Fred Cuming: A Passion for Coast and Sky

Fred Cuming is a vital part of the English landscape painting tradition. Like John Constable and Alexander Cozens before him, he is fascinated by cloud formations – ‘feather and wing shapes in the sky’. The clouds take centre stage in the giant skies of his paintings, from the wonderful rapid violence of Wheatfield Against a Storm (cat. no.11) to the pink light playing on the clouds in Sky Patterns Somerset Coast (see opp.). Inspired by masters of colour such as Turner and Paul Nash, Cuming explains ‘Marvellous colourists are few and far between - I would love to be one’.

Cuming’s landscapes such as Bristol Channel (cat. no.28) often contain a solitary figure under an enormous sky; visibly awed by the elements around him. ‘You can almost hear Fred’s voice as he explains how he is “terribly moved” by landscapes and his motivation is to communicate that to people. He conveys a “visual magic” by highlighting moments from the changing landscape around us: the fabulous Rainbow (cat. no.15) or the single star appearing in Crescent Moon (cat. no.21). After a lifetime of exploring these subjects, he feels he is finally gaining the ability and clarity to find “little tracks” of his own to follow.

Cuming captures the detail of human activity by the sea with meticulous precision: from the walkway to get on to Bodinnick Ferry (cat. no.s 4,24) to the busy boat traffic in Venice (cat. no.10). Other new paintings show the “Angel of the South”: a navigation sign at Dungeness. It was put up early in the twentieth century to help fishermen navigate the channel before modern technological methods emerged. It emerges as a surreal T-shaped sculpture rising out of the water in works such as Mysterious Landscape (cat. no.21).

Unfazed by fashions ‘that come and go’, Cuming is painting the same things now as when he was a ‘young lad’. He has been looking at them for years and striving to find some way of saying how much he loves them. These paintings show an artist at the height of his powers: in his own words he rejoices in ‘finally understanding what I’m all about. I am in my own little boat and trying to find something to say’.

Isabel Kidel

Born in 1930, in London, Fred attended Sidcup School of Art from 1945-1949. Having completed his National Service, he attended the Royal College of Art in 1951, winning a Rome Scholarship and an Abbey Minor Scholarship. In 1964, he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy (ARA) and he has now been a full member of the Royal Academy for some thirty six years. Also a member of the New English Art Club and Associate of the Royal College of Art, Fred lives and works in East Sussex.

Cuming’s first one-man show was held in 1978 at the Thackeray Gallery, London, and since then he has exhibited regularly in solo shows throughout the UK and more recently in the United States. His work has also been included in many group exhibitions since 1953, and in 2001, he was given the honour of being the featured artist in the Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition, with an entire gallery within the show being dedicated to his work.
3. Rye Harbour Entry – Evening Cloud  24 x 24 in  oil on canvas on board

2. Dymchurch Sands – Evening  8 x 24 in  oil on board
4. Badenmick Ferry  12 x 20 in  oil on board
5. October Sky Venice  12 x 14 in  oil on board
6. Evening Walk – Camber 12 x 20 in  oil on board

7. Rye Harbour Dawn 20 x 24 in  oil on canvas on board
8. Fisherman's Beach, Hastings  12 x 24 in  oil on canvas on board

9. Breaking Wave, Lyme Regis  30 x 30 in  oil on canvas on board
11. Wheatfield Against a Storm  10 x 10 in  oil on board

10. Venice the Lagoon – Salute  8 x 12 in  oil on board

12. Hastings Pier 13 x 24 in  oil on board
13. Etna  24 x 24 in  oil on board

14. Teignmouth Harbour  12 x 24 in  oil on panel
15. Rainbow  12 x 24 in  oil on paper on board

16. Rye Harbour Entry  20 x 24 in  oil on canvas on board
19. Winter Landscape – Somerset  12 x 24 in  oil on paper on board

20. Old Friend in the Snow  20 x 24 in  oil on canvas on board
21. Mysterious Landscape  48 x 48 in  oil on linen on board
22. Willows  12 x 20 in  oil on board

23. Crescent Moon  10 x 12 in  oil on board

24. Bodinnick Ferry – Clouds  16 x 16 in  oil on board
25. Evening Garden  20 x 24 in  oil on paper on board

26. Bonfire – Crescent Moon and Cat  30 x 30 in  oil on canvas on board
27. Study for Mysterious Landscape 10 x 20 in  oil on paper on board

28. Bristol Channel 10 x 10 in  oil on board

29. Hastings from Bexhill 10 x 10 in  oil on board