

A Life in Painting

Jean McNeil



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Paintings and drawings 1980 - 2015

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## Foreword

This exhibition marks 75 years of life and 35 years of painting. It was the idea of my partner, Phil Cohen. He asked friends and relations who had bought my paintings to loan them for the show, and to write a little piece – not conventional art criticism – about what the painting meant to them. These pieces make up the catalogue, along with texts by me for those paintings that have not been sold. Phil has written about living with painting and I have introduced my work.

I would like to warmly thank everyone who participated. The texts are extraordinarily varied, as no doubt the people are, and revealing. I am also indebted to those other friends and relations who have bought work that is not shown here. It was difficult to decide which paintings to include in the show. I may not always have chosen the most accomplished works, but have tried to represent each phase of my development. Thank you all for your support, it has made me the painter I am.

Thank you to Phil also who has been the best partner a painter could have: both an honest critic and an enthusiastic supporter.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the great support I've had over the years from my brother David and sister-in-law Leslie.

Thank you also to my nephew Dylan for helping get the show off the ground, and last but not least, to Ben Cohen whose help enabled the catalogue to come into being.

*Jean McNeil*



## Introduction

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*Jean McNeil*

I come from a family of both failed and very successful artists. I always drew and painted a little but I resisted the idea of being a painter or doing anything artistic. When I finally did begin to paint in my thirties it was because all other paths had become blocked and it seemed like the only thing to do.

I joined a painting class at the City Lit, and found it immediately absorbing. On my own I had been powerless; now the encouragement of the teacher and the company of the other students filled me with a new energy. I was lucky enough to find a place on Cecil Collins's meditative drawing course which cut through my inhibiting self-criticism. Still today I need the stimulus and encouragement of others. My artists' support group is vital, they provide the positive criticism that we need to develop. We have been meeting, talking and eating together for 30 years!

At first I wanted to portray people, but I was also drawn to abstraction. Long before I took the plunge into painting, a landscape in the Tate Gallery had given me a feeling of wholeness and pleasure: it was a very simple painting made of just a few brushstrokes. I thought it was a William Scott but I'm not sure now. I hadn't realised that you could paint a landscape that was also "abstract".

I was excited by patterns, kaleidoscopes, playing with light to create effects, and views and vistas. My first proper canvasses were of the recession of back gardens outside my London window. (*The Backs*) I looked for bits of green in the townscape, nature was something pure and genuine that I longed for.

I met Phil around that time, and he took me to his little chalet on the edge of a cliff in Happisburgh. This was a double excitement: a new relationship, a visually exhilarating place. I discovered that he was interested in my work. I also found a new way of working by looking at the sea and responding to it rather than reproducing it. I studied the sea in motion, it was a feeling of forces at play, gravity pulling down and wind pushing up, and also an optical phenomenon, a shimmering grid (*Sea Grid*).



Piet Mondrian: *'The Sea'* (1914)

I wanted to paint the sea as substance, as matter. Bachelard describes matter as the unconscious of form, and I wanted abstract forms to arise from the vision of the sea. But there came a point where I couldn't take this any further, perhaps I had already realised I was not cut out to be an abstract painter. In addition, I craved verticals. This brought me to grasses, woods, the ready-made aesthetic of London parks (*Field, Dark Spirits, Lake in Winter*), and London views (*From the Reservoir*).

A painter friend once said my work was about atmosphere. However, the structural element is always present (Cézanne was so important!). I could contrast the part of me that worships Ivon Hitchens with the one that is enchanted by Caspar David Friedrich or the landscapes of Rembrandt. I am always trying to find a form for a psychic state, or a form that reverberates within the body. The strongest work comes without



Ivon Hitchens: *'Arched Trees'* (1957)

much thinking, prompted perhaps by unusual light (*Wild Wood, From the Tower, Dark Spirits*).

I'm often perturbed by the fact that I'm not part of any avant-garde, pushing my art beyond what has already been done. What is there left to say about landscape? I am affected and perhaps influenced by a



wide range of contemporary painters: Frank Auerbach, Howard Hodgkin, John Virtue, Fiona Rae, Cornelia Parker and many others. But I don't feel I have much choice about how I paint. Landscape has chosen me.

Round about 1996, when I had a show at the John Jones Gallery, my paintings had become almost photographic, as though I wanted the real landscape to be present so that people could enter it and walk around. I had moved from the slapdash, muscular, rhythmic, formal to the lyrical, symbolic, illusionistic (*Field with Sheep* comes closest to this).



Rembrandt: 'Landscape with a Bridge' (1637-40)

was able to go in greater depth into some of the avenues I'd only half explored. I found that working in smaller formats and on cheap and ephemeral grounds helps me to be more spontaneous and daring. I think I still stay very close to the appearance of the subject, the marks I make seem more meaningful when I respond to a closely observed scene.

I work almost daily for short periods, perhaps two hours in the morning. My eyes get tired and my critical side gets stronger until it stifles the creative energy, so I go and do something else. I waste an enormous amount, maybe only one in ten paintings survives. I try to draw as much as possible and use the sketches as inspiration, relying on photographs to provide the composition.

After that there were doldrums. I learnt to teach English to foreigners as a way of making a better income than in the office jobs I was now losing through lack of computer skills. The teaching became absorbing and used up some of my creativity. I welcomed this as a rest from painting; what I was producing had become repetitive and less adventurous.

On moving to East Anglia, at first part-time, now permanently, I found a new energy and enthusiasm for landscape. I



*Jean McNeil: 'Sea' (2015) Mixed media*

Our son Stephen died in 2013, and it was some weeks before I could paint again. The first two paintings were about my sorrow, the colours were the most muted, off-key I have ever used. But they were also the start of a productive wave that has lasted until now, almost without interruption, as though Stephen were infusing me with energy. He and I had often painted and drawn together since he was a little boy, and I had been looking forward to the development of his obvious talent for drawing.

I began a sea series in the winter of 2014/15 that feels like a new departure. I am still drawing and photographing, but I am painting from what the sea feels like and less from a direct visual stimulus. It occurred to me recently (how long these realisations take!) that I could actually paint anything I liked, anyway I liked. It's as though I have rediscovered play. I am painting with my emotions, and I am taken back to the first enchantment of the peep show, the magic lantern and the toy theatre of my childhood.

## Living with painting

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*Phil Cohen*

“The works which constitute the life and fame of artists decay one after the other by the ravages of time. Thus the artists themselves are unknown, as there was no one to write about them and could not be, so that this source of knowledge was not granted to posterity.”

*Giorgio Vasari*

“Writing is present in the margins, painting is spread over ‘vacant space’.”

*Stéphane Mallarmé*

“My responsibility towards these paintings is to make you see them, only that.”

*Victor Ségalen*

By all accounts it was Vasari who was responsible for the idea that the story of art could be told through the lives of its practitioners. At the time he was writing, in the mid 16th century, it certainly was the case that if the reputation of painters, sculptors and architects was to survive them it was not enough for their works to do so. His vivid pen portraits of the life and times of his chosen ‘greats’ are an entertaining mixture of gossip, fable and commentary on provenance; their main purpose was to secure a place for his heroes in the hall of artistic fame. But times have changed. Or have they?

Today the lives of artists are still popularly supposed to illuminate their work, even if it is granted that the meaning of an artwork cannot be entirely deduced from or reduced to the biography of its maker. To become intimately acquainted with the life of an artist, even if only vicariously and at second hand, remains, for many people, the royal road to a better understanding of their work, especially in its more unconscious dimensions hidden from the artist herself.

This assumption is linked to a pervasive belief, which can be traced back to the Romantic movement, and which Freud's study of Michelangelo helped to legitimate, that the artist is a special kind of person, exceptionally sensitive, or neurotic, not subject to the social norms to which ordinary mortals have to conform. It follows that the artistic vocation, the roots of creativity, the true significance of the work, must be sought in the circumstances of the artist's everyday life and especially in their childhoods. By implication those who know the artist intimately, their family, their friends, their lovers, are supposed to have a privileged insight into the springs of their imagination. And so the biographies are supplemented and even supplanted by a new genre of memoir that offers the reader a behind-the-scenes account of 'My Life with Picasso'. Or Chagall.

The art/life tension – is art imitating life or life art – has increasingly given way to their fusion. Nowadays if someone lives only for and through their painting, if their life style and pictorial style converge, then they are praised for their integrity. This may give the work itself an obsessional intensity, it tends to compel by repetition, but the absence of any dialectical tension between the forms of lived experience of, say, a particular landscape and their imaginative transfiguration in a painting means that both are the poorer. Yet this hollowing out of mimesis is disguised by the frenetic masquerade of the art scene with its ever greater accumulation of cultural capital.

In contrast to Vasari's time, when the claim to immortality was a religious affair and largely the preserve of saints, the contemporary artworld is filled with the frenzy of an entirely profane renown, and there is a whole discursive apparatus devoted to the making and breaking of artistic reputation. Many artists deliberately cultivate public interest in their more or less bohemian life styles as a way of promoting their work. Indeed the public persona, or 'brand' of the artist may be deliberately cultivated as in itself constituting an aesthetic statement. Projective identification with the artist's vocation is encouraged as a sign of aesthetic taste or cultural ambition and turns the spectator into a voyeur of the work, which itself may be a project of self expression. The art object becomes a prop for the shared narcissism of producer and consumer, the mirror of their folie a deux.

Artists have become the avant garde of capitalism's 'cultural turn' and what has been called the aestheticisation of everyday life. Everyone is a curator of something these

days, if only of the music tracks downloaded on their ipad. To this has corresponded a shift away from painting towards multimedia, performance, installation, video and time based art. The story is told of a professional curator of contemporary arts, working for a prestigious cultural centre, who came to visit a well know painter. He never took so much as a glance at the work on the walls and when challenged confessed that he no longer regarded painting, especially landscape painting, as being part of the contemporary art scene and hence of any interest.

Against this background many artists feel they have to match, in the scope and scale of their work, the gigantic machinery of the advertising industry and consumer spectacle; it is the only way to get noticed above the visual din. But what then happens to less strident work that takes its distance from the turbo charged urban buzz of the art scene? There are no prizes or kudos for small scale studies of what were once part of the commons or the common place but have now become edgelands, out of bounds or simply off the map: the eroding shoreline, the flaws in a meadow, a view over an expanse of land, sea or sky from a vantage point that is no longer there, or about to disappear.

Certainly Jean's work is not trendily conceptual and there is nothing ironically post modern about her exploration of the borderlands between abstraction and representation. But neither is it traditional. She may work deep in Constable Country and there are some echoes of it in her palette, but she is not offering us a reassuring prospect on a countryside where the topography is always and already secure. Nor do her paintings offer us a refuge from the current unease we feel inhabiting a coastline at increasing risk from flooding due to global warming.

These reflections imposed themselves when Jean asked me to write an introduction to this catalogue for an exhibition in which she has selected from different phases of her work. So, firstly, what is the function of a retrospective? In some recent cases, we know, it has become little more than a bid for prospective, and even posthumous fame. More properly speaking a retrospective should be an occasion for considering the development of a body of work over an artistic lifetime, tracing its emerging themes, enabling some kind of assessment to be made. But how, from what or whose vantage point should such an evaluation be made? That of the artist herself? Are artists always the best judges of their work? Or does it require an art critic to do the job? Critics mostly operate a grid

of commensurability to position the work in relation to artistic schools, or particular aesthetic traditions, for example the picturesque or the sublime in English landscape painting. Not only does that ignore the individuality of the work itself, treating it as merely symptomatic of this or that trend, but it reduces the notion of a retrospective to a teleological account of the unfolding of an unwavering artistic purpose. Here sudden shifts in perspective or volte face, or simply the trial and error of true experiment become regarded as signs of an erratic temperament, an uncertain talent.

In contrast, the approach we have chosen is to treat the paintings themselves as interlocutors between the artist and the collector, between aesthetic intention and reception, cutting out the art critic and curator as interpretive go-betweens. We have simply asked people who have bought Jean's work over the years to write short pieces telling us what the paintings have come to mean to them, the memories or other associations they evoke. This brief has been interpreted in widely different ways. Some people have talked about the circumstances in which they bought the work, or how their role as patron or collector developed in the context of a personal relationship with Jean. Others have concentrated on the immediate impact the work had on them, or its 'slow burn' on their awareness of a particular landscape. Still others have described their sensuous reponse to the painterly qualities, or the pride of place a painting occupies within a domestic interior, or personal memoryscape.



*London 1992*

People often say, looking at a painting they see in a gallery 'Oh I like that, but I could never live with it'. What they seem to be implying is that it takes some special quality for a painting to become a life long companion, not just another 'pretty picture' on a wall, but a window into another possible world which is imaginatively shared with the artist. This tacit dialogue between

artist and collector seems to me to constitute a painting's true provenance; this is not just about recording the bare bones of artistic signature, date of birth, and history of subsequent ownership, but includes a meta-narrative tracing all the stories which cluster around the work, from the moment of its conception to its always provisional final resting place. Yes, every picture tells a story, but even and especially in the case of narrative painting, it tells another story, a story about this 'other scene'.

Curated in a white cube, the painting is shown in constant light and temperature so that it presents an unvarying aspect to the world. Hung in the home, it is usually subject to much more variable conditions; in the morning its colours may be radiant in sunlight, later in the day, or when the skies cloud over its more subtle tones register on the eye, while in the evening under artificial light its richness of texture may emerge. And these diurnal changes, as well as the wear and tear of its traffic with its physical environment are also part of its provenance.

The second question raised for me in writing this introduction was the nature of my relation to the exhibition itself. I have, after all, been living with Jean for most of the time during which she has produced the body of work from which she has selected 17 pictures for this show. I have been privileged to share many of the places and times which have inspired these paintings and indeed we recently collaborated on a book, *Graphologies*, which brought into conversation our different responses to the land and seascapes of East Anglia over the past 25 years. But I very much doubt whether this gives me any special insight into what her work is about. And this for one main reason: we relate to the world through radically different idioms.

As James Elkin's reminds us in his wonderful book *What Painting Is* the act of painting is at once a very material and a very mysterious process, as he puts it '...an unspoken and largely unrecognised dialogue where paint speaks silently in masses and colours, and the artist responds in moods.' Elkins criticises the sociological or psychological bent of most art history for ignoring this visceral aspect of painting and its impact on the viewer. Composing a picture of place and its atmosphere in words, as I have tried to do in some of my poems, is a fundamentally different activity from depicting it in paint or charcoal, acrylic or gouache, each of which media lends its own special fleshing to the bare bones of the composition. As a wordsmith, I have felt from the very beginning that Jean's work

has dwelt in an unfamiliar dimension; in a sense it represents for me the ‘other scene’ of our partnership, a terra incognita that continues to fascinate, to draw me out of my literary comfort zone but which I know I will never be able to fully explore or understand. I fully endorse Mallarmé’s sentiment: writing is always marginal to the scope of what a painting can assert in its own idiom, an idiom definitely not structured like language.

This does not mean that living in close proximity to the *mise en scene* of painting has not required an active accommodation to the activity. Elkins refers to painting as an alchemical process, and to the artist’s studio as his or her laboratory, where substances undergo a magical transformation and come to mean what they do in paint on canvas. Jean has had many different kinds of studio: there was the shed we built perched precariously on top of a windswept and rapidly eroding cliff in Happisburgh, from which prospect the large skies and tumultuous waves of this part of the North East Norfolk coast etched themselves on Jean’s inner eye. Such a contrast to her present studio which nestles in a visually secluded space at the bottom of our garden in Wivenhoe, a refuge from many a passing storm. Then there was the very urban workspace she rented in an industrial estate in London, and whose atmosphere always seemed out of harmony with her work. But mostly Jean’s studios have been in a room set aside for the purpose in the various domestic spaces we have shared. These have been her alchemical laboratories, where she has impressed burnt wood and powdered stone onto canvas to conjure up her envisagements of place.

Perhaps it is worth remembering that ‘laboratory’ was originally a term for the space between the fire and the flue bridge of a reverberatory furnace, where various kinds of engineering work were performed. Another term for this kind of laboratory was a kitchen or hearth where the confluence of two contrasting elements (air and fire) produced a material transformation. In fact many of the early scientific experiments took place in people’s homes. I would like to suggest that there is a direct analogy here between the domestic studios where Jean has conducted her experiments and the works she has engineered.

One of the key aspects of Jean’s land and seascapes is that they occupy an in-between space, a space between map and territory, the wood and the trees, the land and the sky or sea where the strange becomes familiar and familiar strange; she uses these visual ambiguities and



perspectival shifts to explore the confluence or contrast between these different elements. As she put it in *Graphologies* ‘my paintings evoke a sense of transience arrested in the moment of their manifestation or imminent departure: a tide that is on the turn, a glimpse of land from a train, a passing storm’. Her working method involves a similar to-ing and fro-ing, between the terrain and its depiction, photograph and worked canvas.

I have often visited Jean in her studios, but they remain in some sense out of bounds. I feel that I am somehow trespassing, entering the primal scene of art, prying on its secret



*Happisburgh 1980s*

affordances. She does not like to be observed while she is at work, radio on, body tensed at the easel, brush in hand, rapt in the act of painting. I wish I could put that process into words, in Victor Segalen’s phrase turn it into a spoken painting, but too much would be lost in the translation. I could not in any case improve on her own descriptions, which like the paintings themselves are deft, nuanced, and, without out the slightest pretention, profound. She has taught me how to look at what is there, and especially at what hovers on the edges of perception, in our peripheral vision of the world.

One day watching Jean stretch and prime a canvas I realised that she brings to the task the same meticulous observance of detail that she applies to everyday objects about the house. And this respect for things, for their thinginess, carries over in the painting itself. If what you see is what you get in these paintings, what you get is a sense of specific gravity, the weight in the world of these elements of landscape.

I think this helps explain why there are so few human figures in these paintings, and those that do feature appear so fragile. They are not needed compositionally to provide a visual anchorage or sense of scale, let alone 'human interest'. The balance of forms and forces relies on more intrinsic devices. Of course, the absence of people also reflects the fact that the crowded fields of yesteryear have given way to the depopulated hedgeless expanses of modern agribusiness. When figures do appear, often against the immensities of sky or shoreline, they seem to be clinging on by sheer will power against invisible winds of change. Second nature, not first, is the true subject of this work.

I hope that visitors to this exhibition will delight, as I do, in bearing witness to Jean's persistent struggle to give form and meaning to the often hidden and inchoate features of land and seascapes we often take for granted, but which are increasingly under threat. These paintings do not shout their message, but like Jean herself, they are quietly determined to make their point.

### ***References***

Giorgio Vasari *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550)

James Elkins *What Painting Is* (1999)

Stéphane Mallarmé *Écrits* (1876)

Victor Ségalen *Paintings* (1991)

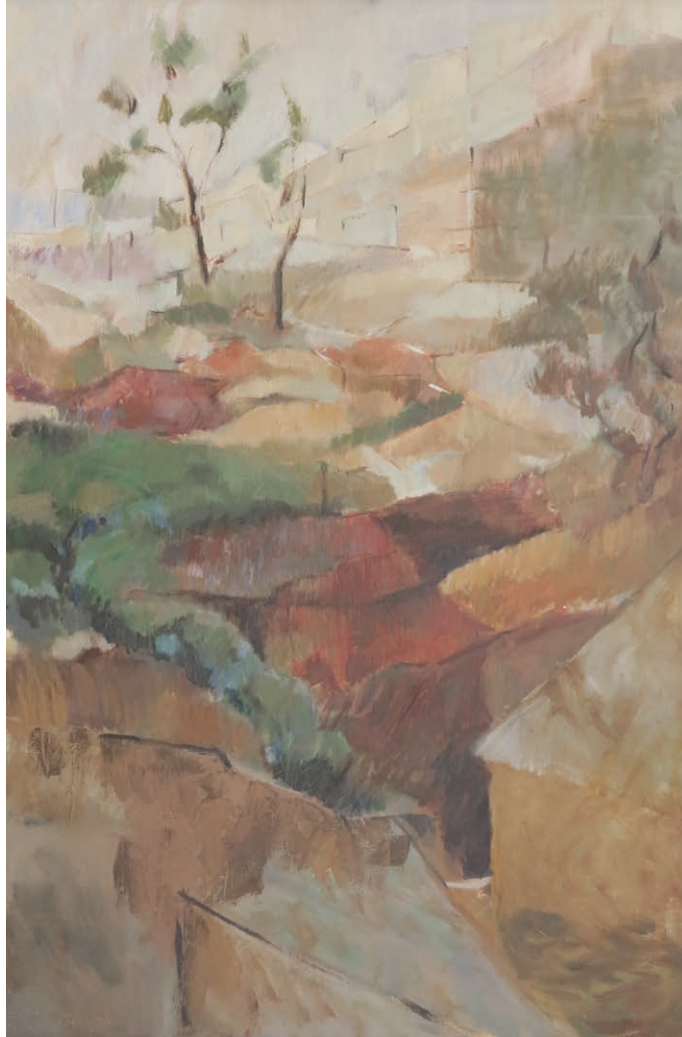
John Barrell *The Idea of Landscape* (1986)

# The Drawings and Paintings

## 1 The Backs

I bought this picture from Jean around September 1984. I was just about to start at University. I knew that students had posters on the walls of their rooms, and I thought – in a way that seems pretentious now – that I wanted a painting instead. I remembered the paintings she had done from the window of the back room of her flat in Crouch End when I stayed with her once, a few years before, perhaps in 1981. From staying in that room, I recognised that the paintings captured the light and atmosphere there. It somehow felt high up, and airy, though it was only a second floor. In 1984, I just asked if I could buy one of her paintings. We looked at a few, but I remember making the decision very quickly. I must have been thinking about that specific painting from before, and was hoping I could have it. Jean seemed a bit astonished to have me want to buy, perhaps she didn't want to sell it at all! I pinned the painting to a block of polystyrene, and it became the centrepiece of a succession of student rooms over the next few years. The combination of natural and man-made elements in this painting works very well. The patchwork of greens, browns and greys captures the feel of suburban London for me. And of course it carries a lot of memories, not just of the circumstances under which I acquired it but of my student years.

*Patrick Haggard*



*'The Backs' (1980) Oil on canvas 90.2 x 59.7 cm*

## 2 Sea Grid

The Sea Grid drawing happened very quickly, with hardly any thought. It was the bare bones of several paintings of the sea, but I think it was more successful than they were. It is a very simple idea, so charcoal conveys it most clearly. Paul Klee talked about gravity and growth, the two opposing forces acting on nature. Here there is a vertical effect of the air stirring the surface of the sea, and a horizontal one, as gravity pulls the surface flat. I was very much influenced by Klee, who said: get inside your subject, recreate it. I also looked hard at Mondrian's abstracted seas and trees.

My mother bought several of my works, always the best ones, and this was the first. I dedicated it to her.

*Jean McNeil*



*'Sea Grid' (1982) Charcoal on paper 38 x 56 cm*

### 3 Blue L

Blue L was a vision between sleeping and waking of a slate-blue shape. This is how I saw it in pastel and charcoal. It also gave rise to a painting which was laboured and turgid compared to the drawing. A painting often takes itself too seriously, it composes, fills the space, smoothes over rough edges.

Along with Sea Grid, this is one of my very rare abstractions. As with the landscapes I seek tension and balance at the same time.

*Jean McNeil*





*'Blue L' (1984) Pastel & charcoal on paper 40.6 x 55.9 cm*

## 4 Field

For several years Jean and Phil had the use of a tiny holiday cottage in Happisburgh on the Norfolk coast where eroding sand cliffs brought the cottage closer to the sea year on year. I was regularly invited to join them for weekends, and enjoyed walking and cycling on beaches, dunes and windswept uplands. Going with Jean to pick strawberries on local farms, or to buy crab from fishermen introduced me to a different food culture from my weekly shopping trips by car to Sainsbury's. The experience of living simply, close to fields, sea and cliffs punctuated several of my summer seasons in the late '70s and early '80s.

These long ago visits to Norfolk are all merged now into an overall visual impression and a sensation of balance between change and continuity, which come back to me whenever I look at the painting. The energy of wind and waves is mirrored in the movement of wheat and shrubby trees in these Norfolk fields.

I bought this painting at the first gallery exhibition of Jean's work (or perhaps it was the first one that I attended). It has moved with me to different houses and flats and always has a special place. I call it 'Fields in Norfolk' and add proudly 'by my artist friend Jean McNeil'.

*Monika Beutel*



*'Field' (1985) Oil on canvas 66 x 93.9 cm*

## 5 Red Field

A red painting crossed with dark shapes; further on, another dimension, far off, it's a window opening on another world, but don't enter it, at any rate not right away, it isn't made for you, it isn't waiting for you. Be content for the moment to lean out of the window. It opens onto your dreams, your daydreams, stay a while, be patient and wait until the dark forms on the red background take you by the hand and lead you, not into the abstract, but simply into another reality.

*David McNeil*



*'Red Field' (1985) Gouache on paper 40.6 x 58.4 cm*

## 6 The Wild Wood

In my flat in London I have quite a few art works, and quite a few of these are paintings that Jean has given me over the years we have been together. But my favourite, the one that holds pride of place, and is most remarked upon by visitors is Wild Wood. Of all her paintings it is the one that is closest to my inner landscape, as well as evoking the time and place we first spent a lot of time together. Presumptuously I like to think she painted it just for me.

It is not a painting for all seasons but best appreciated on a wet and windy Winter's day when rattling windows provide a counterpoint to the snug indoors. But it also belongs to a more personal memoryscape. Wind in the Willows was one of my favourite children's books and ever since woods have fascinated and frightened me. They are where babes go to run away from home and get lost. They are where, as adults, we go to escape the exposure of the open fields. They are haunted by Wild Men or Wodewose as well as stoats and weasels. They give a local habitation and a name to our most intimate fantasies of seduction or abduction. And, of course, they configure the landscape. Along the North East Norfolk Coast isolated trees are bent into stark diagonals by a wind that sweeps in relentlessly from the west. No wonder they crowd together in copses as if to shelter one another from the storm.

This painting is certainly no invitation to a teddy bear's picnic. Its wildness comes from the way it unsettles our conventional sense of the distinction between the wood and the trees, figure and ground. Here the earthworks are as turbulent as the stormy sky, the dense swirling arboreal joins the symphony of closely worked blacks, purples and greys. Our eye finds itself caught up in the visual dance, blown hither and thither, unable to find a stable anchorage or point of repose. Except perhaps in that little patch of red on the lower left. Poppies? Or perhaps a subliminal echo of Turner's famous 'red blob'.

While I was writing this I had a dream in which I was an intern in an art class given by Jean, in which this painting featured as a source of inspiration. Each student interpreted it in his or her own way and in response produced an enormous variety of work. This is the most we can ask of any painting, that it gets us to look at familiar things in a fresh way and sparks off our own creativity.

*Phil Cohen*



*'The Wild Wood' (1986) Oil on paper 39.4 x 57.1 cm*

## 7 Lake in Winter

This painting was a marker for me of a sense of becoming a Londoner. At the time I bought it for our new London flat I had started to have favourite parks in London – and had been to swim in Hampstead Ponds which felt like a symbol of arrival in the real London. Over the years I have come to think of it as Hampstead Ponds, but now find from Jean that it is Waterlow Park, which was one of her local London parks. I knew this at the time and am glad to relocate it in my mind. The picture excites me in the same way that London does: the calm greens of the grass and greys of the water, the darker sense of not-quite-kept-in-order black fences and tree trunks and beyond, stretching to the sky, the dense jumble of brick, slate, concrete, chimneys and towers. The painting brings together for me in a quiet but powerful way how complex London is with its crowded, relentlessly changing cityscape and its gifts of quiet green spaces, canals, rivers and ponds.

*Liz Haggard*





*'Lake in Winter' (1990) Gouache on paper 38 x 48.3 cm*

## 8 Dark Spirits

This was I think the first painting of Jean's that we acquired. I am reasonably sure it was my wife Gillian's initiative – she said that having been friends with Jean for so long we couldn't possibly not have one of her paintings. Was I involved in the selection? Maybe I was sulking. I was always worrying about finances, and very possibly dealt with this unwanted outburst of money (trivial by current standards) by detaching myself from the whole procedure.

In our home the picture grew on me insidiously. The stillness of the pool, the heavy emptiness of the undulating green, the glint of the pool – in the end it exerted quite a hypnotic influence. Maybe it did from the beginning, hence my passive resistance. I knew where it was, in the sense that I knew where Waterlow Park was. But I knew only its perimeter, so its inside was a mystery, and inside that mystery was the mystery that was the pool.

When Gillian died we had her funeral meeting in Lauderdale House, whose back opens out into the park.

In the mid 1990s the academic unit of which I was the senior member moved into greatly improved accommodation, which incorporated an almost circular sitting space ringed by academic offices. A nice place for impromptu social gatherings and occasional celebrations. I took Dark Spirits there and hung it on the wall, to enhance the calm feel. I'm not sure how long it hung there. There was a rebellion by some group members saying that I had hung it up without consultation; they demanded a hanging committee. Of course it wasn't about the painting, it was a way of getting at me. So I took the painting home again.

*Jonathan Rosenhead*



*'Dark Spirits' (1990) Oil on canvas 66 x 93.9 cm*

## 9 Lake

In taking this picture down from its permanent place in my sitting room so that it can be displayed in Jean McNeil's retrospective exhibition, I was startled by the blankness it left behind on the wall. I had hung it so that it could first be seen through a doorway as you entered the sitting room – even in fact as you came down the last few stairs before you entered that room. As you entered the room the painting conveyed a view as if through a window.

Good paintings demand their own viewing distance. I get the feeling (right or wrong) that Jean could have stood well back from this painting before making each brush-stroke and then advanced to deliver it onto the surface.

The brush-strokes appear to be free and decisive. Only when I get quite near to it do I realise the abstract quality of the work. That achievement of creating what on close inspection appears nearly abstract while at a certain distance becomes a coherent landscape (or in this case a waterscape) particularly attracts me. A good painting demands a specific viewing distance?

The scene it conveys has associations for me. It is a place I like and am familiar with: one of the ponds around Hampstead.

The seemingly confident brushwork, the colours, give me the pleasure of having a 'window', that looks out of my interior house-world onto nature, water and fresh air. It gives me continual pleasure. It does not pall.

*Anne James*



*'Lake' (1992) Gouache on paper 28 x 38 cm*

## 10 From the Reservoir

The Reservoir is in Dartmouth Park Hill, about five minutes from where we used to live. You could climb on top of its grassy mound and look out on a view similar to that from Kite Hill but shifted to the east. Londoners love a View, it's an escape from the suffocating streets and the only time they begin to grasp the immense entity of London. Looking out from the Reservoir, watching the mushrooming of the City and Canary Wharf, was one of my favourite “gasp” moments, and it never failed to lift my dark moods.

Here I've zoomed in as though to reduce the overwhelming complexity of the buildings, streets and trees stacked behind each other for miles and miles. The sun was past its zenith and the light was pinkish.

I worked on paper and the oil paint went on fast and freely. I had begun to realise that the cheaper and flimsier the material I used the more daring and spontaneous my work seemed to be. Other artists I've spoken to have told me they feel the same. The more elaborate canvases I painted on the same subject have all been thrown out or painted over.

This was another painting my mother bought and to my delight hung in pride of place when she moved to a small flat in the last years of her life.

*Jean McNeil*



*'From the Reservoir' (1992) Oil on paper 38.1 x 50.8 cm*

## 11 Field with Sheep

It is a sombre painting, its main surface is filled with brown fields of grass or corn, dark green trees, and a slatey grey sky which seems to be announcing an imminent squall, from which a flock of sheep may already be sheltering in the far distance. In the foreground is a hedge, which seems to close off the viewer from the more open landscape beyond, offering no inviting way through to it. The pathways through the fields are dark and uninviting. The larger space of the picture seems enclosed in a claustrophobic rather than a reassuring way. Furthermore the expanse of fields in the right middle-ground and to which the eye is drawn, seems to be swelling upwards, as from some internal disturbance, giving the scene a quality of tension or suppressed force.

On the horizon, however, there are patches of brighter light, even streaks where the sun may be trying to break through. There is a sharper definition to the trees in the distance, perhaps the other side of the storm, than there is to the hedge or the fields in the foreground, though this is the contrary of what one might optically expect to see. If one sees this landscape as the representation of a state of mind, one might say that the fore-and middle-ground are painted in a somewhat flat way because the mood is such as to have withdrawn much curiosity and interest from it. It is at the edge of the clouds in the distance, that the silhouettes of the trees against the sky are given closer attention, and reveal traces of beauty.

Nevertheless, there is an order and harmony in the painting which make it pleasing to look at, as if the artist and we can survive whatever anxieties lie beneath the surface here.

*Michael Rustin*





*'Field with Sheep' (1995) Oil on canvas 61 x 81.3 cm*

## 12 Woodland

The first painting class I took in my life was the one that Jean gave me. At the time, she was teaching evening classes in Crouch End and she took me along. In the manner of the Japanese painters, she invited her students not to draw the shape they saw but the ‘counter-form’, what was around it – which was another way of telling us not to draw what we saw but to be sensitive to the invisible, underground forces of things. This simple tip remained deeply rooted in me and still follows me in many other areas.

With ‘Woodland’ she almost reaches Japanese printmaking: just a few brushstrokes are enough to crystallise a form, and even more so a light, in a simple, very simple manner, sometimes using only the white of the paper. There is little texture because she uses highly diluted gouache like watercolour, and I sense that this painting was done quite fast. Like Japanese painters again, who simply place a few brushstrokes in seconds - but take weeks of reflection to arrive at this gesture!

I love in her painting the way she navigates between abstraction and figuration, and this painting is for me the perfect balance between the two: not really within figuration anymore, but neither in abstraction. However, fans of the two meet here. That is why this clever mix (a formula she would be unable to replicate – and all the better!) is for me the epitome of her painting.

*Dylan McNeil*



*'Woodland' (2004) Gouache on paper 27.9 x 40.6 cm*

## 13 From the Tower

Three quarters of this picture is a sky of pearly greys and darker greys that mix and mingle in an uneasy dance. The lowering darker sky at the top overwhelms the earth, casting it into deepest shade only briefly warmed by occasional patches of almost brown and slightly green. There are silvery streaks that could be the shimmer on the sea or watery areas before the sea. There is a curtain of fine rain falling from the darkness above to the darkness below. It has no defined edge. Is it coming or going? One cannot make out its exact contours. One cannot grasp anything with certainty and could easily get lost. Nature is doing its own thing regardless of our petty human concerns, which are, in any case, cast into darkness.

In some of my moods, this image is almost a memento mori. It makes what is normally a gentle, organised and managed world into a symbol of all that is shifting and transitory, but also fated and ungovernable. It is strange how this can be expressed by patterns of light and shade, and stranger still that I (we?) crave these reminders of our unimportance and mortality. Is it because such eloquent painted expressions reconcile us to the inevitable?

*Claudia Cotton*



*'From the Tower' (2007) Acrylic on paper 30.5 x 45.7 cm*

## 14 Storm Clouds

I chose this painting very deliberately from the exhibition at Wivenhoe a few years ago, from several which concentrated on East Coast sea and sky. Unusual light effects with clouds are one of the major beauties of Nature, with scientific and religious but mainly aesthetic aspects. They can be uplifting, even when not heralding fine weather. Mannerist devotional paintings tended to overdo the Divine Light pouring through clouds. Here, I like the capture of a break in the storm; the heavy cloud layers are thinner in the direction of the concealed sun, letting through enough light to side-illuminate, through other cloud, the central white cloud that we see. To lightly interpret, it represents the promise that the storm is receding seaward and we shall soon be able to breathe the freshened air, when walking on the beach again. Under usual overhead cloudy mid-day lighting, the sea on this part of the coast often has a muddy brown non-reflectant quality, but here the greenish tones and the gleaming patches in the picture reflecting the lightest cloud make it real, sinuous, moving water in a nether calm. I recently noticed just the same quality in the dark foreground water of JMW Turner's very fine "Peace: Burial at Sea" at the Tate Gallery, a quality not seen in most of the reproductions of it.

The painting hangs in the sitting part of the dining/living room area of our flat in London, with other middle-sized paintings, in a loosely box-shaped arrangement. This is on the garden side of the house receiving only north light, but quite a lot of it. They are all landscapes (in the wider sense including sea-scape) but very different in character.

*Mark Haggard*



*'Storm Clouds' (2012) Acrylic on paper 33 x 50.8 cm*

## 15 Snowy Path

An English byroad in the snow.

This small painting with its winter colours of whites, greys, and muted browns hangs in my sitting room where it resonances with the different, but also very English landscape that I see through the adjacent window. I find myself looking at it many times in the course of a day, always with pleasure and with interest.

The little country road and its verges dominate the foreground: the variations in the colour of the snow on the road and the tufts of vegetation, roots and fallen branches poking through the light covering of snow on the banks capture beautifully this slice of rural England after a light snow fall. The partly seen trunks and boughs of the two large, quintessentially English trees that dominate the middle ground frame the scene beyond. In the distance one sees a tranquil world of small fields and hedges. The road, with the hint of car tracks visible in the snow – an indication that someone has recently travelled this way – introduces a sense of movement to this otherwise motionless landscape.

I treasure the painting both for the peace its delicate evocation of place and season create, and for the way it continually draws my eyes and thoughts into the world portrayed.

*Sarah Harrison*



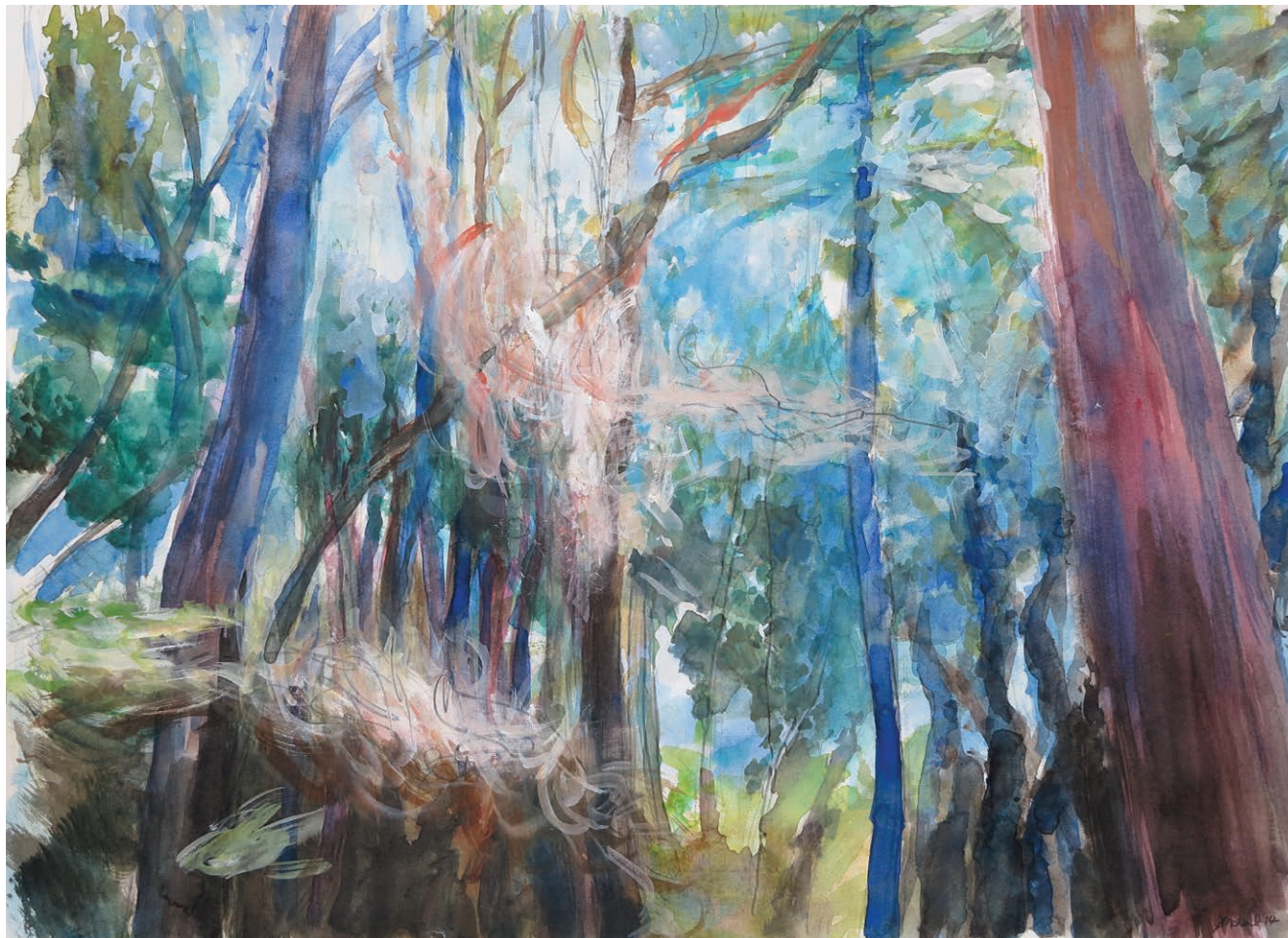


*'Snowy Path' (2013) Acrylic & charcoal on paper 20.3 x 30.5 cm*

## 16 Blue trunks

I revisited an old theme: the grid. A very simple structure, horizontals, verticals, like an embroidery frame, which I can decorate, distort, add diagonals to, a game of composition. I often work in series, and this painting is part of one of the longest series I have done, perhaps 10 paintings of roughly the same scene, a copse near Wivenhoe, in acrylic and particularly in gouache, which can be smudged, puddled and altered more easily. Why did I choose this one? I have particular favourites that change over time, but this one stood out because the colours were more vibrant and the composition was more striking. I can be timid at times, and have to encourage myself to be bold.

*Jean McNeil*



*'Blue Trunks' (2014) Gouache on paper 33 x 43.2 cm*

## 17 From the Sea Series

This latest series of sea paintings, which now numbers about 20, is a new departure, or perhaps a return to a period of searching and experiment. I have been trying to paint the sea all my life. I want to try and show this immense expanse of water: how far can we see it stretch? How deep can we imagine it? Are we tensed up against it or floating in its comforting familiarity? How to show its constant movement, the shift of light, the weather that appears to sweep over it like a speeded-up film.

The film-maker Henri Storck, who was my mother's partner and one of my visual mentors, wanted all his life to set up a camera in front of the sea and just film it. But no-one would give him the money to make such a vague project. I would like to dedicate this series to him.

*Jean McNeil*



*'From the Sea Series' (2015) Acrylic on paper 41.9 x 58.4 cm*

## Jean McNeil

Jean McNeil has been painting since 1980 after various jobs as a social worker, research assistant, translator and office worker. She now lives in Wivenhoe, Essex, and continues to teach English part-time.

She has shown at the following galleries:

Hornsey Original Gallery 1985, Dryden Street Gallery 1992, John Jones Gallery 1996, Highgate Gallery (with Maria Pinschhof) 2000, Mercury Theatre Colchester 2002, Colchester Library 2006, The Naze Tower 2007, Wivenhoe Gallery 2007 and 2012.

She is a member of the Colchester Arts Society.

website: [www.jean-mcneil.co.uk](http://www.jean-mcneil.co.uk)

See also:

***'Graphologies'***

***Phil Cohen with Jean McNeil  
Mica Press (2014)***

***'A Life in Painting'***

***A film by Aura Productions (2015)***



*Wivenhoe 2005*