

## Alive in Space and Time

JEFFERY CAMP RA: 1923 – 2020

An Obituary by Richard Morphet

Jeffery Camp was a singular painter whose work is visionary, not in a religious sense but in the intensity of his response to nature, to place and especially to the vitality of human presence and relationships. His pictures have special power when these elements are combined. Minute particulars are often juxtaposed



with enormous sweeps of space, distance and almost magical atmosphere, pushing reality and fantasy to extremes. In *Rocket over Venice* 1986, the elongated bodies of naked lovers, their heads and arms just touching, describe an arabesque in mid-air across the width of the canvas, high above the entrance to the Grand Canal. The sky is alive with fireworks, swelling clouds and eddies of golden mist, while blue waters oscillate far below. But most of Jeffery's erotic river scenes occur above or beside the Thames in central London. Nudes, in intimate communion or standing proud against the urban panorama, are seen with, for example, Parliament, the bridges and double-decker buses.

A site to which Jeffery was specially drawn was Beachy Head in Sussex, the highest chalk cliff in England. He painted the striations of the chalk face, bird and plant life near the cliff edges, mysterious hang-gliders, the vertiginous view down to the lighthouse near the cliff's base, the westward vista of the Seven Sisters cliffs, and the vast expanse of sea and sky, but above all he was fascinated by the relationship between people, alone or in couples, and the very edge of the terrifying drop. His cliff-edge pictures are charged with a strange tension between exaltation and risk. The loved figures he placed in this awe-inspiring setting may be teetering, dreaming or relaxing in bliss, but their location gives their presence a special urgency.



Chief among these figures is the notable painter Laetitia Yhap, Jeffery's partner for many years and his lasting muse. Alone or with Jeffery she can be seen, on the edge, staring out to sea, leaning dangerously into the wind or sleeping serenely. Their domestic life is recorded in images that celebrate the human body's versatility and a sometimes almost mystical preoccupation with the relationship between private indoor space and the world of weather, infinite space and the movement of time outside the window. Though so often the focus of Jeffery's paintings, Laetitia can also be discovered by her distinctive profile in wider scenes that are rich in independent incident. So too can Jeffery, his penetrating, usually front-facing, gaze more that of watcher than protagonist.



Most of Jeffery's paintings are rectangular, but he made unusual shaped pictures of two kinds. In large pictures, shaping could heighten (or concentrate) the viewer's sense of the space encompassed by a scene. In his late years he invented an original format for small paintings, in which pieces of board were cut to create surfaces with irregular sides of varying number - it could be as many as twenty or as few as five - and length. They were displayed unframed, but standing forward from the wall. The later

years included both very large pictures of rich colour and markedly gestural freedom in which the always important subject had almost to be intuited and, by contrast, a multitude of the small facet-edged oils, in each of which a motif of great particularity was closely and often tenderly observed. The subject could be a peopled outdoor 'snapshot' in which the vividness of an ordinary moment is freshly revealed, or it might be a flower studied closely with a body seen from an unusual angle, a crowded life class or an almost apocalyptic view of Lulworth Cove. Always the theme is the celebration of nature and of humanity's integration with its manifold forms.



An ideal way to experience the richness and immediacy of Jeffery's imaginative world is to study the three remarkable books he both illustrated and wrote. *Draw* (1981) and *Paint* (1996) are no ordinary 'How to do it' manuals. Rather they are portals to Jeffery's intense and infectious curiosity about the compelling interest of even the most down to earth thing we see, if only we really look, and equally about the living resource of the whole of the great art of the past as an inspiration to anyone to paint or draw, each in their own personal way. He introduces the reader to artists of the distant and recent past as if we are

meeting them. But as Jeffery re-creates their works on the page we meet him, too, a sure, entrancing and ever-surprising guide, and also enter into his daily routine. *Draw* identifies Jeffery as a pioneer in the recent flowering of interest in drawing as an art form that is open to the use of any source, style, method or material that will communicate the urgency of an artist's encounter and the meaning of their subject to them.



*Almanac* (2010) is an engrossing pictorial autobiography that examines Jeffery's life, art and circle in nearly five hundred images. Its compelling running commentary could have been written by no-one else.

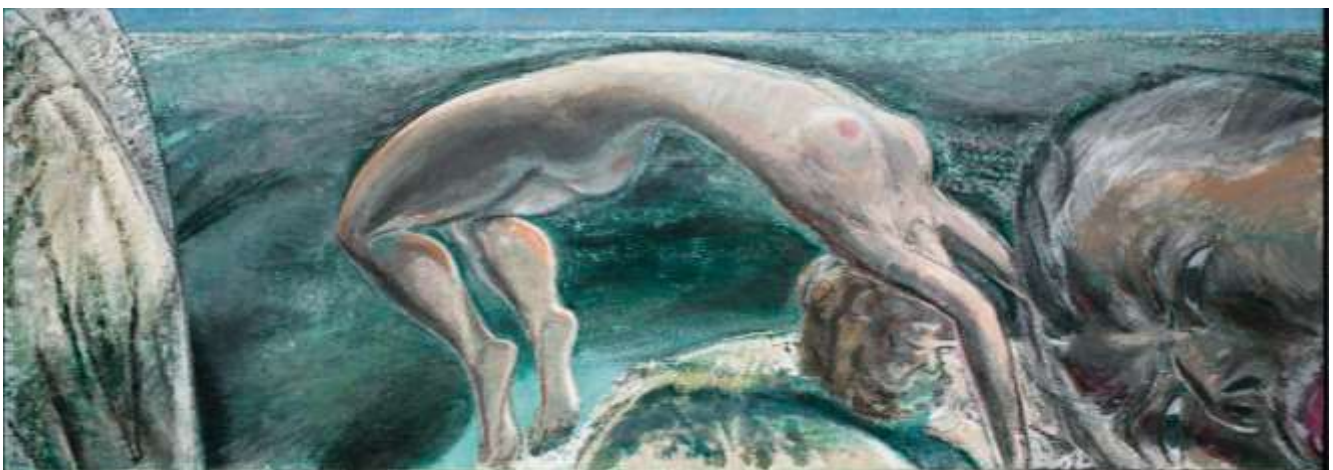
Jeffery felt almost personal identification with the visions and techniques of innumerable artists, whether great or niche, across time and national borders, yet his work is unmistakably English. A key element in this is his preoccupation with place, initially the Suffolk coast, then above all the Sussex coast and motifs in London, a city at once teeming and tidal. Irrespective of style, this deep engagement with place associates his work with that of mostly London artists of his time as diverse as Carel Weight, Anthony Eyton, Patrick George, Leon Kossoff, Craigie Aitchison, Michael Andrews, Adrian Berg, Frank Auerbach, John Lessore, John Wonnacott, George Rowlett, Colin Self, Laetitia Yhap, David Inshaw and Timothy Hyman - and the list must be longer. But the connections also extend back in time, as four examples may suggest.



An affinity with Stanley Spencer is inescapable, in that his art combined obsession with a particular place, Cookham, with acutely observant figure painting, some of it intimate, as well as with a deep interest in

the material detail of everyday life. A specific parallel is the ease with which each artist was equally at home with direct observation and with invented scenes that seem no less real (and that, indeed, they occupy personally), yet which are impossible in reality. Sickert, whose art engaged closely with a succession of particular places, was another masterly painter of the nude figure related to its setting, and also compelling for Jeffery through his exceptional interest in drawing and in the material substance of paint. While the Pre-Raphaelites' concern with immaculate facture contrasts with Jeffery's painterly freedom, there is a connection between his art and theirs when representing figures in landscape. He and they pay equal attention to both these elements. Figures are discovered in strange situations or unusual postures, but in each case strong human interest merges with great sensitivity to light, to weather and to distance itself. In such Pre-Raphaelite pictures, as in Jeffery's, the very near and the very far each play vital roles within individual works. Among other meteorological effects, rainbows are common to Jeffery's art and to theirs. Finally, another poet of the sky's relation to the earth is Samuel Palmer. In his work of the Shoreham years, Palmer felt he had found a kind of inhabited paradise and this, too (for all the dissimilarity of the artists' world views), is an aspect of Jeffery's conception of the ecstatic situation of his figures seen in landscape settings. Celebration of creation's abundance is fused with abundance of personal feeling.

By a sad irony, Jeffery died during the lockdown, in the same city, of the National Gallery's astonishing exhibition reuniting all of the *Poesie* that Titian painted for Philip II. In normal times and when well (as he was till the age of 93), nothing would have stopped Jeffery viewing this exhibition of six magnificent



images of encounters between figures, one in ambiguous space and five in the open air, and all giving prominence to the nude. Two of the scenes are in coastal settings and two more beside water, while every work offers a dynamic interplay between near and far. In each, emotion is intense. Jeffery would so much have appreciated an imagination that could visualise the human form in such variety of posture and angle of view, not least when figures are flying through the air. He would also have delighted in the

handling of paint, by which light, atmosphere, distance, transparency and it almost seems breeze itself are conjured by a hand and mind of which he would have been in awe.

Jeffery Camp was born near Lowestoft on 17 April 1923. He attended local art schools before studying at Edinburgh College of Art 1941-44, where one of his teachers was William Gillies, for whose work he had lasting admiration. He painted increasingly peopled Suffolk land- and shorescapes before moving to London, where his first one-man exhibition was at Helen Lessore's Beaux Arts Gallery in 1959. He married Laetitia Yhap in 1963 and they moved to Hastings. They later separated, Jeffery living wholly in south London from 1981.



Jeffery taught at the Slade School in London 1963-88. He had numerous solo exhibitions, latterly at Art Space Gallery, which issued several publications and a film. He had retrospective exhibitions at South London Art Gallery in 1973 and the Serpentine Gallery in 1978. A national touring exhibition in 1988-89 included the Royal Academy, of which he became a member in 1984 [ARA 1974]. He had a 90th birthday exhibition at the Jerwood Gallery, Hastings in 2013. Jeffery remained highly active until becoming disabled in 2016. He died peacefully at home on 5 April 2020.

London, May 2020

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List of images top to bottom:

- 1 ***Rocket over Venice***, 1986; oil on canvas, 244 x 198 cm. Courtesy of the Tate
- 2 ***Beachy Head, Sheer Drop***, 1972; oil on wood, 183 x 121 cm Courtesy of the Government Art Collection.
- 3 ***Floral Power***, 2014; oil on board 32 x 48 cm. Courtesy of Art Space Gallery
- 4 ***Lulworth Cove with Parasol***, 2006; oil on board, 20 x 28 cm. Private Collection
- 5 ***Laetitia in the Bath*** circa 1970; pencil on paper, 25 x 42cm. Courtesy of Art Space Gallery
- 6 ***Self Portrait on the East Anglia Coast***, circa 1960; oil on board, 30 x 60 cm. Private Collection
- 7 ***Sprung Figure at Beachy Head***, 1981; oil on board, 86 x 245 cm. Courtesy of Art Space Gallery
- 8 Jeffery at Art Space Gallery looking at ***Ralph***, 2006; oil on canvas, 396 x 427cm. Courtesy of Art Space Gallery