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Marks of Passage

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Though Peter Joyce retains a house in his native Dorset, for the past decade he has lived and worked mostly in La Vendée, a somewhat remote and not much visited region of western France. Formed from reclaimed land, this is a flat landscape of marshy fields and pastures interlaced with canals, dykes and creeks. Its small communities are sustained by arable farming and by much-diminished fishing and oyster farming, whilst the relics of a once-important salt harvesting industry can be seen in the region's salt pans; some now home to wading birds and aquatic life whilst others, with the forlorn air of abandonment, are left empty.

Joyce is a man of passionate interests, chief amongst them a longstanding fascination with wildlife. In this La Vendée is especially rich, and amongst its animal population are hares, rabbits, muskrats, coypus, small lizards, snakes and eels. There is also an abundant birdlife, the choreography of its movements and plaintive cries bestowing a perpetual drama to this quiet and mysterious landscape. Harriers and daytime hunting short-eared owls swoop over the land, as redshanks and lapwings try to divert them from their nests. There are white egrets, herons, kites, spoonbills and hoopoes, with black-winged stilts and storks amongst summer visitors. Beneath the expansive skies of this place, one becomes acutely aware of space and distance, of atmospheric changes and subtle shifts in light and reflection. And here, walking and driving in Joyce's company, one relates to the place through the prism of his painting, constantly noticing echoes of its textures and colours. There are clues to its formal vocabulary everywhere; in bleached wooden posts entangled in rusted wire; in the skewed timbers of a dilapidated barn; in the bend of a dyke; and the telegraph poles which line the region's roads, defining distance and perspective, their loping cables, 'stitching the landscape together' as the artist puts it.

Surrounded by fields, the house Joyce and his wife Jo share is just two hundred metres from the Atlantic, whilst the artist's studio – a former oyster factory – is within walking distance, and only five metres from the beach on a road that runs along the coast beside an earth bank built as sea defence. He paints Mondays to Fridays, in a space designed to ensure no visual dialogue with the outside world, for although his painting is inspired by nature, he in no sense works directly from it, and is keen that it provides no distraction whilst concentrating on his work. Hence, the studio's few small windows are glazed in frosted glass, with much of the light source coming from the relatively low-level fluorescent overhead lighting Joyce prefers. Paramount to his essentially abstract painting is its formal, compositional aspect, for as he stipulates: 'ninety-eight-percent of my time in the studio I'm thinking about formalism... that and the mechanics of painting.' Asked what informs his work: the physical environment, atmospheric conditions, time, memory, he states that 'memory plays a massive part'. And memory surely operates on various levels here, both consciously and subconsciously, intuitively and subliminally, not only of the visible world but also of sensory and emotional experience.



More prosaically, the artist describes how, during the walks he and Jo undertake each day he will occasionally alight on something that might trigger an idea from which to start a new picture; it might he says be as simple as a bit of red plastic thread caught in a wire fence. visible world but also of sensory and emotional experience.

Typically, Joyce has around seven paintings underway at any one time, on canvas, panel and paper, each different in size. He alternates between them, switching tempo and the scale of mark-making accordingly. He emphasises that the works do not inform one another, that he looks for no inter-dialogue or cross-fertilization between them. Moreover, the idea of working in series is anathema to him; rather, he concentrates on one work at a time, the others stored out of sight.

Before commencing work on a large canvas, Joyce meets it literally head-on; a ritual in which he presses his nose against it, whilst stretching out his arms like Vitruvian man across its breadth, measuring his own physicality against that of the canvas to establish a relational intimacy. Then, in a combination of premeditation and intuition, he quickly puts down broad compositional marks, their scale related to that of his canvas. These might be painted or applied as glued-down pieces of canvas, a strategy that disrupts the surface and provides a starting point from which to progress. He paints in acrylics, selecting different brands for their specific viscosity, often mixing colour directly onto the painting's surface, and sometimes drawing with it directly from the tube. He does not dilute his paints, any water comes from the pot in which his brushes are kept. Along with an array of variously sized brushes, he also utilises knives, rollers and squeegees to apply and manipulate paint, with scrapers, sandpaper and a small electric palm sander to scour and abrade his layered surfaces. Often pieces of canvas or hessian are incorporated, some as collaged components that remain evident in the final work, others submerged within its surface.

To some extent the artist's methods are analogous to those of a sculptor, for his process centres not only on painting *per se*, but also on a form of pictorial construction in which a predilection for textural surfaces – the haptic aspect of the work – is crucial. It is achieved by gradually coercing materials into shape and effect, via accretion, revision and assimilation, in what Joyce describes as 'working on a 2D surface and fighting against it all the time.' He talks of 'taking the sexiness out' of a distractingly delectable passage of paint, by scraping it away or working over it, so that it does not undermine the development of the whole. There is a muscularity in the work, especially apparent in the greater formal complexity of the larger paintings. It can be found also in the deployment of line, specifically in tightly controlled, tensile lines, which as they flex and alter direction can both animate and contain whilst serving also as compositional anchorage. These lines are sometimes finely inscribed, others made by excavating the surface, scraping into it to form bands comprised of underlying paint layers.

Joyce's relationship with sculpture is a fundamental one. Intriguingly his first real source of inspiration as a student was the sculpture of the Russian constructivists El Lissitzky and Tatlin; the latter's spiraling tower *Monument to the Third International* can be seen to echo in the dynamic centrifugal and centripetal forces of Joyce's work. Meanwhile, the first paintings that compelled him were by the Americans Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, works that combine paint with eclectic elements of collage and assemblage. Latterly, he came to greatly admire the architectonic elegance of Anthony Caro's sculpture, often constructed from disparate components: and here there is a direct parallel in Joyce's painted interrelationships of line, plane and mass.

See for instance the two works *Channel at la Louippe* (cat. no. 17) and *River Passage* (cat. no. 11). In both are open structures through which course spiralling movements redolent of fast flowing water. In *Channel at la Louippe* a corroded disc of Indian Red is held within wiry configurations of dilute and blotted line. A series of acute and obtuse angles act as directional markers within a swinging movement that gravitates first downwards, then diagonally upwards towards an area of bleached light in the picture's furthest spatial reaches. The application here is more open and calligraphic, less densely layered than in many paintings. It summons a particular luminosity from layered washes that stain and bleed into the hessian canvas, the texture of its warp and weft integral to the overall effect. *River Passage* is a painted collage, made from multiple pieces of overlapping paper of various shapes and sizes, set against a unifying background of washed-out greys and ochres. It is structured around two main formal elements: the larger of them roughly square, the other leaf-shaped, each containing clusters of subsidiary components. Here the artist has made a virtue of subtle spatial disruptions and disjointed edges, part and parcel of the collage process, one that by its very nature is more obviously related to that of sculpture.

Spatial construction in Joyce's work is also strongly related to that of the elemental abstracts of Peter Lanyon, the artist whose impact on his work has proven greatest. This is clear in the canvas *Inventory* (cat. no. 3), so titled because Joyce sees it as a kind of repository of the components of his formal vocabulary. The composition is structured from a sequence of overlapping boat-like forms, stacked over an angled vertical panel of textured greens and browns. Within a wide variety of application here is a patch of pale grey, put down and then softly wiped in a curving motion, its diffused edges suggesting a pocket of mist or of fine rain. The work reads as though from a vantage point just below cloud level, and is full of rhythmic movement, its soaring trails and contours redolent of tidal and aerial currents and of migratory flight patterns. In contrast *Sea Air* (cat. no. 7) is heraldic in design, a quatrefoil configuration out of which grows a runic shape like some kind of colossal arterial root. Again there is a sense of aerial movement and of landmass, much of its textured surface as recalcitrant as limestone. At the centre of the canvas is drawn an open structure of inky black lines, some like fine wire, others loose and blotted. It is akin to a sculptor's maquette, and reminiscent of the type of drawing Lanyon incorporated into certain of his constructions in glass, metal and plastic.

Though in conversation Joyce tends to downplay the role of colour in his work, much of its power resides in its finely judged juxtapositions and shifts in hue and tone. A prime example is the quietly evocative *Moving Earth* (cat. no. 6), in which variegated blues, greens and pinks are set against gently abraded blacks and greys. Within the two central shapes of the top section, colour segues as it might in a patch of sky or a stretch of mirror-like water. The work is full of painterly incident, with pigment brushed on, scraped back, sprayed and spattered like delicate drops of rain.

Whilst walking in the landscape Joyce often takes photographs, a supplementary activity from which over the years he has amassed thousands of images. Though serious about this pursuit - 'taking a camera means that I stop and look' he says – he stipulates that these photographs are unrelated to his painting. Where the camera does play a role in the studio is in recording a painting's progression, establishing a record of its various stages, with each photograph then considered away from the studio during evenings at home. An insight into the development and technical processes of Joyce's work can be found in a selection of photographs illustrated here, six from a series of fifty-nine which document what eventually became the painting *Reclaimed* (cat. no. 2). Its title refers both to the local landscape and to the fact that, after much struggle,





Photograph 1



Photograph 6



Photograph 15



Photograph 39



Photograph 50



Reclaimed, final painting

Joyce feels that he rescued the work from what at one point appeared certain failure. The first few photographs show a compositional starting point; a main central shape containing a group of freely brushed subsidiaries, flanked by areas of flat colour. The entire run of photographs form an animated sequence, and flicking through them on a computer screen one sees rapid and often radical changes, as large areas of colour make a brief appearance before becoming subsumed or simply removed in an experimental process of trial and error. The loping black W that so defines the final composition makes its appearance in the fiftieth frame, after which a series of relatively minor adjustments lead to the final statement of the finished canvas.

Joyce describes a ‘settling-in period’ of up to three months in which he lives with each painting before deciding it is ready to go out into the world. It is sometimes only when contemplating a finished work that he considers its potential sources in nature, sources that might then suggest a picture title. The visual reference in *Undertow* (cat. no. 31) was more predetermined, and is evident in a curved roseate strip based on shellbanks composed of myriad delicate pink tiny shells, brittle and frangible underfoot. Painted on two abutted sheets of stout paper, the work suggests the heft and pull of deep seawater. There is a recurrence in Joyce’s work of horizontal structures within which opposing directional movements meet. An example here is *Dune Walk* (cat. no. 15), in which the point of a centrally positioned V formation acts as a pivot between conflicting forces, and in which an acrobatic linear configuration leaps upwards.

Since 1989 Joyce has documented his finished work photographically, forming a chronological record in a series of albums. It is clear from scrutinising these albums that the building blocks of his formal language were established early on, and in leafing through their pages one sees how his painting has gradually become richer, more diverse. Many of the paintings of the 1990s are responses to the Dorset coast, their groupings of stacked or interlinked curvilinear shapes composed in such a way so as to be frontal, totemic. Others are as though in cross-section, like geographical strata, whilst others are as though from an aerial viewpoint.

The influence of St Ives artists, not only of Lanyon but also of Roger Hilton, is apparent in a certain type of gestural line and distinctive tonal palette of browns, ochres and greys. There are also qualities reminiscent of the paintings of Prunella Clough, an artist Joyce admires for her formal invention.



Left: *Mupe*, Peter Joyce 2001  
Acrylic on Canvas, 50” x 40”.



Right: *Walking from Ballard Down to Handfast Point no. 1*, Peter Joyce 2002  
Mixed Media on Paper, 6” x 28”..



Commenting on his long familiarity with Dorset, Joyce says: ‘I could write a guidebook’, and in referring to its Jurassic coast and to the frontal compositions of much of his work produced in the county adds: ‘Dorset is all tipped-up’. In contrast, and pointing to a line of trees on the far horizon, he refers to the enormous distances of the landscape of La Vendée. He also mentions its light, often more intense compared to that of Dorset. And one is struck how the artist’s relocation to this contrasting landscape of France has effectively both necessitated and allowed for the development of an artistic language more authentically his own. One sees its emergence in works from 2004/05, a period during which Joyce began to spend considerable time in France: not only formally but in a more varied application, in a more open calligraphic line and a broader palette. Expanding upon a predominantly tonal range, there are now richer primary and tertiary colours. His greens are those of local copses, of samphire, grasses and fields of barley, of the intense luminosity of algae afloat in pale green water, its hue echoed in works such as *Converge* (cat. no. 14), where it is set against dense oranges redolent of lichen.

Another of Joyce’s great passions is for ceramics, and he has over the years formed a large collection, including pots by both Bernard and Janet Leach, by Ewen Henderson, William Marshall, Nic Collins and Phil Rogers. There is an emphasis on stoneware, on clay as unembellished matter, for Joyce takes a sensuous delight in its tangibility, a pleasure clearly related to his enjoyment of the malleability of paint. Indeed, it might be said that his application is informed by the fusions and coagulations of clay and glaze, and his deployment of thick skeins of gestural line by those of trails of slip. He has in his collection a number of conspicuously earthy and raw deconstructed pots by Charles Bound, pots that seem especially sympathetic to Joyce’s own tactile deconstructions of landscape in their common emphasis on materiality and organic surfaces; scored, encrusted and pockmarked.

Certain of Joyce’s smaller-scale paintings on paper and board have an improvisatory quality; some are shaped unevenly, constructed from adjoined sections or irregular off-cuts. Examples here are *Blue Field* (cat. no. 24) and *Enclosure* (cat. no. 22); and *Port Rhythms* (cat. no. 29) in which much of the pictorial structure is delineated in charcoal. Joyce enjoys the irregular effects of charcoal, the way in which a line drawn with the medium might stutter or break in a way that is pronouncedly different to a painted one. He will often apply a wash of water over charcoal, toning it down and blurring its edges. And sometimes when a small painting is near completion, or at an interim stage in the overall process, he will flood the whole thing with water, an act that can either unify or disrupt its surface, like a tide rearranging or settling the detritus on a beach.

Joyce has said that he feels he could work on the same painting for the rest of his life, a sentiment that suggests an ambition to arrive at a statement of his artistic concerns that is somehow definitive. Within the continuum of the work therefore each picture, whilst resolved in its own right, is effectively a staging post imbued with further potential, a factor that is essential to the works’ ongoing vitality. Simply, Joyce makes paintings; objects that exist matter-of-factly on their own terms, and communicate to us in their own essentially abstract, elusive language. Yet their power is simultaneously in what they evoke of elemental nature. And in this, each mark and gesture, each shift of directional emphasis, is in its way equivalent to the movement of the human body and its physical and sensory immersion in landscape. In each painting the artist makes manifest his relationship to the natural world, with all of its force and susceptibility, resilience and fragility.

**Ian Massey** 2017



1. *Vendée Winter*  
acrylic on canvas  
190x225cm





2. *Reclaimed*  
acrylic on canvas  
90x98cm



3. *Inventory*  
acrylic on canvas  
138x107cm





4. *Red Cross*  
 acrylic on canvas laid on to wood panel  
 92x92cm



5. *Lost Pond*  
 acrylic on canvas laid on to wood panel  
 92x92cm





6. *Moving Earth*  
 acrylic on canvas laid on to wood panel  
 92x82cm



7. *Sea Air*  
 acrylic on canvas laid on to wood panel  
 92x82cm





8. *Pays du Gois*  
acrylic on canvas  
200x118cm



9. *Time Lapse*  
acrylic on canvas laid on to wood panel  
63x130cm



10. *Strandline, la Coupelasse*  
acrylic on paper  
70x80cm

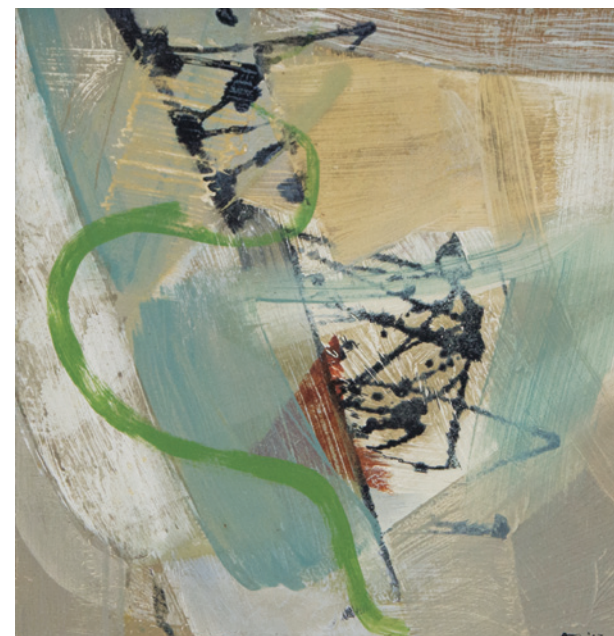




11. *River Passage*  
acrylic on paper  
77x112cm



12. *Les Jussies*  
acrylic on wood panel  
46x44cm



13. *Voie Verte*  
acrylic on wood panel  
46x44cm





14. *Converge*  
acrylic and collage on canvas laid on to wood panel  
26x61cm



15. *DuneWalk*  
acrylic and collage on canvas laid on to wood panel  
28x61cm



16. *Printemps*  
acrylic on wood panel  
63x59cm





17. *Channel à la Louippe*  
acrylic and plaster on hessian laid on to wood panel  
78x70cm



18. *Flotsam*  
mixed media on paper  
45x39cm



19. *Tied Off*  
mixed media on paper  
45x39cm





20. *Nebulous*  
mixed media on paper  
38 x 32 cm



21. *Serpentine*  
mixed media on paper  
38 x 36 cm



22. *Enclosure*  
mixed media on paper  
38 x 35 cm



23. *October Copse*  
mixed media on paper  
38 x 28 cm



24. *Blue Field*  
mixed media on paper  
41 x 36 cm



25. *Samphire Night*  
mixed media on paper  
40 x 35 cm



26. *November Field*  
mixed media on paper  
38 x 28 cm

27. *Moon Shadow*  
mixed media on paper  
36 x 38 cm





28. *Lift Off*  
acrylic on board  
18x22cm



29. *Port Rhythms*  
acrylic and collage on board  
18x15cm



30. *Wired Blues*  
acrylic and collage on board  
22x18cm



31. *Undertow*  
acrylic on paper  
77x112cm

BIOGRAPHY

- 1964 Born in Poole, Dorset
- 1980-82 Bournemouth & Poole College of Art & Design
- 1982-85 Stourbridge College of Technology & Art: BA Fine Art
- 1986-2004 Home and studio in Poole, Dorset
- 1990-2013 Represented by Anthony Hepworth Fine Art
- 1992 Birth of son, Brennan Joyce
- 1995-2002 Part time lecturer in Fine Art at Arts Institute, Bournemouth
- 2004-2007 Home and studio at La Croix Bussard, La Barre de Monts, France, retaining a home in Wimborne, Dorset
- 2007 Home and studio at Le Cerne du Moulin, La Coupelasse, Bouin, France
- 2010 Marries Jo Long
- 2013 Represented by Jenna Burlingham Fine Art

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- |      |  |      |                                       |
|------|--|------|---------------------------------------|
| 1991 | Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, Bath              | 2005 | Watermill Gallery, Aberfeldy          |
| 1992 | Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, Bath              | 2006 | Strover Gallery, Cambridge            |
| 1993 | 33 Mossop Street Gallery, London             | 2008 | Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, Bath       |
| 1994 | Clive Jennings Gallery, London               | 2009 | Strover Gallery, Cambridge            |
| 1995 | Ainscough Gallery, Liverpool                 | 2009 | Brick Walk Fine Art, Connecticut      |
| 1996 | Russell-Cotes Art Gallery, Bournemouth       | 2010 | Samuel Robson Fine Art, Oakham        |
| 1997 | Atrium Gallery, Bournemouth University       | 2011 | Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, London     |
| 1998 | The Arts Institute, Bournemouth              | 2012 | Samuel Robson Fine Art, Oakham        |
| 1998 | Atrium Gallery, Bournemouth University       | 2012 | Jenna Burlingham Fine Art, Kingsclere |
| 1999 | White Gallery, Brighton                      | 2013 | Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, Bath       |
| 2000 | Maltby Contemporary Art, Hampshire           | 2014 | Strover Gallery, Cambridge            |
| 2004 | Red House Museum & Art Gallery, Christchurch | 2015 | Jenna Burlingham Fine Art, London     |
| 2005 | Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, Bath              |      |                                       |





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