



# Colin Fraser

by Estelle Lovatt

I've never seen a more abstract figurative painter or, more precisely, a more conceptual figurative painter. Confused? Don't be. Colin Fraser is a painter who understands that it's okay to employ the aid of photography; that it's okay to invent bits of his painting that he doesn't actually see in front of him, in order to add to the reality of the painting; that it's okay to formulate the surface of the picture plane for the sake of the composition, even to the extent of exploiting the device of the cast shadow to enhance the illusion of drama, and depth, as in his Morandi-white Stripes. Technically competent, he is a brilliant draughtsman; a sophisticated painter, who communicates with an ease and fluency.

The key feature of the paintings is that they glow because Fraser works in egg tempera. Steeped in

art history tradition (Egyptian decorations, ancient cave paintings, Byzantine, Medieval, Renaissance, Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Social Realism), egg tempera is a process where powdered colour is mixed with egg yolk and water. The paint dries instantly and, distinct to oils, cannot be manipulated. The colours can dry unpredictably. It is very time-consuming; each inch of the surface must be built up little by little, layer by layer. Trying to get away from all that intellectual stuff, Colin works from his gut, not his head. This involves not just looking at things but 'seeing' in the terms of paint. An abstract process of cross-hatching with a small brush and moving shapes around with a bigger one means the artist works the space like an Abstract Expressionist, thinking and feeling in terms of rhythmic quality, not specific precision. According to the Colin, "The brushstrokes themselves are very



gestural, reflecting form, volume, movement, and speed. They attempt to portray the way something feels, both didactically and emotionally." He then adds, "You have to put everything into this, allowing your emotion to steer you without letting it tip over into meaningless chaos. But the rewards... make it worth it."

Born in Glasgow, in 1956, the light of the Scandinavian sun lured Colin to south Sweden. There he fleshed out his work with a remarkable property concerned with, as he says, "The feel of the thing, the mood if you like, that the presence of sunlight gives." Colin's world is one of infinitely lazy summer days enthralled and captivated by sunlight. Living his life "inside the picture frame", he is motivated by the way sunshine bursts through a window into a room; dances over a glass bowl; stretches shadows; never keeps still. Attracting me to his art - moth-like - is this translucent, inner light and luminosity, so meticulously and carefully painted that the picture becomes a celebration of light itself. The artist is drawn to tempera's vitality, reminding him, "...of the dynamism of the sun - never static, always changing. With such a high degree of luminosity, tempera gives all colours, including black, the ability to 'glow'". A ground (a gesso of chalk, white pigment and rabbit skin glue) is painted over a Masonite wood-pulp panel before a warm yellow-orange is washed over. The light penetrates it, bouncing off the background and back up through the transparency of the egg yolk. The tricky and arduous process of this craft allows, "...only gradual changes because the work, built up in many layers, is fast drying". It is wonderful for creating really long fluidly drawn brushstrokes that appear to go on forever, but, as you cannot push paint around, every mark stays, giving his picture life. Apart from marvelling the technical aspects of a unique glow that cannot be imitated in other mediums, you admire the 'mood' he captures. As the master of interpreting saturated coloured highlight amid extraordinary invented shadow, Colin captures memories, evoking the emotional connection (that we all have) to an experience.

It is Colin's ability to describe it all, everything, that's important. The suggestion of its tonal values - extremely subtle in shift rather than forced by chiaroscuro - emphasise such description, becoming the branded characteristic of his image, as if sharing an emphasis of the effects of light with the Impressionists. Although, the two styles are markedly different: Colin's characterised by attention to detail, while Impressionism is characterised by the lack of detail. "No matter how hard you try, these issues are ultimately steered by

the heart, not the intellect. Making a painting is not an intellectual process. It's about getting involved and excited about what you are going to paint. Being passionate." The rhythmic musicality of it all is what's important in his work, which is, entirely, about light: the way it falls and highlights; the shadows it casts; the mood it creates. Although, as the artist says, "You can never pin down what a

opposite: Colin Fraser - Dawn Flight.  
Egg tempera

below: Colin Fraser - Purple Sash.  
Egg tempera, 90 x 60 cm





right: Colin Fraser - Arome. Egg tempera, 83.3 x 122 cm

bottom: Colin Fraser - Still Running. Egg tempera, 122.6 x 84 cm

opposite top to bottom: Colin Fraser - Genufflection. Egg tempera, 80 x 104.5 cm

Colin Fraser - Glazed. Egg tempera

Colin Fraser - Vinyard. Egg tempera

specific 'mood' is." His causes an arousal of the same level of excitement as spying the silhouette of flesh through sheer material.

Portraying rustic, idyllic pastoral settings, such as in Valley or Ascension, it is the light, as usual, which is the undercurrent thread, not the still-life. The white jacket, seemingly arranged casually across a chair, is personal to him, although not surrogate as a portrait. His ideology is implied through the graphic solidification of a jewel-like light shining

through the back of the jacket. You imagine the sun coming and going in and out of clouds, feeling its warmth against the dynamism of the breeze. This simple vision is special for being simple. Putting a still-life in a wild landscape provides a focal point, an area on which to concentrate. The challenge lies in making sure that you aren't more interested in asking, "What's the chair doing there?", as, Colin adds, "Appearance is secondary to the feel of the thing." More about the long struggle in walking up the hill and looking up into the sky, it's about







mortality, without any sentimentality. "The subject matter is the front door into a process that is meditative"; the airiness of its spiritual quality going beyond the everyday it symbolises.

And so it is that Colin also paints glass as if conducive to rumination and contemplation. The transitory effects of light - short lived and evanescent - richly substantiate the structure of an intensely serene, sensitive, atmospheric, highly spiritual picture - around a plain glass bottle. Yes, minimal furnishings - 'props' - are arranged, almost stage-managed by Colin, so that a basic glass bottle becomes a light trap where light defines space around the object, as in *Galaxy*. He gets an

energy - the excitement of the moment - into his painting by saturating the solid object (or human figure) with brushstrokes, each of which becomes equivalent to light. Can there be beauty in a glass bottle? Yes indeed, like looking at a stained-glass window, or Orthodox icon, in your house of prayer. Witnessing this, I can attest, that, if, whilst you're looking at a Colin Fraser image, you suddenly feel like falling down on both knees, don't worry, for deliberation over spirit doesn't only have to take place somewhere ceremonious.

The artist is humble. "You start work and become unaware of any clever ideas or plans that you may have had. It's just you and the painting." Alone, Colin discovers powerful colours to paint light breaking through a window over a strategically placed composition of fruit. Still-life objects act as evidence, indicating a recent human attendance - the insinuation and allusion of abandonment where someone has just left the 'scene'. People play an important role, if only by suggestion, because, it's not about remembering what someone (or something) looked like, but more about (re)discovering it. In his sleeping nudes, such as the sensual *Salt White*, the most important feeling is that we have stumbled upon a very private moment of restful equanimity. Endorsed by the bed linen, lace curtains and feeling of the puff of air in the background distant grass, we, as voyeurs, are fully aware that the subject doesn't gaze out of the picture to look at us; instead, situated halfway between solid existence and a highly sophisticated 'idea' about the emptiness of 'air' - "holding on to an almost unattainable 'mood'".

Definitely not photo-realist but painterly, this expression of feeling distinguishes Colin's artwork from photography, as, "One not frozen, as in a snapshot". What you read in his pictures is not process, but a deftness of truth for you to experience in terms of invention and self-consciousness. Lodging the most perfect aesthetic dialogue in relating object to nature, so that you really do feel like you are a 'part' of his picture. Actually in it. Not just looking at it, like you'd watch TV or peep at a photo. A Colin Fraser painting functions, for purposes of meditation and interpretation, in a way Realism might envy, amounting to genius.

*Colin Fraser's Solo Show runs 16 November - 3 December at Petleys, 9 Cork Street, London, W1S 3LL. Telephone: +44 (0)20 7494 2021. [www.petleys.co.uk](http://www.petleys.co.uk)*