

BIOGRAPHY

Robert Woolner

Robert Woolner was born in Jamaica in 1946, trained at Camberwell School of Art and was Director of Art at Canford School until 1990. He lives and works at Vanners Studio in North Dorset.

My recent abstract paintings are an attempt to distil my interest in texture and light, and much of the work is about containment: the atmosphere within and the view from without. I would like to suggest a contemplative model for my observations and to develop a response to surfaces and the earth's crust through the use of mixed media. The illuminated interiors of my paintings and the use of warm and cool colours follow my obsession with shifting patterns of light. These paintings have been described as protective enclosures that have the dominance of fortification.

Woolner's paintings over the last twenty years have shifted from an accent on realism towards abstraction. Today his work is more about incident and experience than the specific and figurative. However, he still retains strong ties to the land and is particularly affected by the strong forms found in the landscape of Dorset. Forms such as hill forts: "wonderful, powerful, moving forms in the earth which give one a very strong starting point."

Hambledon, Duncliffe and Hod Hill are for Woolner central occurrences in the landscape. He knows them well through spending time drawing there. "Up at the top there is a feeling of enclosed space. They are heavily charged environments. They've escaped... they haven't been disturbed too much; they are condensers of history. They have a tremendous atmosphere which can vary as much as the light."

Woolner's work is concerned not only with ancient sites in Dorset but also with the more general topography of his part of the county. Being familiar with the land in North Dorset he is attuned to small changes as well as "special times --- when it snows or storms." Often when beginning a painting it is from a detail in the landscape that an idea emerges. "It might be just the way two thick trees come together in a field or the meeting point between two fields, or clouds passing behind a tree." Woolner needs very little to start with. He enjoys the challenge of "taking a small piece of information and turning it on its head."

Woolner studied at Camberwell School of Art for four years. As a student of the Sixties he was excited by the avant-garde work which was coming out of America; the work of Abstract Expressionists such as Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock and Willem De Kooning. At that time the idea of working on a large scale was particularly exciting as "the Camberwell of the Sixties was very much Euston Road and William Coldstream." The Euston School of Painting was formal and sombre, in contrast to the colourful, gestural style of the Americans.

At Camberwell, Woolner's teachers included Frank Auerbach and Euan Uglow. He remembers Auerbach working with "tons of paint" and Uglow being "a very, very tough draughtsman." Both drew a great deal from direct observation and from paintings of Old Masters. Drawing was part of their core practice. For Uglow it was an indispensable discipline, while for Auerbach it offered a way to recall and capture the sense of a place.

While at Camberwell, Woolner learnt to draw from observation and today he still continues to do so. Some years ago he completed some very big, long drawings of hedges. "I took a section of hedge and drew the whole thing, in order to create an impression of an overwhelming quantity, a romantic feeling of immersion, wildness. I also took photographs as a kind of aid." Today, if he uses a camera, it is for taking photographs which are interesting in themselves rather than for any relevance to painting. "If I'm walking up on Win Green, taking a photograph doesn't give me any information about the light, the space, the immensity of it all. Those things have to be confined to some kind of notation in a book as an aid to memory."

Sometimes, when drawing, Woolner will deliberately "convert" a landscape; re-align it with an aerial perspective. "It just changes the way you see the landscape. Painting of course is a flat two-dimensional process, but its flatness is its great excitement. Whatever you do, you create illusions of space."

In the 1990s Woolner began to work in monochrome as an aside to his colour paintings. He has always been intrigued by black as a colour, not in the European sense of it being a colour associated with death, but in the Eastern sense. As he says; "the Japanese feel that black is the most beautiful of all colours and I tend to agree, because you immediately start to play with light when it hits black. Painting is really about contrasts: light and dark, warm and cool, hot and cold, rough and smooth, sharp and blunt. Painting as a visual language is entirely centred around contrasts. How much colour does one need in a picture?"

Woolner's Crow series of paintings, which includes *Crow's Field* (1999), are the brown, black and relief whites of earth. They take their inspiration from *The Life and Songs of the Crow* by Ted Hughes. They are perhaps his darkest and bleakest monochromatic works to date. They dismiss the image of a cosy countryside, and in alliance with Hughes speak of a place where there is destruction as well as life, cruelty as well as sanctuary, and despair as well as joy.

Today the colours that Woolner uses are warmer and more suffuse; indeed light itself has become the subject of his of his latest series of work. There is an architectural quality to many of these paintings, with their stepped corridors, planes and shadows of shifting light (*Folding Light* 2001). In their alchemic colours they connect with the patinas of bronze artifacts and archaeological finds. Others, such as *Light Cut* (2001) and *Deep Cut* (2001) combine aerial perspective with a sliced core-view of Earth's geology.

Since the Crow series, Woolner's work has become increasingly textural. Torn and cut paper, sand and other materials are embedded in emulsion and acrylic before any colour is applied. Overlapped shapes and ridges become organic forms out of which other things grow. He believes that the torn edge of a piece of paper can be as expressive as a brush mark. In his way of working with mixed media there comes a balance between control and chance, which is part of the excitement.

Woolner rarely throws a work away, and sometimes he will come back to a painting long set aside. Collage elements may be stripped off but any resulting distressed marks become new areas of challenge to work with. "One of the important parts of my work landscape is the layers that happen in painting. The underlying layers can often surprise you. They give the painting a history. I think the thing about layers is that like the landscape they trap time. That's something that fascinates me. It isn't an instant process. Painting is about layers of time. A close examination of the landscape shows that it offers up its secrets, layer by layer."

Extracts from "Re-inventing the Landscape" by Vivienne Light

The purpose of good painting is to reveal what has not been seen before, which is why this new work by Robert Woolner is so important, his search continues to break fresh ground, and is an illuminating testament to the mysterious condition of painting.

There is an enduring stillness in the series of paintings that explore the finely balanced interaction of light and dark across the picture plane. Through veils of light, and the subdued use of warm and cool tones, works such as "Touching Air" produce an ethereal state of intense calm. These planes act as shutters between interior and exterior worlds, through which you may step, if you dare.

Much of the work is about containment, atmosphere within and the view from without, and geometry of fear connects works like ancient ley lines; there are signals for us to pick up like radio waves. In his exploration of surface texture, and the mixed use of pigment, glue, card, marble dust and scrim, where colour is kept strictly at bay, are a series of paintings that seem to rediscover the earth's crust like an aerial photograph, plans of protective enclosures, as ancient as Man's first settlement, apparently stitched together like a computer motherboard. Hardly surprising that one such painting is entitled "Safe inside", several others are quite small works that have the dominance of fortifications.

In Woolner's restless search for simplification we are presented with a concentrated residue of this inquiry; in our complicated modern lives it is all and everything we need to know.

Nicholas Collier (Alpha House catalogue), August 2003

Biography

1946	Born Kingston, Jamaica.
1964-68	Camberwell School of Art.
1969	Study and travel in Italy and America.
1969-72	Manager, Pulteney Books and Prints. Painted part-time. Stage designs and constructions, Tower Theatre, Canonbury.
1972-76	Painted in England and South West France. Worked at Islington Studio print workshop proofing and editioning Taught etching and helped to develop studio at Cubertou Art Centre, South West France.
1976-79	Artist in residence, Canford.
1978	Invited to join Artists from Cubertou group.
1979-87	Taught Art at Canford and painted at Cubertou during the summer.
1987-90	Director of Art, Canford.
1990	Opened Vanners Studio.
1990-91	Lecturer, Poole Arts Centre.
1991	First Exhibition, Courses and Concert at Vanners Studio.
1990-2002	Courses in Painting, Vanners Studio

Selected Group Exhibitions

1969	Northern Young Contemporaries. Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. Arts Council travelling exhibition.
1976	First Artists from Cubertou Exhibition at Compton, Chichester.
1979	FBA Galleries, Artists from Cubertou.
1978, 1980, 1982, 1983	Cubertou Art Centre, France.
1976, 1978, 1980	Artists from Cubertou group shows in England.
1977, 1978	R A Summer Exhibitions.
1990-94	Summerleaze Gallery.
1995	Alpha House Gallery, Sherborne. Summer Exhibition.
1995, 1997	Royal West of England Academy.
1995	A Blend of North Dorset. Salisbury Library.
1996	Pathways and Crosscurrents. Seldown Gallery, Poole Arts Centre. First Prize Winner awarded by Department of the Environment.
1997	Quantum Fine Art, London.
1999	Richmond Hill Gallery, London. Bettles Gallery, Ringwood. Bournemouth University Art Loan Collection, Atrium Gallery.
2000	Maltby Contemporary Art, Winchester.
2001	Reinventing the Landscape, Warehouse Gallery, Dorchester. Summerleaze Gallery.
2002	Maltby Contemporary Art, Winchester.
2003	"Horse" The Study Gallery, Poole. The Gallery Upstairs, Henley in Arden. Maltby Contemporary Art, Winchester.

One Man Exhibitions

1977	Butlin Gallery, Dillington House.
1983	Anthony Brown School of Music, Canford.
1987	Seldown Gallery, Poole Arts Centre.
1991	Vanners Studio.
1992	Dorset Art Week.
1993	Vanners Studio.
1994	Dorset Art Week.
1995	British Embassy, Paris, France.
1996	Dorset Art Week.
1996	Alpha House Gallery, Sherborne.
1997	Bettles Gallery, Ringwood.
1998	Dorset Art Week, Vanners Studio.
1999	Alpha House Gallery.
2000	Dorset Art Week, Vanners Studio.
2001	Kelly College. Alpha House Gallery The Gallery, Shepherd Market, London
2002	Dorset Art Week, Vanners Studio
2003	Bettles Gallery, Ringwood. Alpha House Gallery.