint. I make an underdrawing and I grid the painting out, then I adapt it from there. I tend to have a set of rules that I abide by and then I dissolve those habits, and form new ones out of the ones that are familiar."

When Professor Bryan Hibbard, President of the Contemporary Art Society for Wales, selected Parry's work in *Artists & Illustrators*' "Nine for 2009" feature earlier this year, he noted that "what interests him is the whole landscape, just like JMW Turner." And like Constable, who began work by painting his entire canvas brown, Parry underpaints each canvas. "They either start from blue, an olive green or a peat brown. The underpainting is very important because it influences the mood and the surface tone."

For his palette, he looks to the Dutch baroque painter Johannes Vermeer. "I get very romantic about the idea of an artist's palette and I very much abide by Vermeer's palette: seven colours that seem to be balanced almost like a good meal. Lemon yellow, ultramarine, lead white... They're wonderful

ABOVE RIGHT Iwan Gwyn Parry BELOW *Late Summer Rain over Cymyran Estuary*, oil on canvas, 30x41cm



combinations and I tend to stick to them because you can't go wrong with them.

"Being a good colourist to me is not about using very bright colours, it's about using very subtle and delicate tones," he adds. "Painters like Gwen John and Stanley Spencer demonstrated that beautifully."

The legacy of Parry's modern-day mentor, Peter Prendergast, was celebrated recently with an exhibition at the Royal Cambrian Academy, of which Prendergast was a member. Parry, also a member, contributed work to the show, which bore testament to Prendergast's ongoing influence on Welsh art.

It was Prendergast's memory that put Parry back on track but where his quest will take him remains to be seen. "Every painting is a step closer but I know ultimately it's a futile activity because one never gets there. It's almost like a horizon line and that's how I want people to look at my pictures: everything is over there, beyond reach." 

Iwan Gwyn Parry was born in North Wales in 1970 and gained a BA (Hons) in Fine Art from Cardiff Institute of Higher Education before completing an MA in painting at Chelsea School of Art, London. He is a member of the Royal Cambrian Academy and is represented by the Martin Tinney Gallery, Cardiff. www.artwales.com

