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# Jeffery Camp: The Gaze that Captured the World

*Campanology – A Tribute to Jeffery Camp,* **Art Space Gallery**, London, 8 April-6 May

Jeffery Camp (1923-2020) is a singular figure in the history of Modern British painting, a hugely distinguished artist much admired by such contemporaries as Craigie Aitchison, Michael Andrews, Patrick George, R.B. Kitaj and Euan Uglow, although his work is still not as widely appreciated as it deserves. Recently there have been signs that this is changing, as his paintings have been chosen to hang with fashionable younger painters in such pools of limelight as White Cube, and a new generation has discovered his originality. Thanks to lockdown, the memorial exhibition to mark his death last May at the age of ninety-six was delayed for a year, but it was a tribute worth waiting for. Michael and Oya Richardson of Art Space Gallery, Camp's loyal supporters for the last twenty years, hung a magnificent display of his paintings from the 1950s to 2014, ample testament of the variousness of this remarkable artist.

His work could be abstract or figurative, broadly dabbed or drawn with the most precise of marks. All of it has a thrilling lyricism and tenderness that is rare in art of any kind. Camp has been criticised for not having 'a killer instinct' in his approach to painting, yet he was able to locate precisely the effect he wanted to convey, the very particular emotional complexion of a scene or place. His work, so intimately bound up with notions of beauty and celebration, does not have a fashionable angst or cynicism to it, yet its whole timbre is edgy, for Camp is the poet of instability, and as such has more to say about our times than many a forcefully self-promoting expressionist or conceptual artist.

'Sometimes my paintings are to do with fragility,' he said in an interview with me in 1988. 'A lot of artists like to make people monumental, like Henry Moore did. I think that with our thin skin-cover we are very fragile.

We live from breath to breath. It's amazing we manage to survive at all. In my paintings I put people in situations where they're no more secure than they are in life.' Later he qualified that slightly and admitted that many of his paintings were more to do with vitality than insecurity. And he reiterated: 'I like people in movement, I like the flux. Happiness is often to do with vitality. The activity of birds and sky and sea is somehow joyous, and helps towards happiness.'

Camp's great subject was figures in landscape. His figures float off into the skies like Mary Poppins, or recline on cliff-top clouds like grown-up Baroque putti. Lovers intertwine airily, weightless with desire and passion. A nude, spreadeagled against the firmament, might turn like a slow-motion Catherine wheel or drift in ecstasy. They move without effort, these dream figures who never fall, exhilarating and joyful, melancholy or self-questioning as Hamlet. Camp relished the precariousness of balancing on a point (ballet dancers) or soaring off a cliff grasping a structure of aluminium and synthetic sailcloth (hang gliding), and although his dancers tended to be doing the jive at a pier-end hop rather than a *pas-de-bourrée*, his hang gliders do take the winds off the Sussex chalk cliffs at Beachy Head.

His paintings often emulate this precariousness by being balanced on one corner, and thus moving from a square or rectangle into a diamond, and entirely changing their pictorial dynamics in the process. Camp said that if you stood on the top of Beachy Head you had a great feeling of insecurity from being in such a high place. That's what he was after in his paintings.

> Also a sense of the immensity of the space up and down and across. A lot of my paintings have been about that, which is why I have tilted the canvas into a lozenge or other shape. If you balance a picture on its point, it's in a state of equilibrium only if you can paint enough verticals and horizontals to stabilise it. By adding marks at the side of the frame, the beat of the waves can be suggested, or other possible horizons. The colours of sunset or land. Blake's idea of chaos was the sea.

Jeffery Camp, an only child, was born at Oulton Broad near Lowestoft in

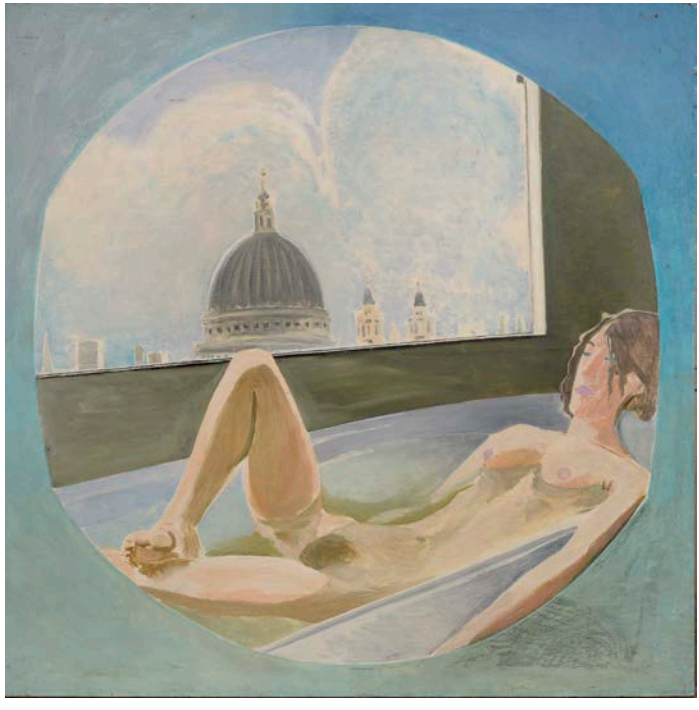
Suffolk, and knew early on that he wanted to be a painter. He attended Lowestoft Art School part-time at the age of fifteen, then in 1939 spent a full year there, followed by a year at Ipswich School of Art. At Ipswich he tried woodcarving for a while. In 1941 he went to Edinburgh College of Art, and grew more serious about painting. Hubert Wellington was the Principal then, a friend of Walter Sickert who used to go out painting with Harold Gilman. William Gillies and John Maxwell were Camp's most influential teachers. He said of Gillies (whose work he collected in a small way): 'I was lucky to be taught by a genius', and of Maxwell: 'one of those very clever people who could paint watercolours easily and thought Blake was one of the ten great draughtsmen of the world'.

The mood was very French: Gillies had studied in Paris with André Lhote, and Maxwell with Fernand Léger. As Camp said to me in 1986: 'Gillies is the best artist that Scotland has produced in recent years, and he symbolised for me the whole *belle peinture* aesthetic that Edinburgh absorbed from Paris.' At Edinburgh, Camp's studies coincided with Patrick George's, and they remained friends for life. Camp also met Eduardo Paolozzi in the life class, while Alan Davie had been a student the year before. The artist and Slade Professor Randolph Schwabe came to Edinburgh to assess student work in June 1945. He noted in his diary: 'A rather remarkable scholarship student, landscape painter named Camp, very prolific and very straightforward. He ought to be heard of in future.'

That year Camp won a travelling scholarship which typically he used to travel home to Suffolk. It was still wartime so travel was restricted, but this most intellectually wide-ranging of artists was, for most of his life, a determined stay-at-home. Camp's parents had been evacuated from Lowestoft to Eye, in deep Suffolk countryside, and it was there that Jeffery fell in love with trees, which he proceeded to paint through the seasons. Eligible for a landscape bursary, he took his work to Alfred Munnings, then President of the Royal Academy. 'What's all this bottle green?' barked the terror of the Modernists. 'Why don't you get out into the country and draw the thorn bushes?' Munnings showed Camp round the Academy, but the young man had his eyes fixed then on Bonnard and Matisse and was only to feel at home at the RA much later.

The training at Edinburgh attached much emphasis to life drawing,

*Jeffery Camp, By the Sea, 1953*
*Oil on board, 20 x 4cm*



*Jeffery Camp, Laetitia in the Bath, 1971*
*Oil on board, 61 x 61cm*

*Jeffery Camp, Beachy Head Night, 1973*
*Oil on board, 236 x 185cm*

*Jeffery Camp, Fling, 2008*
*Oil on canvas, 184 x 184cm*

which stood Camp in good stead when he found a new subject on Lowestoft beach in 1953-4. Figures in movement became his theme: running about on the beach, bathing, grouped together in huddles, Camp painted holidaymakers from life in thin oil paint on boards resting on his knees. (At Art Space was *Bather at Kessingland,* one of the earliest, and *By the Sea,* a fine interlocking composition.) The paintings resembled worn and abraded frescoes, and their construction owed a good deal to his study of the Italian Renaissance, and particularly to the work of Piero della Francesca, much in favour at the time. (Kenneth Clark's monograph on Piero appeared in 1951.)

The structural imperatives of Piero were mixed with other, more contemporary, inspirations. Sometime around 1961, at Lower Marsh, the artists' colony near Waterloo, Victor Pasmore told Camp to look at the cartoonist Giles for ideas about composition. He did and always maintained this was of great use to him. From then on he looked at everything. As a young man at Norwich Castle he had carefully studied the Museum's fine collection of Cotmans, a classical artist he rated very highly. Rubens was another master to whom he paid considerable attention – particularly his oil sketches.

He began to exhibit in London at the Galerie de Seine in Belgravia in 1958, but had his first important solo show at the Beaux Arts Gallery in 1959. The Beaux Arts was run by the doughty Helen Lessore and was the cradle of a generation of artists that included a roster of names famous today, from Frank Auerbach to Euan Uglow, so it was clear from the start that Camp belonged with a very talented group of painters. He enjoyed two more one-man shows with Lessore, and began to teach in art schools to make a living, first at Chelsea, then at the Slade. He spent twenty-five years teaching at the Slade, retiring in 1988.

Looking back he commented: 'I tried everything under the sun to startle the students into seeing for themselves. I'd give the model the brightest possible blue background, or hang up a hugely enlarged Old Master image behind the figure. I must admit I got bored with teaching.' But when it came to the future, and Camp saw traditional methods vanishing unappreciated, he became a man with a mission. To counter this dispersal of knowledge, he wrote two manuals about the importance of

painting and drawing, enshrining the wisdom of art school training and the centrality of copying from the Old Masters, as well as the importance of drawing the world around us. *Draw* was the first, which took him three years to write. It was published in 1981, and was followed by *Paint* in 1996: both were hugely successful. Filled with reproductions of his own and others' work, they were illuminated by his unexpected and often poetic verbal insights, which enhanced and extended the visual observations. He wanted students to train themselves to look clearly, and to learn from what they saw.

Meanwhile, his own work was steadily developing. From the mid-1950s, water became an essential part of his imagery: first the North Sea, then the English Channel, followed by London River and Venice, the great city in the sea. He spent twenty years painting by the North Sea in Suffolk, during which time he met and married the painter Laetitia Yhap (born 1941). When Jeffery's parents died, the couple were able to buy a flat in London and a cottage in Hastings Old Town, on the Sussex coast. The Channel now became a focus for Camp. Water was not just a key element in his universe, a major component of his landscape paintings, it was not just the sea at Beachy Head or the Thames running through London, it was a force that stroked, warmed and flattered, caressing the figures in his paintings, just as the bath water does the callipygian Laetitia.

Laetitia was clearly Camp's muse, and he painted her repeatedly. In the brochure for his 1968 solo exhibition at the New Art Centre in Sloane Street, the titles of all thirty-four paintings begin with Laetitia, from *Laetitia in Bed* (1965) to *Laetitia and Seagulls* (1968). Yhap was undoubtedly his main inspiration, and he was clearly obsessed with her: there are literally hundreds of paintings and drawings of her. One of the many paintings is *Laetitia and a Cornish Tin Mine,* 1967, now in New County Hall, Truro, showing the artist's wife in a concertina-like composition set within the usual rectangle of the painting. In later years, Camp would use similar shapes, but dispense with the painted rectangle surrounding them. He would, quite literally, cut them out, and free these dynamic shapes to sit directly on the wall. This was typically unconventional. There had been something of a fashion for shaped canvases in the 1960s and seventies, but Camp took the idea further, making it a distinguishing feature of his work.

When I got to know him, in the mid to late eighties, one of the rooms in his Stockwell house was set up as a workshop, with a mitre saw and clamps and all the accoutrements of an artist who liked to prepare his own panels and canvases and sometimes to frame them. (His father had been a cabinet maker and antique dealer.) He taught me about marouflage – the stretching and gluing down of canvas over (in his case) old planks – and was inventive right to the end of his life in making surfaces to paint on. He painted a whole series of small circular pictures (about two or three inches in diameter) on curtain rings with thin circles of card glued to them. Another series was done similarly on sections of thick cardboard tube. Others were painted on irregular many-sided hardboard offcuts, which he mounted on sections of wooden batten so they would stand proud of the wall and not need framing.

Camp always made an image appropriate to the support, and those small polygonal paintings explored the idea of the vignette: brief, evocative and episodic. He orchestrated the composition of these small works in such a way that the energies gravitate inwards from the edges to the centre. (This is the reverse of a vignette in a book, which tends to fade into the background without a definite border. Camp's borders were very clearly drawn, if unexpected.) The idea was that if you multiply the edges, you boost the picture's charge. These are small, intense paintings of great presence, compactly expressive, as concentrated as haiku.

Camp worked long days and nights in his studio, as much as sixteen hours on the trot. Sometimes he'd break for a couple of hours and go out to the opening of an exhibition by a friend or acquaintance, a contemporary or a student. He saw all the major museum shows and virtually everything else of interest in London. He didn't much like going abroad, so missed some of the larger exhibitions that didn't come to the UK, but he was happy to go out of London for the day, to see an exhibition at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge or the Towner Art Gallery in Eastbourne. I went with him to both galleries, to see a wonderful Christopher Wood exhibition in Cambridge (1990), and *Paul Nash: Places* in Eastbourne (1989).

Another memorable visit was the day he took me to see Gainsborough's House in Sudbury in his native Suffolk, and we looked at the works by the master, before taking a picnic lunch to the watermeadows. It was

restful travelling with Jeffery. He was so busy watching people and the places we journeyed through that conversation became, for a welcome change, a lot less important than looking. He also liked day trips to the seaside to scrutinise people on pier and beach, to eat fish and chips, drink Guinness and simply wander around. Sometimes he drew, sometimes not. I remember him at Beachy Head once, stepping over a sign on a roped-off area at the cliff edge that was labelled DANGER: Cliff Erosion. He went right up to the edge and peered down. Then he turned slowly back to me: 'I used to paint out there!' he said, gesturing into the blue air, where magpies and choughs soared, and where the chalk cliff had once been.

In 1986 he had said: 'I think I will explore up the Thames and further downriver towards the estuary, but in the centre the mood changes faster. It is more stark and surprising and exciting in the centre of London at evening.' I remember accompanying him on one trip downriver when we took a boat to the Thames Barrier and back, Jeffery drawing all the way. I recall a couple of pencil and crayon studies of my head and shoulders against the great silver hoods of the barrier, but I don't think he made a painting of the subject. His plan chests were full of such studies. At night, in the studio brightly illuminated with daylight bulbs, he would look through his drawings and find a subject he wanted to paint. Sometimes several drawings of different subjects would be brought together in a new composition. He said he used drawings for the design of a picture, drawings for the detail of the figures and drawings for the architectural or landscape setting. In earlier years, he would square up the drawings for transfer to the canvas.

If he needed to see the effects of colour in those preparatory studies, he would often add watercolour in the studio. 'I use watercolours afterwards to colour in drawings done on the spot. Often the paper becomes folded, rubbed with ink erasers. It is bullied and scuffed. I force the drawings into the shapes I need. My watercolours are rough. I use them to make oil paintings possible,' he said. When working in oils, he used a whole range of implements to apply the paint, from small sable brushes and housepainters' large block brushes, to a roller and a brush tied to the end of a long bamboo pole.

In London he travelled by bus and tube, but also walked a lot, always

with pencil and paper, and he would frequently stop to make a note or a more finished drawing in a park or beside the river. When he came to dinner he sketched the other guests, usually the best-looking ones. He also drew figures in his studio: beautiful girls, beautiful men, sometimes together, making love. I heard that one couple had their marital problems solved in the gentle encouraging ambience of Jeffery's studio.

He asked me to pose nude for him, but I was prudish and refused. In the end I took off my shirt and he drew me like that, with me clutching a glass of wine for security. He was amused and made a great fuss of repeating: 'But my paintings are pure!', in his deepest Suffolk drawl. Was he a voyeur? Of course. As Robert Motherwell said: 'Every painter *au fond* is a voyeur: the question is whether he has a vision.' Jeffery certainly had that. And here is Peter Ackroyd writing about Alfred Hitchcock: 'Watching provides a definite form of pleasure. It involves the mastery of the observer, absorbing the details of people and of places, even discerning plots and patterns not seen by the participants. It is the gaze that captures the world.' That is how Jeffery looked at everything, but in the most pacific and unthreatening way.

'I like to do small paintings so that a lot of different ideas can be followed out. There is not really that much difference between a small picture and a larger one. Bigger formats allow greater scale, but it is not quite so important as is sometimes suggested to make paintings big.' Actually, Camp paintings are of all sizes, from the hand-held to glorious great ten-footers. He liked to put himself into his pictures as witness: his profile appearing quizzical rather than bewildered, though his sense of wonder pervades so many of these images. So does his pronounced sense of mischief and his sardonic wit. Although in conversation he could be elliptical and oblique, he enjoyed making wry or provocative comments. Of a new painting, *Fling* (2006-8), one of the biggest pictures in Art Space's exemplary exhibition, he told me: 'It's the most sumptuous picture you've ever seen in your life, isn't it?' Did he care whether I agreed or not? He certainly noticed every change of expression in his interlocutors, but he seemed confirmed in his self-belief, or at least in the appearance of it.

Some have been shocked at what they took to be his negativity, but I used to rejoice in his wicked humour, debunking the most exalted of

names in art's firmament: 'he's no good, and she can't draw'. He had the courage of his convictions and said what other artists thought but refused to admit: that only they were any good, and the rest mediocre. Self-belief, is, after all, what keeps artists going. If Camp was slightly autistic, as others have suggested, then this would also help to explain his outspokenness. But I think of him as a canny Suffolker who enjoyed startling people with his shrewd remarks.

The great art historian, painter and teacher Lawrence Gowing had no hesitation in including Camp in the category of School of London; nor did R.B. Kitaj in his 1976 *Human Clay* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. And there he should be with Andrews, Auerbach, Bacon, Freud and Kossoff. Yet too many surveys of the period have excluded him because his work is not easy to categorise, and demands an unprejudiced response not often to be found among writers and curators. Painters have tended to see him clearer. Michael Andrews wrote in 1973: 'A remarkable thing in Jeffery Camp's painting is the naturalness or readiness of expression – an absence of strain. There is a balance of practice with spontaneity.' Andrews also spoke of 'a sort of sweeping brevity' in Camp's work. When Jeffery himself said: 'Pictures need such a little information,' he was reacting against the data overload we suffer today. He wanted us to feel more and concentrate – not flood our systems with unassimilable data. This is not a fashionable approach.

A loyal supporter and friend, Camp turned out to exhibition openings, and tried to place works by artists he admired. He joined the Royal Academy in 1974 and used his position to help those he believed in. He was quietly active behind the scenes, as a selector for the Summer Exhibition and as a committee member of the Chantrey Bequest, which every year bought distinguished works from the RA Summer Exhibition for donation to the Tate. He quite enjoyed the social aspect of the Academy, but was prepared to voice his opinions, even when it meant teasing the darlings of the moment. He had no patience with posturing and pretension. The justification for his bluntness remains his art.

With glorious generosity of spirit, Jeffery was a maker of images that never cease to arrive in the present and engage with us here. He was an artist supremely capable of taking pleasure in awareness, of other people,

and of the world around us. His painterly touch is all transcendence: a sensual order of enchanted realism. Camp's lovers soar over the Thames or Beachy Head like Blake's angels or Chagall's roistering villagers. Their union is at once mystical and physical, for they are body and soul mates, emblems of the essential human dialogue between the flesh and the spirit, making superbly manifest the rainbow's path, the dance of life. His tender couplings are indicative of our intimate connection to all of creation; above all, to that crucial core of aliveness, that endless circulation of matter, what Gerard Manley Hopkins called 'the dearest freshness deep down things'. Jeffery Camp's work is affirming and celebratory, coherent and various. We may safely say that in his lifetime, the world did not go unseen. His paintings are always larger than their limits. Cherish them. He cherished us through them.