

Window Onto A Windowless World

By Tony Culver

Peculiarly there is in place internationally in cities, towns, villages of civilised nations, a set of phenomena few painters have noticed or used as subjects.. Did The Romantics or Impressionists use it? No. Cubists, Vorticists, Supremacists? Nope! Minimalist, Op, Pop, Y.B.A.s? Sorry, no. Do we hear of Whistler's, Turner's, Picasso's, Hockney's, Hirst's, Emin's use of the subject? No way. Is any R.A., R.W.E.A, R.S.A.A., member of the Royal Watercolour Society or Royal Oil Painting Society noted for its use? Not a one. Have the Tate Complex of museums a healthy collection of such work? Nay indeed sirrah, nor I suggest, any other art museums in the U.K.. Few painters seem to have noticed its existence. Though much of the time it is right under their noses. In relation to its numerical existence, a trillion +, each different, many large and stared at frequently, very few painters have exploited it. What work there has been done is peripheral to the periphery of painting. Yet, it is as varied, colourful, complex, as 'The Landscape' and within easy access. Should, by now, have become a mainstream 'genre'. What is it?

STUDIES OF/THROUGH WINDOWS (from the outside or inside) – SHOP, OFFICE, CAFÉ, RESTAURANT, BAR, PUB, FACTORY, STATION, AIRPORT, PRIVATE HOUSE. Clearly (if the window cleaner's been) there are lots of panes of glass in frames in cities, towns, villages, houses, even barns, hencoops worldwide. A VERY large number (the commercial) could, each one, render up *thousands* of studies for interested painters. Yet, from the various courses I've taken on painting, books I've read (I recently galloped through twenty on the art of watercolour painting), teaching received at school, exhibitions attended, museums plodded through, I've never come across it or a mention of it as a subject. I must have seen hundreds of thousands of windows in my career as artist painter/potter/sculptor, illustrator/writer) yet, until now, never thought to use it. So, I mock not others in The Arts for their poor powers of observation. Mea Culpa too. I once did a project through a large window, from the inside, of a landscape, depicting it under different lights and weathers. Not one of the works contained the key feature of this 'discovery'. Monet did something similar on Chartres Cathedral in oil. Mine was a dry medium project - pencil, crayon, pastel. The same landscape from precisely the same position each time.

So, what is the excitement about? Windows are often LARGE, so unmissable. They are not a rare species hiding in dark corners. Twitch one's eyes open in the morning – there one is! So, if one is lazy one could lie in bed and work on 'studies of windows'. Windows also have, have you noticed, have you observed, PANES OF REFLECTIVE GLASS in them. 'Reflective' being the important word. Each restaurant in

the average-ordinary-common-or-garden High Street has:

- A) People or furniture inside, which are different from each of about 100 degrees of study round the front.
- B) Panes of GLASS inset in frames on which there are REFLECTIONS of - the trees/buildings opposite, people on both sides of the street, traffic between and birds, clouds, the sky, sunlight possibly. MULTIPLE planes of reflection on the secondary plane over the people and furniture.

The reflections are all different and, in a High Street, change all the time, from any fixed point, as people pass and traffic motors up and down, clouds change, prams are bowled along. From such a point the reflections of buildings are still, but what is between is moving, close or distant from the glass, in REVERSE to what is seen inside the window. So the totality comprises REVERSED IMAGES SUPERIMPOSED OVER A STRAIGHT-ON IMAGE. If there is more than one pane of glass, images over images over the image. Should there be an actual mirror inside, as often there is, the reflection is clear and behind the reflections on the window pane(s). With all the movement, a camera is necessary to fix the people, traffic etc. and then work from the photos. You could take a hundred of one window from a fixed point on a digi-cam and though the reflections of the buildings opposite would remain almost the same, the people, traffic, clouds, birds, anti-social pooches would differ. So, shifting to the right and taking photos every 10 degrees, a 1,000 studies could be elicited. Kneel down – another 1,000, all different. Do the same thing on a Sunday – 2,000 more. At night, 2,000 more again. In effect, an endless set of possibilities.

But, 'variety is the spice of life'. I imagine one would get bored of working on similar paintings year after year. Unless, of course, they sold. There are thousands of restaurants in, for example, London. If some windows are covered by blinds or curtains the reflections ought to show up more clearly. Otherwise, every time one returns to one with a large expanse of glass, the customers inside would be different. So would the reflections. A left-inclined painter could use the images of affluent, fat-cat customers stuffing themselves and have the reflections 'doctored' to depict derelicts passing, people down on their luck, drug-addicts, the starving of Africa. Ghostly figures overlaid on the 'straight on' studies of the customers. Why confine oneself to one restaurant when there are thousands? Though not all would have broad expanses of glass. A selection procedure is obviously necessary to find the more interesting with interesting reflections. A project within the project of depicting every level of London society 'daintily dining' (oops) might have a 'political edge'. From the super-rich in Mayfair eateries down to greasy -spoons

in Hackney. No need to ask permission. Just take the shots from outside, photographers abound in London.

There are also millions of shop windows all over the world. Though many have shutters not windows in places like India, Africa, the Middle East. In The West, there are – greengrocers, butchers, bakers, clothiers, shoe, second hand, charity shops, hardware stores etc.. With these the wares displayed would be the fixed subjects, over which changing reflections are superimposed. Colours and forms laid on colours and forms, yet, separate. Contrasts would abound. Greengrocers, butchers, bread shops could all, again, be used politically with ‘doctored’ reflections of the starving of Africa superimposed over the food. However, if a political point is not the point, each of these has colourful goods on display. Organised in each shop differently with a different set of reflections thrown onto the glass. One might reflect a row of painted houses; another a church; a third a park; a fourth a row of trees with buildings behind’ a fifth a different row of shops etc..

The ground floor windows of houses in country or suburbs would render up more tranquil compositions. Onto the glass laid reflections of trees, bushes, lawns, flowers, fleecy white clouds, people at rest on the lawn, in the hot sun of a summer’s day. While within the windows the depth of the lounge, filled with cool shadows, perhaps with someone dimly seen sitting in an armchair reading, out of the sun. Or a complete landscape might be reflected, if the windows abut straight onto countryside. These could be worked on from sketches, since the scurrying crowd is absent. A house by the sea could have a seascape reflected on the windows. Those in a mountainous area, mountains. Those by farms – farmland. ALL the various landscape possibilities could be found in the reflections. Enough to satisfy the creative needs of a landscape or seascape painter. Both could combine their loves with studies of people – in the rooms or laid on the glass. Be simultaneously a landscape and portrait painter and on the cutting edge. Painters of dogs and cats could have such beasts in the house, or gambolling on the lawn. Slap in some people and he/she is simultaneously a pooch or moggie painter as well as a landscape and portrait painter with a cutting edge added.

The huge expanses of glass in some airport terminals, bus, stations and superstores could supply a painter with material for VAST canvases. The subject inside terminal windows – people moving and milling about – overlaid on them, the planes and runways or arrival buses, cars dropping passengers. Bus stations – people waiting inside with reflections of drivers standing around waiting to go, passengers arriving and leaving, people waiting at queues, the buses themselves. Likewise, on station concourses, passengers bustling around, stationary shops, snack bars, police, trains standing waiting. The windows might be bureau de change kiosks, lonely figures counting money the ‘core’ subject, over them reflected all the

hustle and bustle of the concourse. Again different from every angle of view. Super-store windows would supply a large range of fixed images. Any one of the many departments might have a display, each different. Men's clothes, food, sportsware, women's clothes, chinaware, glassware etc.. Commercial objects interesting in themselves, interesting in the careful way displayed and over them a wide variety of different reflections. Each section of Harrods widow display could furnish a painter with a different study. Marks & Sparks in every large town? Windows galore. Miniaturists might be inspired by the small windows on the sides of houses, each with their distinct physical identity and reflections.

In numerical terms it is an enormous subject – the whole of a tall skyscraper can be glass! But the reflections on the upper reaches, impossible to use, unless up on a level with them. Every modern city, town,. village has windows in abundance. Each ground floor window is usually different, anyway as far as what is inside, and the manifold reflections laid on the glass. The subject is also fundamentally different from the landscape, seascape, portrait, still life, nude, study of people. Different in that it is 'multi-planed', images in reverse on images. Sometimes images on images on images. Structurally distinct, when compared to the 'single plane' traditional subject paintings. The superimposition of image on image, so that each is apparent, might not be totally 'new', but it is certainly a rare concept for painters to use. Images juxtaposed, yes, superimposed – not common. The superimposition also mixes colours in a new kind of way, so that the underlying colours clearly show through the overlaid colours. In most traditional styles, the colours beneath the surface colours might affect them, warm or cool them, they are rarely supposed to show through as pure colour.

The opus based on this subject would be more complex than most traditional subjects. This might be a problem for 'the average man/woman' to appreciate. Regrettably this is often the case with 'The New' in the arts. However, they could be representational – which doesn't strain too many brains – and have more resonance than – a pile of bricks; an empty gallery with lights flashing on and off; a shark in a tank; sawn up sheep; the excreta on a baby's nappies; excreta in a can; screwed up balls of paper; bluetac stuck to the walls; a display of pharmaceutical bottles; people running at regular intervals through the Tate Modern. Such work has diverged so far from 'the average man's taste' as to have become a butt for coarse jokes. One major advantage, aside from the skill of execution of the works by most painters, is that they would depict Homo Sapiens favourite pastimes – shopping, eating, drinking, socialising, relaxing.

Cost wise? Well, the basis of this hypothetical new dimension is another subject most have ignored. So, to exploit it all a painter has to do is study windows in his/her area. Take some photos. Get them enlarged and create paintings from them. Really nothing different from the standard procedure if, as most

do, the painter uses a camera to supplement his/her sketches. No extra cost is incurred.. Though I realise that all painters have their own agendas, thus might resist moving into the new field of expression. Qui peut dire? At the moment most don't have the choice, because they haven't, it seems, noticed the subject.

The subject should, in my view, be in the genre portfolio of ALL painters. The education systems of most western countries have fallen down, for decades, by missing it out of their curricula of art education. I approached the ministry responsible for arts curricula, explained the subject in some depth and asked if they could insert it into next year's curricula for 13 + children and students. I got no reply. They seem to be stonewalling. Probably too grand to take notice of anyone outside their network of graduate London artist-professors (if they pay any attention to them). But, now that it has been 'discovered' – not just by me, a painter in France uses it as does a Californian – it could, as mentioned, be the basis for a worldwide upsurge in painting. Thus provide society with a rich new strata of aesthetic expression and the public with exhibition after exhibition of new work. So, if you paint, it would be easy to address the subject. If you live in a city or town, you'd have a very wide choice – millions of windows to choose from. If you're not a painter, you might care to spread the word among your friends/acquaintances who might be painters. Help to make the world a MUCH more beautiful place.

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