

FELIX & SPEAR

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Press Release
November 1, 2024

Paul Tonkin

Glimmering

24 Nov – 22 Dec 2024

Opening reception: Sat 23rd Nov. 12-3pm (RSVP essential)

London, November 1, 2024 – Felix & Spear are pleased to present '*Glimmering*', an exhibition of abstract paintings by Paul Tonkin (b. 1951).

Initially inspired by his dad's drawings of Disney characters, "they didn't look quite right and I convinced myself I could improve on them", Paul Tonkin was an avid sketcher and doodler from an early age. Books were everywhere in the house. His father, who had left school at 14, consumed literature voraciously, from best-sellers to classics by Tolstoy, T.E. Lawrence and George Orwell as well as works on ethnology, gruesomely illustrated volumes on the second World War and many, many film books.

Southampton City Centre library is housed in the same architecturally distinguished building as the art gallery and Tonkin soon started taking out books on painting and to study the paintings by Turner and the Dutch landscapes as well as 20th C. works by Matthew Smith, David Bomberg and Roger Hilton in the gallery's permanent collection.

The monochrome world of 1950s and early 1960s Britain was giving way to the experience of colour during his teenage years. This happened relatively quickly in "swinging" London but was a much slower process in a staid provincial city like Southampton. Even so he was able to see bands like John Mayall's and Peter Green's and to dance (in a hand-me-down suit) to the latest soul music of Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett.

He discovered the virtuosity of Jackson Pollock and the inventiveness of Paul Klee. The stunning colour of Monet and Matisse was hinted at by the new art books coming out at the time. Visits to London from Canterbury College of Art not only revealed the real thing but also Rothko, followed by Morris Louis, Frankenthaler, Gottlieb, Still, Noland and later Jack Bush. No sooner had he discovered each of these painters he hastened to attempt to incorporate facets of their work into his own.

Simultaneously music was an equal fascination : Robert Johnson, Little Walter, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Duke Ellington, Stravinsky, Vivaldi, Shostakovich, Jimmy Hendrix and Captain Beefheart; all became obsessions. His painting was to become a fusion of colour and the rhythms of dance.

At Canterbury he met Geoff Rigden, Ian Dury, Alan Gouk and Katherine Gili. Rigden introduced him to the paintings of Hans Hofmann, Dury to musicians and the photographers Chris Killip and Harry Diamond. Through Alan Gouk he was to meet Douglas Abercrombie, Fred Pollock, Anthony and Sheila Caro and Clement Greenberg and was invited to show at Stockwell Depot.

London offered pubs, clubs, galleries and concert halls to explore the past and the present of the visual and musical arts. The ethnographic department of the British Museum (then in Burlington Gardens) became a favourite haunt and he took a great interest in the arts of Africa and South and East Asia. He became a regular at the dance nights at the Africa Centre, Covent Garden.

Using acrylic paint on unprimed canvas he was to evolve a combination of watercolour and oil painting techniques. Some of the results were exhibited at the main London galleries thanks to the interest of John Hoyland, Albert Irvin, John McLean and Sheila Girling.

More recently he has spent time travelling in Europe, visiting many of the most important art collections in Switzerland and elsewhere. Walking in the Alps and beside Lac Lemman (Lake Geneva) has enhanced his awareness of space and colour. Much of the American influence has fallen away – the paintings now are more complex, spacial and European ; colour and drawing more vital and integrated. He feels more attuned to European painters like ; Braque, Robert Delaunay, Nolde, early Kirchner, Veronese and Rubens.

Edmund Duffy (Oct 2024)

About Paul Tonkin

b. 1951, Southampton

Lives and works in London, England

Paul Tonkin attended Southampton Art College and Canterbury Art College. At Canterbury his tutor was Geoffrey Rigden who had met American painters Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski through working at Kasmin's Gallery in Bond Street. He became interested in the work of Rothko, Clyfford Still, Morris Louis and Hans Hofmann. Encouraged by Rigden and another tutor, Ian Dury, he explored techniques of painting using acrylics which were then relatively new. A music fan, he briefly joined Dury's band Kilburn and the Highroads but soon realised that his training and experience made the less glamorous route of painting the one to follow. After leaving art college he moved to Stockwell in South London and set up a studio in a squat in Brixton (above an Oxfam shop opposite Desmond's Hip City Reggae shop). He participated in annual exhibitions held at Stockwell Depot (1976 – 79). These included sculptors, Peter Hide and Katherine Gili and painters Jennifer Durrant and Alan Gouk. The exhibitions were thoroughly documented by Sam Cornish in his book 'Stockwell Depot 1967-79'. John Hoyland invited him to exhibit in the Hayward Gallery Summer Exhibition 1980 alongside John McLean, Albert Irvin, Frank Bowling and others. Other opportunities followed: a Serpentine Gallery Summer Show in 1982; the Castlefield Gallery, Manchester in 1985 and the Whitechapel Open Exhibitions between 1984 and 1994. These brought favourable

reviews from the likes of John Russell Taylor, Tim Hilton and Matthew Collings. Colour was and is the key: ‘...his colour is positively Venetian’ and ‘Look at the way he bashes in that yellow, lifting his picture from its self-absorption’ (Hilton). The late 1980s found him working at Greenwich Studios where he became involved with a group of artists searching for more permanent workspace. This they eventually found at Harold Wharf, Creekside where, in 1995 APT was brought to life as a registered charity dedicated to the provision of studios, a gallery and art education. Around this time he renewed contact with John Hoyland which led to the curation with Dr Cuillin Bantock of a series of exhibitions (1999 – 2003) at the Deli Bar, near Hoyland’s home and studio in Charterhouse Square, Clerkenwell. In 2006 he was invited to show a large painting in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition which was illustrated in the catalogue. His work was also hung in the Royal Academy in later years and featured in a BBC2 documentary about the Summer Exhibition. He was given a solo exhibition at the Poussin Gallery in 2009 (with a catalogue introduction by John Hoyland) and another at the Delfina Restaurant in 2011. Visits to North Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, Switzerland, Spain, the Adriatic, Ireland and the South of France in recent years have led to a renewed involvement with landscape. While both music and landscape contribute to the experiences which inform his work, he remains committed to non-representational colour painting built up from improvised elements.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Gallery address: **Felix & Spear, 71 St. Mary’s Road, London W5 5RG**

Exhibition Opening Hours: Wed – Fri 11.00 – 18.00, Sat - Sun 12.00 – 15.00

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