

### NIGEL COOKE'S MIXED MEDIUMS

by JOHNNY MISHEFF  
on MARCH 30, 2012 - 9:11 AM

Nigel Cooke's known for his lush, emotive paintings, each filled with dreamlike scenes rendered with powerful brush strokes steeped in shadowy colors. His show, opening today at Andrea Rosen's New York gallery, gives his massive canvases (some over 9 feet tall) the space they deserve. It also marks the launch of the London-based artists' first book, *Words*. In honor of both, we asked the artist for his thoughts on a handful of topics:



Cooke's Hawaiian Tropic. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery



Detail of Cooke's Dreaming Head. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery

#### On nature and industry:

"Nature takes the role of judge in the work, inundating, obliterating even humiliating the characters who struggle against it. It might be a storm at sea, a jungle or a bolt of lightning—each way the forces of nature threaten the stability of the figurative imagery. It's a way of getting mixed feelings into the work, of setting something up to knock it down.

Industry comes in as a function of this nature—my labors in paint can be compared to weather fronts that impact on the scenes. But labor is also what creates the scene in the first place. So really invested time in a painting is always a question, something to be ambivalent about, a double edged sword.

Industry in the sense of big business is loosely present in the smoking factories that sit in the distance of my images—they're actually parodies of my studio, smokestacks that belch paint smoke which contribute formally to the composition as well as thematically pollute it."

#### On writing:

"Making paintings for me is about experiencing the unknown and the unthought—words get me out of that hole and help me learn what it is I'm doing. I've always envied the multiple levels of thought you can get with books, and have striven to do this with images. But writing alongside painting gives you a different access to your brain, so it feeds me ideas in unpredictable and stimulating ways."

#### On his new work:

"For the first time the show focuses on the obliteration of imagery as a route to creating new imagery. My ambivalence towards the characters and events in the scenes is brought to the center of these works, which results in a stand-off between abstraction and figuration. But they are not in straightforward opposition, their antagonism is held in a balance, maintained as a question, an active tension. They are about everything existing on the brink between states.

It's also about relationships [that are] thought, felt and seen between me and my work, my wife and family, and the natural world. I turn it all into a tangible place so I can pack as many layers into it as possible. I'm creating a holiday resort out of my own brain."

*Cooke's show is up through May 12, 2012. Andrea Rosen Gallery is located at 525 West 24th Street, New York.*

# FlashArt

**NIGEL COOKE**  
**BLUM & POE - LOS ANGELES**



Imagine Billy Gibbons, ZZ Tops bearded guitarist, as a castaway lost at sea who also is a maniacal chef and Zen master, painter and thinker and you have an approximation of Nigel Cooke's phenomenal imagination. Cooke's recent exhibition at Blum & Poe

charts the visual journey of a figure sprung fully formed from the artist's brain – a character at once iconic and ethereal and homespun, who inhabits the spaces in between light and dark, that landscape of disassociation where the imagination is free to run amuck.

Works like the monumental *Washed Up Thinker* (2010) chart the exodus of a man from the sea onto land. The figure stands, stark and raging behind a mass covering his face. The chain around his waist is not a literal reference to the "shackles that bind" all men so much as it is a specific metaphor for self-imposed grief. Perhaps this man has arrived at the center of his own wailing heart. Other paintings are more obviously ironic, like *Future Painter* (2010). Here the figure stands next to an easel, spray can in hand. Again, his face is covered, except for his eyes behind sunglasses, though the surrounding landscape is dark and ominous. The man appears to be documenting his own future, mapping out an uneasy destiny, one in which we are all implicated.

Cooke's sculptures are also magical. Made from patinated bronze and then painted in parts, these are images of decay, fecund and

alluringly grotesque. Works like *Painter's Bisque* (2010) show a crab climbing out of a cramped, dingy vessel. Much like the figure of the man in the paintings, the crab becomes the visual totem of loss, estrangement and ultimately hope and rebirth. In other works, the crab becomes the symbol for learning as it creeps across what appear to be books. Again, there is a quantifiable grief here, a desire on the part of the artist to remake the world according to a set of terms that have yet to be imagined.

*Eve Wood*



Above: NIGEL COOKE, *Departure*, 2009-2010. Oil on linen backed with sailcloth, three panels, 220 x 195 cm. Left: NIGEL COOKE, *I'm All Over It*, 2010. Oil on linen backed with sailcloth, 220 x 195 cm. Courtesy Stuart Shave/Modem Art, London; Andrea Rosen, New York; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles. © NigelCooke.

# ARTFORUM

Published online January 27, 2011

## Nigel Cooke

BLUM & POE

2727 S. La Cienega Boulevard

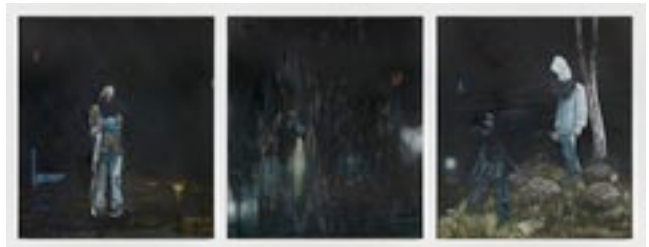
January 8–February 12

With this exhibition, British artist Nigel Cooke continues his interest in the end of days—apocalypse has rarely looked as lovely as it does in his canvases—but here the artist has fine-tuned his subject matter; the neon geometry and inky blackness of earlier works have been joined by pastel washes and realistic portraits in addition to the narrative of two men who appear to be hippies or wanderers. Through eleven paintings and four bronzes, Cooke unravels the obliquely poignant story of a duo caught in a tragedy from which only one emerges alive.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is a large triptych made in response to, or in conversation with, a three-panel Max Beckmann painting titled *Departure*, 1932–35. Cooke gives his version, dated 2009–10, the same title, but whereas Beckmann portrayed a noble family setting sail, presumably to escape scenes of depravity and torture on either side, Cooke places darkness and uncertainty in the central panel, a morass of black mired with strips of gray and scratch marks. One of the characters, red-faced and delirious, throws back his head in bacchanalian glee. Depictions of the two men flank this scene, their gray-flecked beards flying in the foreboding wind of an eerie landscape.

The show as a whole is a sort of requiem, shot through with destruction and uncertain redemption, the gallery space punctuated by sculptures seemingly cobbled from the detritus of shipwreck. Three paintings depict a torrent at sea—and examine a wide range of painting's possibilities. In one canvas, a vivid green wave erupts into a surge of white, tossing the unfortunate men in its wake. The figures are rendered in detail, beards lashing and arms thrashing, while the storm pushes into dramatic abstraction. A lone survivor emerges from the sea in three other paintings, in lush lavender, rich ocher, and moss green. The repetition of this scene mirrors the cycle of trauma, while the surreal palette is suggestive of the confusing morass of emotions that come with survival.

— *Annie Buckley*



Nigel Cooke, *Departure*, 2009–10, oil on linen backed with sailcloth, three panels, each 86 3/5 x 76 4/5".

# FOOD FOR TRUTH

A painter wonders whether too many cooks are spoiling the artworld's broth

THESE DAYS art chat regularly seems to turn to the subject of food and cookery – and it's not only about whether or not flashy canapés should be served at a private view during a recession. Now the grub itself, and a potential cultural upgrade of its status, has become the subject. With the media already wheeling out that hopeless old question ('but is it art?'), this marks a sea change in the seriousness with which we take culinary matters. It may have all started three years ago with the artworld debut of Michelin-starred chef Ferran Adrià at Documenta 12 – a long-distance contribution to the exhibition that plucked arty guests out of the crowd for a trip to his world-number-one (or -two, depending on your source) restaurant on the Costa Brava, El Bulli. The following year, Britain's Radio 4 hosted an argument between fish-loving English TV chef Rick Stein and art journalist Tom Lubbock as to whether or not cookery was art (in case you're wondering – Rick yes, Tom no, but with unconvincing results either way). And last year it was back to Adrià, this time popping up in *Flash Art*, where he was interviewed by artist Maurizio Cattelan. While the molecular gastronomist was careful to distinguish his craft from other fields, Cattelan gently encouraged him to frame cooking in artworld terms.



influence on art production, with an insistent call for a poverty-appropriate modus operandi. In this line of thinking, Damien Hirst's diamond skull has come to represent art's collective crime – nowadays, art must atone for past excesses and the hubris of its practitioners.

This in turn conceals a guilt about art's special status as blithely functionless, and therefore excessive: a luxury. As a consequence, the old reactionary demand for authenticity and truth has again arisen, particularly in the blogosphere. It is a defensive call to order that rhymes ascetic production values with the concept of a unique and nonnegotiable 'calling'. This rustic view – a withdrawal from the immorality of capital into the fantasy of an authentic self – demands that the excesses of yet more material production be offset by a faux morality in the materials themselves. In the past we've seen crappy materials

words *NIGEL COOKE*

Is this so surprising? After all, the crossover between food and art is nothing new: since the Ancient Egyptians, art has exploited the symbolic potential of edible goods – as metaphors for aspects of the political, scientific and religious narratives of the times. Indexed to our narcissism, the impermanence of the material lent it the weight of mortality in the symbolic lexicon of still-life paraphernalia. The role of food in art seems to have been often a moral one too, injecting truth into the smoke-and-mirrors setup of the wealth-confirming still life.

Yet refiguring contemporary 'culinary art' as *art* is not about symbolic fruit and veg – it might have a deeper connection with the mess of relationships between money, art and exhibiting that the economic crisis has left us with. And for good reason. Much has been made of the recession's

being symbolically rebooted to cleanse the artistic expression of any surplus self-interest. In our present dismal climate, this logic has had to be taken a stage further.

This ontological spring-cleaning is where food comes in. Beyond the elite glamour of high-end cuisine, the artworld's recent fascination with gastronomy is in fact a strange new take on the historically recurring drive to rusticate production in the face of ruin. Why? It could be that, deep down, cookery represents the most purified applied art – its recession credentials being that its materiality diminishes in a precise and harmonic ratio with the aesthetic experience of it. Could the artworld's interest in food be a form of envy for an ideal economy art, where for once fiscal involvement is transparent and limited, only affecting the core of the creative process in pragmatic, constructive ways?

Food as art, then, represents a mixed blessing – aesthetic frills unfettered by arbitrary market structures yet silently predicated on a crisis-fuelled, reactionary demand for truth, or the most authentic artistic expression for hard times.

# CONTRIBUTORS

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SEPTEMBER 2010

## NIGEL COOKE

Manchester-born artist Nigel Cooke is known for his ominous paintings of gloomy psychological landscapes peopled by degenerate characters. He represented by Stuart Shave Modern Art, London, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, and Blum and Poe, Los Angeles. A new monograph on his work is due to be published by Koenig Books this autumn, and he has an upcoming exhibition at Blum & Poe early next year.



## NIGEL COOKE'S NIGHT CROSSING

After showing at Tate, MoMa and the Guggenheim, Cooke moves his melancholic art to London's Modern Art gallery

Text by Felicity Shaw | Published 05 May 2010



This month, Modern Art is host to a new solo exhibition by Nigel Cooke entitled Night Crossing. Having previously displayed his work at many celebrated galleries such as Tate Britain, the MoMA and the Guggenheim Museum, the show is set to be a much visited and exciting event. Night Crossing presents a set of new paintings which display a destructive and melancholy world where creative, artistic characterisation is paired with degeneration, existentialist crisis and hedonistic abandonment. Dazed Digital caught up with Nigel to find out more...

**Dazed Digital:** Having achieved a tremendous amount on the art scene, I wanted to begin by asking you where your beginnings in art were. How did you know that you wanted to become an artist?

**Nigel Cooke:** I inherited some art equipment from my Grandfather when he died and I started to play around with it that, but I wasn't very good at it. So I became addicted, as something that I couldn't do – it's something that hypnotised me the minute I tried it. The ability to master it has not been handed down through generations, even though people were painting when we were first learning to stand upright. So it struck me as an odd, mysterious material which is full of human potential but is not yielding, not helpful in any way. It's really separate to everything else, and it felt alternative, more than music. When I first did a painting, it felt like a radical thing to do, because nobody wants another painting – you have to produce art that reinvents something. The job you have when you pick up a paintbrush is to reinvent something that is as old as civilisation, and that is the addiction, the challenge.

**DD:** So you see art as a personal challenge?

**Nigel Cooke:** Yeah, the idea is to not make anymore, to ask the question: 'Do we need any more of these in the world?' The only way that we do is when we get this compulsion, this perverse nagging. In a way, everything that I embark on is always in a spirit of failure, that can't possibly work; it has to be the worst idea in the world. It reminds me a little bit of being a chef, when they make a perfect breakfast that is beautiful and revolutionary, they apply themselves to that and they produce an experience you've never had, although to look at it, it still looks like the same thing. And it is a little bit like that in painting, you are trying to say that you know it already, but it is also new, and the newness is so buried in the image, it is not really the material, or composition but it is just mysteriously in there. And that is what I try to do.

**DD:** So moving on to your new exhibition, Night Crossing, you obviously work on such a large scale. How long

**does it take you to paint one image?**

**Nigel Cooke:** It's hard to tell. We have a log for each one at the studio, where a photograph is taken everyday where we have a diary of materials we used and what happened. And you look back and some of them will be very quick – some of them will be six weeks, a long one might be a year and a half. In a way the paintings, how long they take and how long it takes to solve are not the same thing. The painting may take a year but to solve it may take an hour. Most of the paintings get scrapped and are a disaster, most of what is underneath them are mistakes. Sometimes you can do something for a year and destroy it and then you could make three in a month. You are learning how to solve problems, not just making images or products. Painting has to be the journey or experience for me, you have to conclude it.

**DD: Your work seems to be based in theoretical and philosophical understanding. What is the journey of producing one of these paintings? Do you come up with the concept first, or do you find yourself painting and then link it with something that you have already learnt?**

**Nigel Cooke:** Well there is always an image first. It is not a theoretical or word based formula to begin with. My attraction to painting is that it is a way of learning about ideas that I have got elsewhere. So the theoretical stuff comes from my involvement with the image, and by growing with it. I am drawn to something that begs the question 'why am I doing this? Why have I started to think about this?' It's like the subconscious, it pops out, and you say 'let's look at what that is, what is it about that image that is important?' I am trying to make images that stick in the mind, in a good way, something that you can't get rid of, that actually affect the way you see things. Getting to that point involves a kind of learning and rigorous re-acquaintance with your own product – learning what it was that drew you to it in the first place happens through the painting, and then gradually happens through words. Often I find that after I complete a work I have very little to say about it, that comes later, it slowly comes out. But it is always the image first.

**DD: Your painting Departure is a re-working of a painting of the same title by Max Beckmann. Was the painting something you had been thinking about for a while or like you say, did it just pop out for you as you were working? What was the influence there?**

**Nigel Cooke:** It is a mixture of things. There was an article in the newspaper about debt and I started painting these when the recession was starting to become part of everybody's consciousness. I was reading that the current national debt had only been as bad in the Second World War. It made me think about the huge differences between the two times, and I just remembered the art work that was made during the rise of Nazi Germany. Beckmann's central panel is of these figures in a boat, escaping, whilst the panels either side show the tortured reality of the time. And I wondered what it would look like if there was a contemporary version of that. I thought maybe it would be figures on a stag weekend, taking a boat out to Ibiza. The figures actually invite the disaster, but where they end up is in a place of change, so what it actually became is a parable of creativity that is a journey from not knowing to knowing.

**DD: Are the characters in the paintings representations of artists and creatives, are they, like you say, parables or re-workings of past figures?**

**Nigel Cooke:** Yeah, they are, in a way, based on Vincent Van Gogh originally, who is almost like the patron saint of artistic history. The character's bandaged heads are a reference to Van Gogh and also how Van Gogh became the cliché of what an artist's life is like, for example, success only after death, the tortured soul, being outside the fringes of society, not functioning on any level other than the visual. I resent the image, I don't like the image of one having to cut one's ear off. But also, there is something about that isolation and complete commitment to the visual image that is attractive and true, so it is about the idea of a rather compromising stereotype having a great truth. I am always attracted to images which are negative and positive in one go, so I started to develop this figure that was half Van Gogh, but one which is also a great man of letters like Sophocles, but then bringing it round to also be an older version of myself. I try and wrap all these things into one envelop, into a persona.

**DD: I read that the characters possess 'an abandonment of living' – do you think that the artist needs to abandon thought in order to be creative?**

**Nigel Cooke:** I think in some ways, yeah. I think it is a paradox - the most successful people are able to negotiate between the side of their mind that is orderly and rational and the side that is chaotic and unreasonable. My paintings question how you actually harness this stupid side of creativity without it being purely negative and judgmental, and to actually surrender to not knowing - this is essential to creativity. Within our culture which is obsessed with utility, it is seen as a flaw, and the Van Gogh figure is actually seen as the embodiment of that flaw. You don't actually contribute towards society or the economy until you are dead and your objects are just an heirloom. Without a solution, to try and mobilise the truth of the mind through various visual means, some being recognisable, some being beautiful, ugly, confusing. But in a sense, what is trying to come through is the existential dilemma of the character, the oscillation of being human.

**DD: How do you think your art work will progress next?**

**Nigel Cooke:** I don't know. The biggest thrill is to discover the next thing. It would be nice to look into the future, in a year's time to see what I am doing then, because it won't be what I expect it to be. It's an addiction to the future. Your

painter time is a sort of joke version of real time. You get to see your next bit of your life in pictures - it's like this other timeline alongside your own life. It has to be a surprise and if I ever felt I was doing something by the watch I wouldn't like it. If I was ever describing something rather than experiencing it I would have to stop producing art.

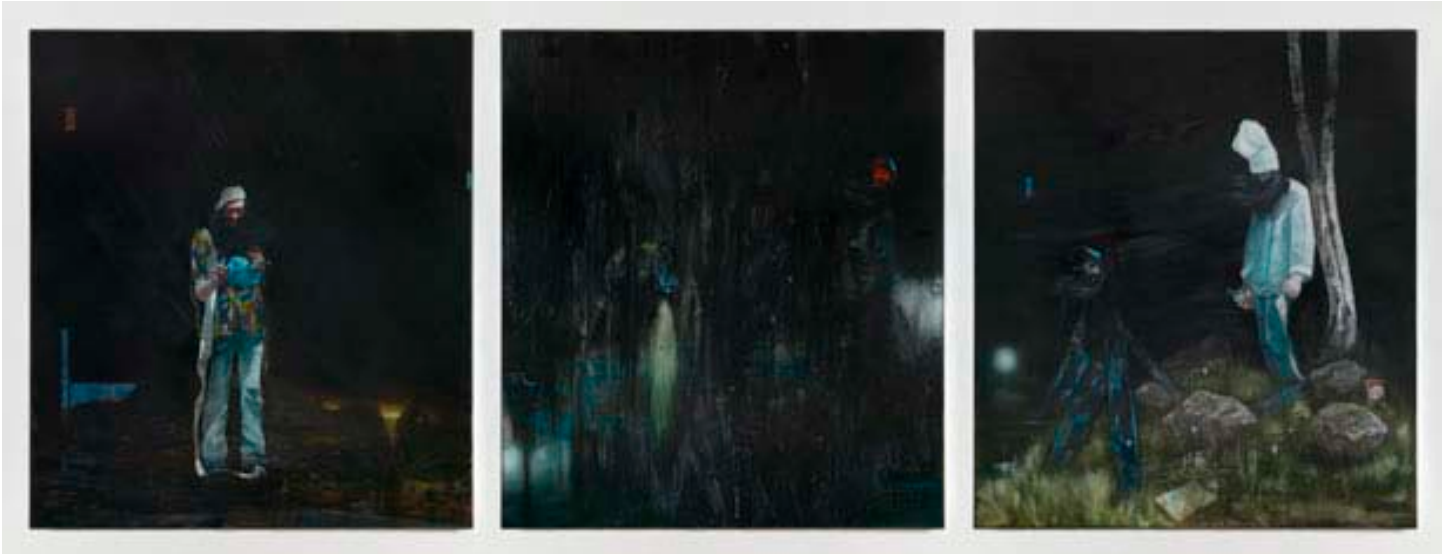
*Night Crossing runs from Friday April 30 – Saturday May 29 at the Modern Art gallery in London*

[http://www.dazeddigital.com/ArtsAndCulture/article/7472/1/Nigel\\_Cookes\\_Night\\_Crossing?utm\\_source=Link&utm\\_medium=Link&utm\\_campaign=RSSFeed&utm\\_term=Nigel\\_Cookes\\_Night\\_Crossing](http://www.dazeddigital.com/ArtsAndCulture/article/7472/1/Nigel_Cookes_Night_Crossing?utm_source=Link&utm_medium=Link&utm_campaign=RSSFeed&utm_term=Nigel_Cookes_Night_Crossing)



Datebook

## Night Flight



Courtesy Stuart Shave / Modern Art, London

**By Coline Milliard**

Published: April 1, 2010

Nigel Cooke, "Departure," 2009

The British painter Nigel Cooke is still best known for his meticulous representations of dystopian landscapes, graffitied walls, and garbage dumps. But Cooke's art has evolved quickly over the past few years. The walls have become bunkerlike structures, and his urban nightmares have been invaded by van Gogh-esque tramps, what he calls his philosophers, or "great men." Wandering the artist's scrublands and wallowing in the self-doubt inherent to the creative act, they function as distorted self-portraits, mordant and tender. In "Night Crossing," his latest series of paintings, on view from April 30 through May 29 at Stuart Shave/Modern Art, Cooke takes them on what he calls "an existential odyssey," engaging in narrative for the first time. The characters set sail in a failed journey to an "Ibiza-like pleasure island," their peregrinations involving, among other episodes, a shipwreck and the bearded, Hawaiian-shirt-wearing philosophers' dealings with unknown islanders, who are alternate versions of the great thinkers themselves. "The nightfall of their self-awareness that takes place on the voyage is, for me, a parody of soul-searching and self-evaluation, the kind that happens most vividly in artistic production," explains Cooke. In "Night Crossing" he offers a tongue-in-cheek portrait of an art world enmeshed in self-ridicule, at once allured and repulsed by the mediocrity of entertainment culture.

# Art Review:

Issue 36 £5.00

'Before making the list, I made fun of it; now that I am on it, I dread being taken off.' - Jerry Saltz (No. 73)

NOVEMBER 2009

# the Power 100

*The definitive guide  
to who's who  
in the artworld*



ART REVIEW AIR



\$11.99

# Time Out

## New York

May 21-27, 2009

Issue 712

## Nigel Cooke



Andrea Rosen Gallery, through  
June 13 (see Chelsea)

Nigel Cooke is a crackerjack painter who's not content just to leave it at that. He holds a Ph.D. from Goldsmiths' College in London, where he wrote his thesis on the death of painting, and his third show at Andrea Rosen attests that questions about the validity of making art remain fundamental to his multilayered, self-referential output.

Four large, excellent canvases depict scenes of loner artists, hermit survivalists endowed with philosopher beards and a Saint Jerome in the Wilderness-like contemplative streak. In *Experience*, a moonlit male figure hulks against a dark sky, which is stained in ghostly, elegant layers of turquoise and black. His vaguely menacing stance and freaky smiley-face mask suggest the possible aftermath of some seriously bad behavior, but the smears of paint on his jeans and fingertips indicate creative exhaustion instead. This raging urgency is undercut by the feeble nature of his output, a tiny canvas streaked with a few colorful daubs, tacked to a slender tree trunk. Amateur hour happens at midnight around here.



Also in the show are several small paintings of whiskered men, kitschy cartoon dogs and woodland creatures, apparently the paintings within-the-paintings materialized. It's a corny but effective touch (muddied by the addition of ten dejected little bronze sculptures). Back in the 1940s, when painting was still king, critic Harold Rosenberg championed the arttherapeutic notion that a painting's intrinsic value lay in the act of its making. If that still holds true, it's good news indeed for Cooke's sad sacks, though the artist himself never had much to worry about.

## Artist Nigel Cooke on how he paints

I've come to accept that anxiety is the only appropriate feeling for a contemporary figure painting, says Nigel Cooke

Nigel Cooke  
The Observer, Saturday 19 September 2009



1989, 2009 by Nigel Cooke. Oil on linen, backed with sail cloth. Photograph: Todd-White Art Photography/Stuart Shave/Modern Art

My grandfather was an amateur painter and I inherited his easel and paints when he died. I was 14, but I wasn't studying art at school; I had no interest in painting whatsoever. Some months later, despite my indifference, I decided I owed it to my grandfather to give it a go. The results were disastrous - the gulf between what I had seen in my head (a dramatic landscape) and what I ended up picturing on the canvas (a couple of black baguettes misaligned in a blue void) was just so great.

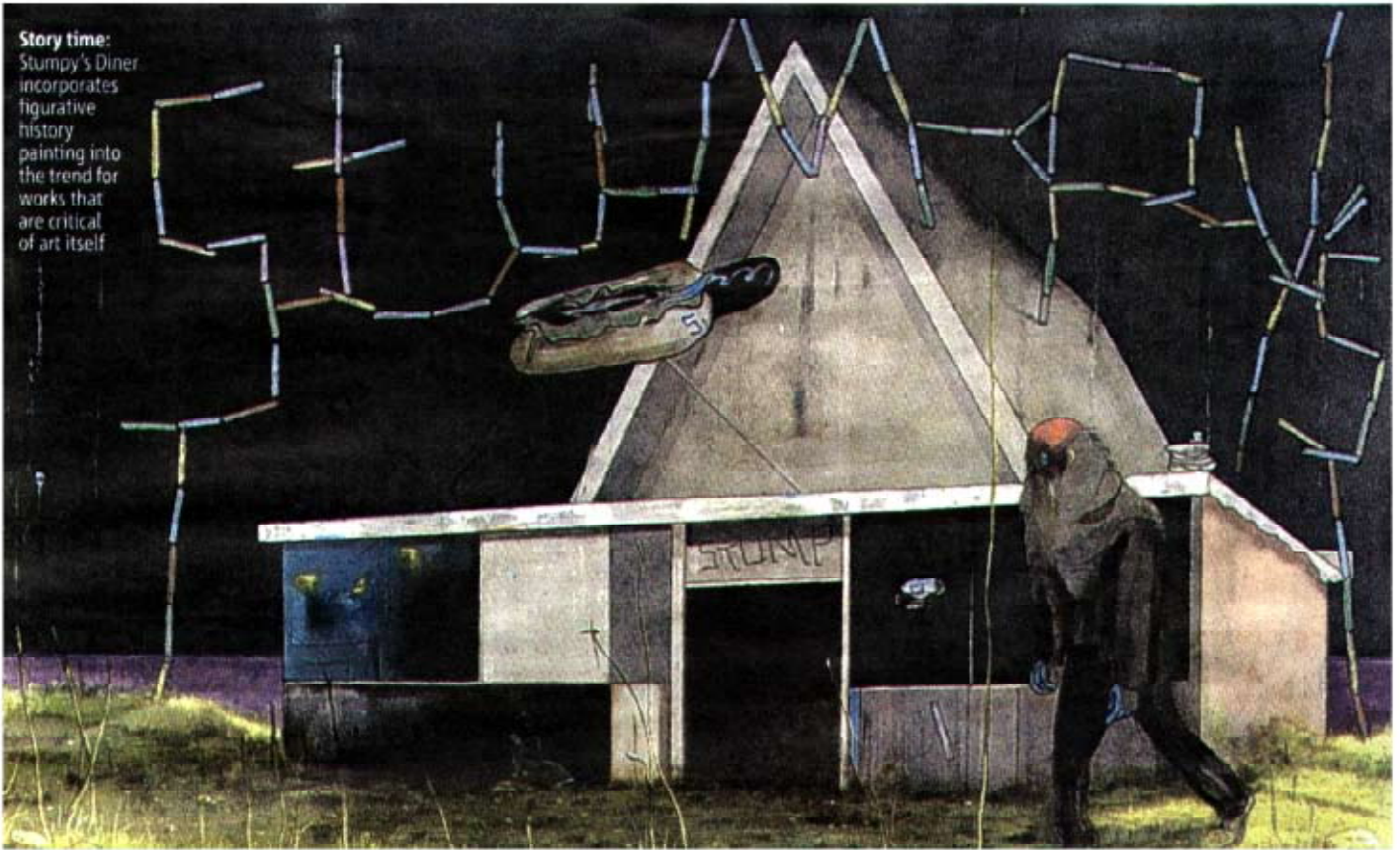
The fact that it was insurmountably, brain-achingly difficult stunned me. I remember well the feeling of near panic and perhaps humiliation when it dawned on me that this simply couldn't be done. I suppose I became fascinated with why it was so hard, and why I hadn't foreseen that it would be. In a lot of ways it's still like that now. It still feels like an impossible challenge. But that's really what's so lovable and strange about painting, and why I got hooked in the first place.

It's unfashionable to admit this, but I've accepted that I try to use colour emotively. There are certain colours - usually very high, infantile ones - that carry a kind of psychic build-up for me, and they keep recurring in my images. For me, emotive colours electrify pictures with difficult feelings.

My paintings have to be a bit nasty colour-wise to have any bite at all, and I've come to accept that anxiety is the only appropriate feeling for a contemporary figure painting. But it's also because I'm more attracted to bad or desperate images - they communicate more ambivalence and doubt and conflict than very polished pictures.

- Nigel Cooke was born in Manchester in 1973. He is represented by Modern Art, London and Andrea Rosen, New York

**Story time:**  
Stumpy's Diner incorporates figurative history painting into the trend for works that are critical of art itself



# New spirit in painting

IN THIS new series of paintings, Nigel Cooke has firmly established himself as the leading British painter of his (post-Doig) generation. He does it through a typically contemporary art sleight of handmaking epic paintings about the end of epic painting.

The name of this 35-year-old, who studied at Goldsmiths and now lives near Canterbury, is unknown to most of the British public but he had a show at Tate Britain back in 2004 and art collectors already queue for years to buy one of his paintings.

He is a great choice for the opening show at the new West End space of Stuart Shave/Modern Art, probably the most successful of the (in this case, former) East End galleries to have emerged in the boom of the past five years. Like many of Shave's competitors, his taste, often figurative, usually rejecting a sense of craft and a "return to beauty", sometimes suffices a weakness for the decorative but not here.

Cooke's is canvas show is small yet it feels much larger. His paintings are intense in their detail and exemplary in their variety there is more incident and

## EXHIBITION

### Nigel Cooke - New Accursed Art Club

Stuart Shave/Modern Art, W1

## BEN LEWIS



originality in one Cooke painting than there is in the entire oeuvre of many of the previous generation of pop-conceptual British artists, the YBAs.

In large and small canvases and drawings, tramps swigging bottles of liquor stagger across scrubland with dilapidated, graffitied modernist buildings in the background. A strange fog or dusk-like gloom has settled on these strangely picturesque corners of run-down council estates which recall 18th century views of classical ruins. We often see it all through arabesques of sperm-like fauna, which seem like fragments from a floral print from Liberty.

What does it all mean? The best clue is in the window of Stumpy's Diner

- a small tourist souvenir painting of an Alpine landscape hangs there. The peaks of the mountains in the picture are echoed by the pointed concrete roof of the modernist café. It's a tragi-comic gag about how low we have sunk since the age of Romantic painting, when they thought an artist could depict God in the landscape.

Cooke's pictures, which here are far more intricate and narrative than previous work, are allegories about this idea of the "death of painting". The tramps are symbols for the artist, now a wino, wandering through a post-apocalyptic landscape, drinking smoking, dipping into a book, occasionally unsurely painting himself, racked by doubt, wondering what to paint next. He is surrounded by "low" art forms and bits of art history - Cooke's weather-worn concrete walls have the textures of the most seductive abstract paintings; the graffiti-tags scrawled on them have the lyricism of an Expressionist charcoal drawing: weeds, dirt and clumps of grass are painted with Constable's attention to detail: occasionally rectangles of faded colour float across the picture surface as if they have broken off from

Mondrian.

The painting style is itself part of the subject - overall it draws on popular artforms of graffiti and illustrated children's books but it also quotes the big "isms". Art that is cynical and doubtful about art - from Damien's cabinet of his own rag-ends to Maurizio Calceolari's exhibition of a live donkey to Luc Tuymans's deliberately weak painting style is one of the few common denominators of art of the past 15 years. Cooke's paintings slot right into this movement but his formulation of its mantra in figurative history painting (as symbolic painted stories) is entirely new.

Some say the craze for contemporary art is a short-term speculative bubble fuelled by easy money: others say that art, freed from the structures of modernism, has entered a new golden age. Nigel Cooke is a bona fide argument for the latter scenario.

• At 23-25 Eastcastle Street, W1 (0207299 7950) until May. Open Thurs-Sat 9am-6pm, admission free

## LONDON HORTICULTURE

by Ana Finel Honigman



Famously reserved when expressing their affection for almost anything besides booze and big breasts, the English also make an exception when it comes to pets and plants. English people, even the hip ones, love flowers, so it comes as no surprise that this month's streak of sunny days has been accompanied by a veritable orgy of fauna and flora blooming in city art galleries -- though the blooms tend to be artistically abject, of course.

### Nigel Cooke at South London Gallery

The flora is up to no good in Nigel Cooke's "A Portrait of Everything" at the South London Gallery. In his 10 new paintings, the Manchester-born Cooke depicts urban landscapes where weather beaten walls meet rocks, broken bottles and weeds. With arresting skill -- he paints as if Clara Peeters or Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder had devoted themselves to depicting the backs of busted-up buildings -- Cooke takes these pitiful settings to creepy, captivating artistic heights.

Cooke's landscapes are confections of considerable originality, shallow back-alley stages painted Photorealist style, the foreground littered with what seem to be actual cast-off objects and artificial plants while the backdrop is populated by creatures rendered as flat line drawings.

The ambiguous narrative drawn on the wall on the left side of Fun shows an anthropomorphized four-petaled daisy sucking on a cigarette as it overlooks a group of humans, dressed vaguely like druids, who gather outside a barn door. While in our current natural order, humans usually impose their will on nature, here the plant looks like the overlord and the people are pathetically puny in comparison.

County Club is a magnificently bright painting full of the sharp, sun-soaked colors of a Miami afternoon. The yellow-orange light off of the concrete illuminates the off-putting sights of a man (outlined against a wall) embracing a massive, sad-looking banana and a pretty poesy tipping on its stem and vomiting over a weed unfortunately drawn next to it.

Yet, while the flowers are not acting pretty, the paintings are gorgeous and just as the graffiti injects beauty into his imaginary scenes, Cooke's ability as an artist renders ugly spaces and urban trash as poetic and poignant as the fruits and fading flowers painted by his Flemish master predecessors.



*Ghosts That Need Tending*, 2006  
Oil on Canvas  
72 3/4 x 121 2/3 inches

## Nigel Cooke

Andrea Rosen Gallery

Nigel Cooke holds a doctorate in Fine Art from Goldsmiths, London, where he wrote a thesis on the death of painting in the twentieth century. To begin by mentioning this fact might seem to be stacking the deck if a concern with the medium's various historical demises did not figure so markedly in the British artist's work -but it does, to the extent that he titled his second solo show at Andrea Rosen Gallery "Dead Painter." The phrase encompasses art-historical corpses (skulls and bearded old men populated the six oils and two drawings on view) as well as Cooke himself, as one who paints what's died. Indeed, the young English artist is not painting the end of painting so much as he is painting about the end of painting: His bile-colored canvases are phantasmagoric graveyards where the medium's conventions and contraries have come to collide and expire and, in so doing, sustain his practice.

Cooke has said that his works "pretend at being total paintings, or painting extreme -overloaded, high octane, all the painting you'll ever need." The Artist's Garden (all works 2006) displays such encyclopedic breadth in its welter of formal and stylistic oppositions. The spatial recession implied by a kaleidoscopic garden sprawling under a peaked-roof aerie is set against a gold backdrop, the monochromatic expanse of which, together with intermittent graffiti elsewhere on the surface, work to assert the flatness of the picture plane; abstract squiggles commingle with caricatures of human faces and animals; and color and line are used both as independent properties and as means of bounding form and object. In addition, the grand scale of the work (it's over twelve

feet wide) contends with the microscopic detail of its contents, and the lacquerlike polish achieved by repeated coats of paint is regularly punctured by small pockmarks resembling spots of rust.

Cooke has raised his horizon line in this batch of work, ceding more and more of the stretches of infected sky in his earlier paintings to loopy, meandering doodles. It's a trading of curdled Romantic landscapes for even sicker Surrealist mindscapes. There's more to decipher and less room to breathe, but what materializes in the bargain is Cooke's keen feel for structure: The edge-to-edge marking in *Ill Health*, for example, evokes the dense spatial irresolution of Willem de Kooning's *Excavation*, 1950. In two pencil studies, delicate sublayer tracers and surface figuration seem to repeatedly alternate places, confirming Cooke's fluency with multiple pictorial strata. Comparing the study for *Night Thoughts* with the finished canvas is akin to looking at an X-ray side by side with the object it pictures. This painting is the surest on view; its surface seems to pulse between the gray-on-gray ciphers of the still-life objects (bulbous fruit and a bottle of wine) that lie beneath and the cross hatching and built-up patches of paint above. These are huge, packed works that perhaps try to do too much at once- but such overreaching is endemic to Cooke's project, and in his proximity he succeeds in limning several of the practical and theoretical dynamics that have steered the past of painting and that will, for better or worse, shape its future.

-Lisa Turvey



Nigel Cooke Artist Garden, 2006, oil on canvas, 220.3 x 370 x 7.1 cm. (C) Nigel Cooke. Photo by Tom Powell

Nigel Cooke has a liking for the grotesque. His large horizontal compositions executed with oil on canvas are teeming with organic forms that are reduced to their essentials and are generally soft in appearance. The mellifluous lines that appear in them are striking: they seem traced through carbon paper and not drawn, since they lack accents and are somewhat fuzzy. In fact, these works consist largely of drawings enclosing discrete areas of diluted color or containing nothing more than a fragment of the ground of the canvas made somewhat lighter or darker in places. Cooke's virtuoso stroke, acrid hues, and the tragic atmosphere that permeates these decidedly surreal paintings seem inspired by the work of Roberto Matta

and Yves Tanguy, while the title of the exhibition, *Dead Painter*, suggests both the enormous challenge posed to the artist by the legacy of his predecessors, now deceased, and his disillusionment with the future of painting, and consequently with his own, is concerned. Cooke's works are neither joyful nor optimistic; the artist uses them as fields on which to unload dark thoughts, that when juxtaposed in such quantities, often appear meaningless to the outsider. *Ill/Health* (2006) is painted a sickly pale blue that is largely washed out. The liquid, mostly abstract forms drawn on top of this shimmering ground rise towards the picture plane or melt into the middle-ground and fill the entire surface of this canvas like a conflagration of

doodles on a restroom wall. The "moist" atmosphere—sexually charged with all those limp, writhing, penetrating, and elongated curvilinear shapes—is heightened by a heavy varnish lending this and other pictures a glistening quality. Among all these protuberances we see little disillusioned ghosts, the downcast eyes of a mourning woman, and teeth suggesting open jaws. *Get Rid of Meaning* (2006) has a field of green at the bottom supporting a colossal brain which holds, among many abstract curvaceous objects, some canvases on easels. Here, we seem confronted with the age-old problem of the hand of the artist not always being able to translate the ideas conceived in their mind.

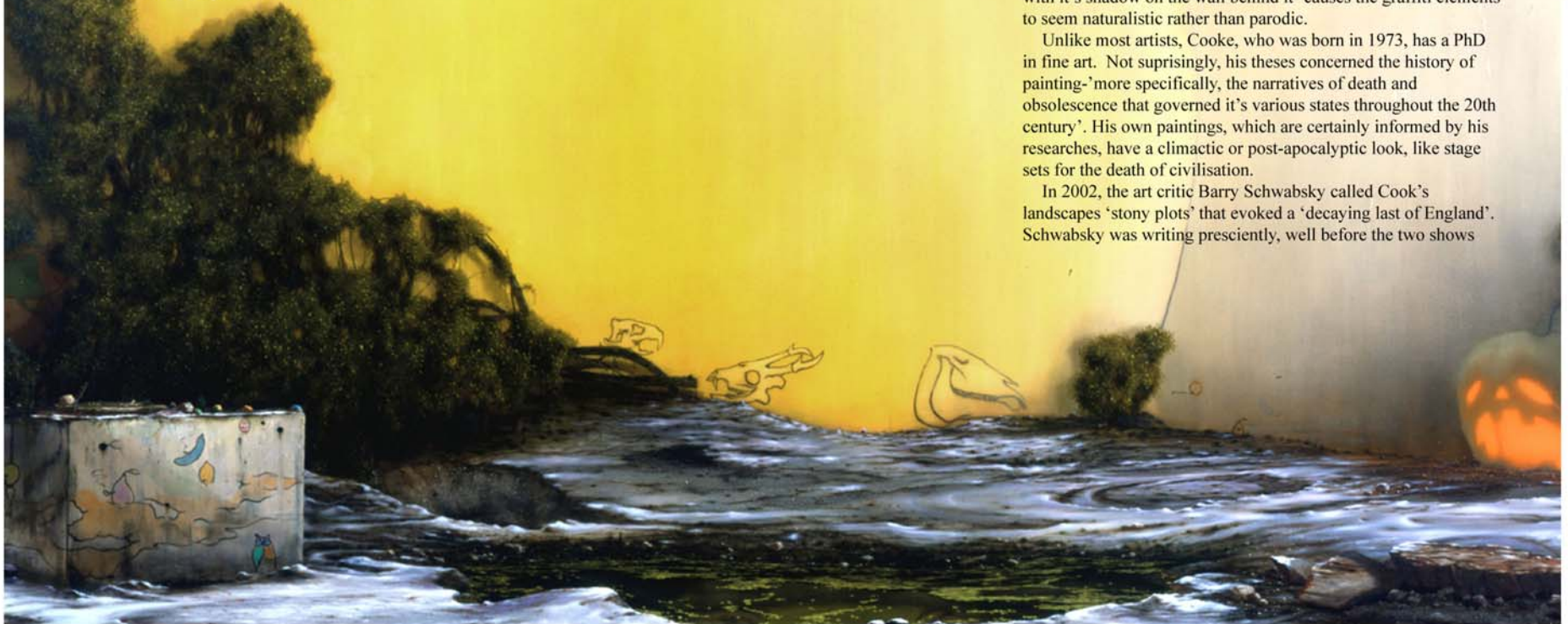


# Art Review:

March 2006 VOLUME LXII

## ALL THE PAINTING YOU NEED

Nigel Cooke's phantasmagorical works, on show at the South London Gallery, are like a giant dragnet trawling through the history of art. But in their tone, they are very much of our era, says **Daniel Kunitz**



I've had this thing about Van Gogh for a couple of years now, Nigel Cooke tells me via email from England, where he's working on a solo show for the South London Gallery. "I'm attracted to the martyr mythology and to the cult of suffering that painting has enjoyed over the years. As my paintings are labor-intensive, and are known to be so, this Van Gogh stuff has started to come out like self-parody."

Cooke may poke fun at himself but, to his credit, he does not make a mockery of paint. Take "Sore Eyes" (2005), a small canvas in which the figure of Van Gogh appears explicitly. In the shallow foreground, a lot, which is almost empty except for stones, weeds, and a bush or tree of uncertain height, stands before a wall on which, graffiti-style, appears a large head of Van Gogh, with severed ear. His face is yellow, his cap purple, the bandage around his head blue-green. He smokes a cartoony cigarette, and his eyes, red slits in an otherwise featureless face, drip blood or red tears.

The extraordinarily precise and realistic detail in the foreground - the tallest bush, painted in Leonardoesque sfumato, is paried with its shadow on the wall behind it - causes the graffiti elements to seem naturalistic rather than parodic.

Unlike most artists, Cooke, who was born in 1973, has a PhD in fine art. Not surprisingly, his theses concerned the history of painting - more specifically, the narratives of death and obsolescence that governed its various states throughout the 20th century. His own paintings, which are certainly informed by his researches, have a climactic or post-apocalyptic look, like stage sets for the death of civilisation.

In 2002, the art critic Barry Schwabsky called Cook's landscapes 'stony plots' that evoked a 'decaying last of England'. Schwabsky was writing presciently, well before the two shows

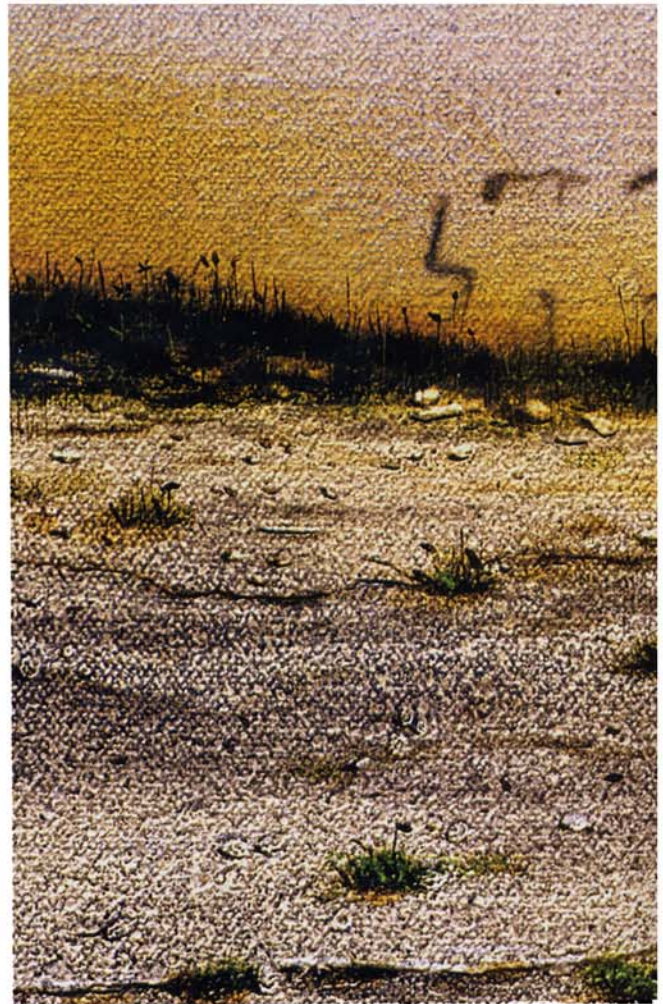
◀ in early 2004 – a one-man exhibition at Tate Britain followed by his first US gallery show, at Andrea Rosen in New York – which introduced Cooke's work to an international audience.

Then and now, the large canvases are almost hypertrophied: six feet high, nine or twelve feet long. One could say the works need such large spaces in order to include as much as they do, except for the fact that, while they are dense with painterly incident and imagery, they seem at first nearly barren. Many of these paintings cram all the imagery along the lower edge of the picture, with huge monochrome expanses, at times broken by graffiti or lightning, on the upper nine tenths.

Walking into these shows, one had the unique experience of finding viewers literally on their knees or lying on the ground in front of the paintings, as they tried to see what was going on along those bottom edges. At first sight these were blasted landscapes or romantic dystopias, as conjured by a modern Bruegel. But what viewers found within them and at the margins were figures appearing in widely varying scales, from the tiny to the gargantuan. Some were gruesome (severed heads); some benign (songbirds, little monkeys in a vast jungle canopy); some nostalgically familiar (graffiti images of mushrooms or pumpkins, blocks of stone from a ruin); some banal (a tree); some fantastical (bolts of lightning).

This almost miscellaneous character of the paintings, what you could call their indexical quality, clearly stems from Cooke's

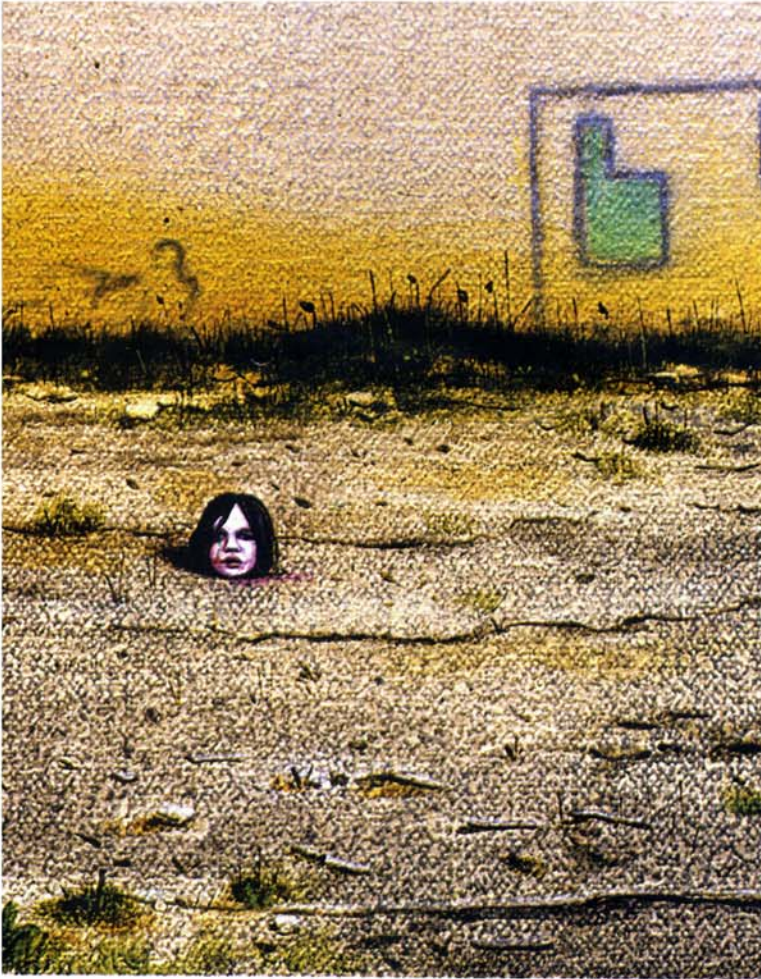
*'All of painting's best and worst moments are crystallised in this hybrid theatrical space that my paintings propose'*



interest in painting's past. As he himself puts it, 'The paintings aim to bring the whole history of painting together in one picture, not as a display of different styles but as a collection of visual mechanisms that convey the vastness of thought that painting has brought about and been subjected to. All of painting's best and worst moments are crystallised in this hybrid theatrical space that my paintings propose. They pretend at being *total* paintings, or painting extreme – overloaded, high octane, all the painting you'll ever need.'

That they pretend at being 'all the painting you'll ever need' suggests that what others have been calling landscapes are in fact more than that. Indeed, Cooke's name for them, 'hybrid theatrical spaces', proves apt. Most of the paintings have a ground, usually beneath a very low horizon, and a 'wall' behind of indeterminate size. Crucially, it is on these walls that the graffiti elements play out their representational alchemy. Sometimes, as in *Silva Morosa*, 2003, masses of vegetation growing in front of the wall take on the role usually played by the graffiti, forming shapes and images in much the same way that a tree seen in front of the moon will seem to curve into a circle.

It's reflexive: painting the painting that is graffiti. But juxtaposing these styles – street imagery and highly finished realism – also allows Cooke to change both the tone and terms of his canvases. To take the terms first: the walls, which function as screens for the projection of images or collective fantasies, transform the generic terms. These aren't really, or merely, landscapes – too much of the canvas space is taken up by surrogates for, or reflections of, the surface of painting itself. And lately Cooke has increased the range of scale in the paintings,



hitting more notes in between, as it were.

'It seems,' he says, 'to no longer matter whether the graffiti element is in any real way possible. It's coded as graffiti, but it could never be done on that scale. So it's about using the 'look' of realism to depict the space, then taking away the system that allows realism to be recognised – that is, scale.'

Now turning to the question of tone, being not-exactly-a-landscape helps the paintings escape a fixed tone. The yellow arc (a comet?) streaking in front of the wall in *Smile for the Monkey Man* (2002) feels effervescent by itself. Only when one peers at the heads planted among wildflowers and bare trees does the work take on a more sinister inflection.

Is *Sore Eyes* desolate or comic, meditative or plaintive? Despite the Van Gogh bandage, the painting isn't tone deaf: how it 'sounds' depends on where you focus your attention. This is significant because the history of painting, when it has attended to tone at all, has tended to prefer unified and clear tones. Today, the most intriguing young artists attempt to broaden the tonal spectrum of art, embracing silliness or bathos or any emotion that has generally been deemed improper for art. Talking about his sobbing fruit and vegetables, Cooke says, 'It's stupidity rendered with the highest sophistication I can muster.'

In Cooke's paintings, tone is, I would argue, key. Speaking to the writer Craig Garrett in *Flash Art*, for instance, he explained, 'I'm interested in the way the expected meanings of images can be changed or amplified by their articulation, or tone of voice.' Cooke achieves what I would call an 'instability of tone' through various means: the proscenium-like hybrid spaces within the paintings, the promiscuous use of imagery, the varying scales.

Above and bottom left: *Smokestack in the Sun's Eye*, 2003, oil on canvas, 182.9 x 274.3cm, details

Below: *Gifts of the Garden*, 2005, oil on canvas, 183 x 274cm

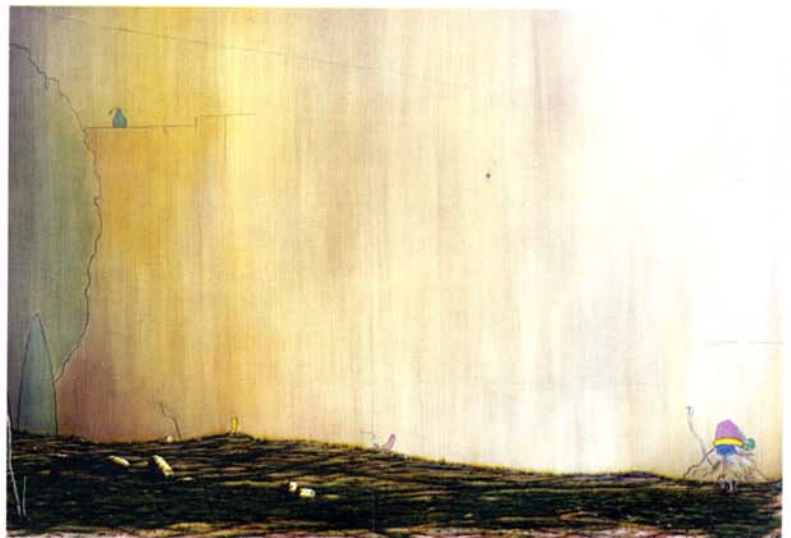
Some viewers feel that the large paintings are aggressive because they force us to the ground to look at them, while others, seeing the graffiti pumpkins and smoking plants, find the works lighthearted. Their sheer size, the inclusion of lightning and the use of black often lead people to describe them as sublime – though I find it difficult to be fully won over to the sublimity argument when there's a cartoon dog's bone lurking in the background. Cooke himself likens his paintings to 'the sad ceramic puppy that looks like you feel'. They are, he says, 'vessels for projection'.

But in fact they are not any sort of vessels. These are paintings that undeniably echo their era: if they don't exactly speak in narrative, they certainly speak to narrative. His canvases have the look of narrative painting, yet they neither illustrate subconscious fantasies, like the Surreal art to which they are at times compared, nor do they follow linear storylines.

Their horizontal formats reinforce the impression that the viewer is reading a story. Yet, in a sense, their plotlines come from the art history that Cooke studied. They act as a dragnet for the conventions of painting. Miniature, naturalism, romanticism, surrealism, graffiti, monochrome abstraction, landscape, portraiture, caricature: virtually every style and genre can be discovered in the paintings. Indeed, his forthcoming show will be called 'A Portrait of Everything'.

Still, a story needs its peaks and valleys. Like any good storyteller, Cooke achieves highs by establishing expectations with a specific convention – say, landscape – and then he introduces surprise by defying those expectations. His grab-bag of history is perhaps understood best not as 'all the painting you'll ever need' but as all the needs Cooke can paint.

Nigel Cooke, 30 Mar-7 May, South London Gallery (+44 (0)20 7703 9799, [southlondongallery.org](http://southlondongallery.org)). Cooke's work is included in 'Talking Pictures', to 3 May, Sammlung Goetz, Munich (+49 89 95 93 969, [sammlung-goetz.de](http://sammlung-goetz.de))



# ARTFORUM

PICKS

## FORT WORTH

### Nigel Cooke

MODERN ART MUSEUM OF FORT WORTH  
3200 Darnell Street  
October 22–November 26, 2006

Nigel Cooke makes paintings as if he were reanimating the dead. His canvases are Frankenstein-like concoctions of disparate styles, often integrating trompe l'oeil depictions of miniature, moss-covered rocks and withering trees with diagrammatic renderings of dilapidated buildings tattooed with graffiti. Despite the conspicuous metalanguage of Cooke's art, his fictional landscapes also forcefully suggest absurd narratives. In the grandly scaled *Ghost on the Happy Trail*, 2003, cartoon brains and schematic birds are seen gallivanting among the detritus of empty lots, maudlin jack-o'-lanterns, and buried human heads in a postapocalyptic Halloween reverie. In the most recent work, *Bad Buffet*, 2006, a lone snail slithers over a banquet. Hidden behind a chalky haze, this ersatz still life is only slightly legible. A snow-laden winter landscape runs along the bottom edge of the painting, cleverly making the entire canvas also read as a bifurcated gray-and-white abstraction. Clearly, there is a ridiculous tone to these grotesqueries, but to his credit, the work is not limited to displays of surreal comedy. Instead, Cooke appears involved in an intellectual game—a reenactment of art history within the frame of our contemporary culture. What's striking about Cooke's art is the ease with which his disparate formal decisions are incorporated into a unified vision. Despite his attention to the artificial nature of making paintings (or perhaps because of it), one willingly accepts the outrageous protagonists Cooke depicts and the nearly depleted world they inhabit.

—Matthew Bourbon



*Sad Brain*, 2004

# The Dallas Morning News

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Saturday, October 21, 2006

## Creating what hasn't been seen

*ART: Nigel Cooke takes a surrealistic view of the world*

When it comes to what inspires him, what moves and motivates him, artist Nigel Cooke often is reminded of a line from songwriter Tom Waits.

"You make music when you don't like what's in the store," Mr. Cooke says, quoting Mr. Waits. "I kind of feel like paintings are the same. I make paintings because there aren't many out there that I really want to see."

He pauses, and in his best British accent says, "I do them so I can see them ... see what they look like."

Such is the case with the stark, surrealistic portfolio Mr. Cooke brought with him to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, which will showcase his work Sunday through Nov. 26.

A 33-year-old painter from Manchester, England, Mr. Cooke splits his time between London and Canterbury and shares his home with a wife and two daughters, ages 8 and 2. His paintings, as art critic Mary Horlock once wrote, "oscillate between extremes – he works on an epic scale but dwells on the minutiae of decay and dissolution. He paints with scientific accuracy but creates scenes that could never exist."

Inspired by classic artists, Vincent Van Gogh in particular, Mr. Cooke says, he's also moved by the turmoil going on around him, in a world that strikes him on the best of days as surprising and on the worst as alarming. It's no coincidence that the details of that world – dilapidated buildings, sprawling graffiti and urban decay – infiltrate his work as often as symbols from the past.

He calls his approach "a bit like achieving the future, in a way. When you arrive at a painting, it's like it's dropped from another planet a little bit ... It's a combination of all your favorite artists and all your other interests, the weird interests that don't fit in anywhere else. It could be things you see in the street, the books you read, your conversations. Children's books, cartoons, anything. It's part of my obsession with images."

That obsession is evident in one of Mr. Cooke's favorites, *Nightfall*, a staple of the show in Fort Worth. He describes the painting as a banana shaped like a crescent moon "having a cigarette," with the ember at the end morphing into Van Gogh's face.

For Mr. Cooke, Van Gogh, the subject of a major exhibition opening Sunday at the Dallas Museum of Art, is a symbol, nothing less than "the ghost of painting itself." He can relate wholeheartedly to how Van Gogh symbolizes "the difficulty, the self-flagellation and the magic" that painting represents.

As much as he loves painting – and he does love it – Mr. Cooke says he abhors its commercial pressures, which he finds "extremely frustrating."

He credits his grandfather, an amateur artist, with having inspired him in his early days. His father was an auto mechanic, his mother a nurse, who provided what he calls a "regular suburban upbringing." Which led to anything but a regular career.

What he loves about art "is the playfulness of it, the ability to do anything you want every day, the novelty and amusement and sheer thrill of putting things down in a concrete form that doesn't yet exist.

"It's not just a job. It's a bizarre gift."

*MICHAEL GRANBERRY*

# ArtReview

84  
Future greats |



## Nigel Cooke

Born Manchester, 1973. Lives in London. Represented by Modern Art, London; Grimm Fine Art, Amsterdam; Andrea Rosen, New York

future  
greats 2005

It's surprising that this painter of poisoned skies and yellowed rainbows isn't better known, considering the clutch of great institutions and high-profile galleries that are clammering to show him, the queue of collectors waiting to buy, and Jake Chapman's patronage. Cooke's gargantuan landscapes which, as in *Sing the Pumpkin Song* (2003), often measure nearly 3 metres across, deliciously fuse sublime landscape and desolate, nightmare worlds. Charting the destructive effects of urbanisation on nature, coupled with the ever-present reality of death at work in life, he succeeds in using an age-old medium to convey the zeitgeist of the early 21st century. Forthcoming in March 2006 is a solo show at the South London Gallery.

WE WOULDN'T  
PRESUME TO DECLARE  
ANYONE 'THE NEXT  
BIG THING' »

IN THE ART WORLD, SO INSTEAD  
OF HOLDING A BEAUTY CONTEST,  
WE DECIDED TO HAVE ARTISTS  
PREVIOUSLY FEATURED IN THE  
'KING OF' SECTION OF TOKION  
INTERVIEW SOME OF OUR  
FAVORITE ARTISTS WHO WE  
HAVEN'T HAD A CHANCE TO SPEAK  
WITH YET. FORTHWITH:



## Wes Lang and

**WES LANG'S** WORK REFERENCES CLASSIC AMERICANA, FROM FOLK ART TO TATTOOS TO PORNOGRAPHY, WHILE BRITISH PAINTER **NIGEL COOKE** HAS GAINED ACCLAIM FOR HIS EPIC, SPARSE CANVASES THAT COMBINE REFERENCES TO STREET ART WITH AN EERIE, APOCALYPTIC QUALITY. YET THEY FOUND COMMON GROUND IN A SHARED LOVE FOR PHILIP GUSTON AND OLD BLUEGRASS MUSIC.

**WES LANG:** All the writing about you that I've come across is so academic and impersonal, and I was wondering, where is the person behind this work?

**NIGEL COOKE:** It's funny, this new show I'm doing is much more personal. I guess I've always had quite an academic interest in my paintings. I've always had a sort of feeling of wanting them to be about things, so they're quite literary somehow. They follow a lot of the examples of writing. But recently the work has become a lot more personal, about the sort of problems that I have making it and making it express something, other than, you know, 'spot the references' or something. I always fail with the instinctive element, and it doesn't really come across when I'm making it, so people would attribute all these references to (the paintings).

**WL:** Were you feeling pigeon-holed and expected to make these certain kind of paintings?

**NC:** It wasn't quite as straightforward as that. It happened in several ways. First of all, what you were saying (before) - the journalism stuff sounds a bit like there's a sort of stockpile of five different angles that get used every time. They're eventually going to stop even looking at (the paintings) because they're going to come with this apparatus to look at what I'm doing, and it's going to stop actually being a direct thing. And then there's also this thing about wanting to use the confidence (from) every show to take it somewhat further - consciously trying to make something which is a surprise and perhaps goes further

and is a little more difficult to understand than the last lot

**WL:** That's your job, right? How long have you been doing this? How old are you?

**NC:** 32 this year.

**WL:** I'm 32, as well. How long have you been supporting yourself just off of your work?

**NC:** About five years now. Four or five years, yeah...

**WL:** You went to school?

**NC:** I did my masters at the Royal College (in London). I did a PHD as well.

**WL:** I come from the other end of the spectrum. I came out of high school and started working in a tattoo parlor and in nightclubs - just kind of saying 'fuck off' to the whole school thing. When you came through school, was it hard for you, when you finished school, to keep working?

**NC:** Yeah, I sort of went through a difficult patch almost straight away. I had to leave London for a bit. I had to work in warehouses and all this sort of shit, and it was quite hard to keep it going then. I was working in a shed in the middle of nowhere, and it just was a disaster, really. I kind of feel that it's best that it happened that way, because in a way all this other stuff is very weird - the fact that people want (my paintings), and they're expensive. It's something that I wouldn't really have known how to deal with if I hadn't had a difficult path, where I had literally nothing. It's good how it worked out.



# Miguel Cooke

ONE THING THAT I FIND HAPPENING IS THAT YOU GET SUCCESSFUL, AND THEN YOU GET ISOLATED



**WL:** Do you see the big name British artists as your peers?

**NC:** Those are a bit of a generation above us really. A lot of those people supported me in the early days. I mean, the Chapman brothers gave me my first show. They really championed me. They bought paintings. They just really helped me out. Now they're part of my generation in a way. But I don't know... I sort of have a different approach, I think.

**WL:** Is there like a camaraderie between yourself and a group of artists or do you find yourself to be a rather solitary individual?

**NC:** I think it's pretty much solitary. I think one thing that I find happening is that you get successful, and then you get isolated. So you've got camaraderie, until it somewhat goes well, and then all of a sudden you're in a different place, and so you have to start to form connections with other people who are so-called successful. And that can be not quite straightforward. There are actually a lot of problems that go along with this lifestyle, but you can't talk about it, because it will make such a complex. You do actually need to go around and say 'how do you do this, that and the other?'

**WL:** Who were the people that influenced you from the beginning?

**NC:** Well, it's funny. I never really was tuned in to my own interests until quite recently. It's like, you consume for so long, you're just stimulated by so many things, and you take it on, and you don't claim it. You just soak it up, and then gradually you start to realize you're coming back to the same things. One of the things is Francis Bacon and Philip Guston.

**WL:** I was looking at your pictures last night, and they made me go pick up a Guston book that I have.

**NC:** Oh, really?

**WL:** Yeah, it's this old Guston book that somebody gave to me when I had my first exhibit in 2000. I think he's one of the most influential people on a lot of us. I know in New York, he definitely weighs heavy.

Bacon too... He can go into your brain and just fuck you, or he can be the most wonderful thing that can happen to you. You've definitely found a way to control it (in your work), and it's nice to see that. Your paintings look super controlled... What is your studio like? Is it cluttered or is it tight-knit?

**NC:** I think it's quite a clutter, really. I always strive for the studio to be very neat in order for work to happen, but in fact it is a mess. My big thing is that I don't have any time. I mean, I probably do have time... I just always feel that I don't. So things just get fucked up, and it becomes pretty chaotic. The house is chaotic with our kids so I just have to make do with it.

**WL:** How long have you been married for?

**NC:** Two years.

**WL:** And how many kids?

**NC:** I've got one ten-month-old and one six-year-old.

**WL:** Oh wow. That's a handful! Do you have any pets?

**NC:** No, no, no. God no. I couldn't handle any more life! And more responsibilities... You know, feeding... (Laughs.)

**WL:** Is London where you would like to call home forever, or do you have a desire to live anywhere else?

**NC:** We're actually thinking about moving out. I bought a house in Kent, which is sort of an hour off London, and I've been thinking about relocating to there, because I don't use London like I used to. I don't need the scene-y thing to get my career going anymore, because it happened, and I don't really get time to go out so much with the kids. Ideally, I would have liked to have moved to New York at some point, but that just didn't work out. London or New York, it looks like neither have worked out. Got to move to motherfucking nowhere and have fun with it! ~



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# Flash Art



*Nigel Cooke*  
*“Silva Morosa”*  
*Oil on Canvas*



## ARTISTS: NIGEL COOKE

interview by Craig Garrett

**Craig Garrett:** Painters, unfairly or not, are always expected to be able to comment on their place in the history of their medium. What episodes in the history of painting have shaped your artistic development? Your attention to detail, for instance, is often labeled 'Flemish.'

**Nigel Cooke:** I'm interested in the history of painting as a kind of dictionary of ideals that I'm trying to ransack as completely as possible. I want all the characteristics of painting, from the retarded to the sophisticated, to be simultaneously represented, as though the whole past lives of the medium were flashing before its eyes. So it becomes kind of a historical. It's a kind of parody of the doomed 'last paintings' that some artists tried to engineer in the 20th century - a death of painting played out as one big, bloated painting project. The Flemish thing is a part of this plurality - it's about giving an intense visual identity to every inch of the image. In my case, this isn't just about the close rendering of objects (which of course is important), but the use of a range of painting sensibilities alongside those objects

**CG:** Another word that gets used a lot in connection with your work is 'entropy.' This force of decay is a tricky thing, as it works on not just a physical but

also a societal level. No matter how well a city may be planned, it contains neglected zones beyond the rule of authority. Stoner dystopias, zones where society's disenfranchised

-adolescents, drug addicts, the homeless - break its rules while, all around, its physical structures are broken down by nature. Have you had a lot of first-hand contact with these sites? Are your artworks based on personal memories? Or are these places you've visited only in the

**NC:** I'm often told that my paintings look like certain places in the world, some that I've visited, others that I haven't. Mexico City, Sri Lanka, Central Illinois, Iceland, and Rome have all been mentioned recently. It's because in all these places there are areas where human constructs and natural processes have collapsed into each other through neglect or other kinds of change. Process connects them, rather than the specific details that the process contains. And the process of entropy is about the erosion of differences. So the entropy in the pictures is a way of universalizing the scene of the image without recourse to any topographical specificity. world of your paintings? Its shows the place as a process. In a way, this is analo-

# Flash Art

gous to the medium of painting; it's a generalization, in which there are specific objects.

That this kind of virulent urban nature is connected with the site of marginal social action gives it a kind of instant content, but the pictures try to work both with and against this. I'm interested in the way the expected meanings of images can be changed or amplified by their articulation, or tone of voice.

**CG:** You have a facility for observing the minute flaws that signal authenticity. It makes me think of the difference between the most recent Star Wars films, in which everything is too cold and digital to be convincing, and the original, in which every robot was dented and every spaceship had rust around its edges. One of the most persuasive elements in your paintings is the precise rendering of subliminal details - litter, broken stones, cracked plaster, water stains.

**NC:** I remember the beaten-up, exhausted quality of the first Star Wars film very well. The details of wretchedness have a kind of pathos and idiocy that always shows you who the good guys are. It's the entropy thing again - there's a fight to keep the powers of dissolution, or evil, at bay. When the truth of nature leaks into the immaculate spaces of science fiction, it's an immediate sign of struggle against a higher threat. Nature and its terminal effects get bound up with a symbolic evil, preying only on the honest mortals toiling amongst it. There is a psychic weight then, yes - something like the irreversibility of time captured in the image of effluvia leaking suspiciously from a crack in a wall. But as a consequence, it's also a sign of instability or change. In terms of painting, these images may have a similar effect. The duality of decay and disrepair is meant to make the thing look ready with possibilities without too much positivity or salvation. But as well as this, it also returns paint to what it really is, that is, colored mud. To use it to depict exactly that seems like a nice tautology.

**CG:** I heard you had some trouble last year at a group exhibition in Tel Aviv. Actually, it was one of your paintings that ran into trouble.

**NC:** It got nicked. Mixed feelings of flattery and confusion. It was very small, so they must have crammed it into their coat pocket.

**CG:** Your paintings are notoriously hard to get a hold

of, with long waiting lists for collectors . On average, how many paintings do you produce each year?

**NC:** I guess I produce around six large pieces a year, with several smaller ones depending on the difficulties presented by the bigger ones. It's the opposite of doing small studies for big paintings. The large paintings tend to establish overall themes that the smaller ones extend and resolve. I work on a few at a time, so have started keeping records of when they start and end. It can be hard to keep track of otherwise.

**CG:** Recent months have been very busy for you. First you had a solo exhibition at Tate Britain in March. In April your show opened at Andrea Rosen in New York. And you're expecting a baby. Has this been a happy period, or has all the stress been difficult?

**NC:** I enjoy a certain level of stress because it keeps you critical of your own decisions . It's been one of the most productive and surprising phases of my work so far, ' creating a very close relationship between working and showing that is both exposed and constructive . And the baby is a great reward at the end of it.

*Craig Garrett is managing editor at Flash Art.*

**Nigel Cooke**  
Andrea Rosen, through May 15  
(see Chelsea).

**B**ritish artist Nigel Cooke is both a miniaturist of urban decay and a romantic landscape painter. Lyrical skies break apart into gothic arrays of litter, as rubble and graffiti overtake the lower half of his large canvases. Just below a Turner-esque patch of fog, or apocalyptic darkness, lurks a morose but engaging mess of hallucinatory detail. By forcing a phantasmagoria of refuse on his pastoral heavens, Cooke creates a brooding picturesque style.

This flotsam of fantasy and kitsch—sprawling crags, severed heads, smoking fruit—is rendered with astounding accuracy. Cooke's

technique is spectacularly meticulous: infinitesimal flora blooms among rocks and pebbles that are barely a millimeter in length. In *Mirrors* (2003), a monochromatic black gloom culminates in minuscule confetti littered in a tiny wasteland of shards. The sky in *Ghost on the Happy Trail* (2003), sliced by abrupt incandescent light, turns into a de-

crepit wall laden with graffiti.

With such compressed detail, the works are a challenge to absorb, both from a distance and at close range. The expansive-to-microscopic fields require viewers to stoop—if not kneel and squint—even when the paintings are installed higher than usual, as they are here. The entropy Cooke depicts is dizzying, as his worlds are razed by a chaos that borders on the gruesome. A large skull materializes from tangled moss in *Silva Morosa* (2002–03), casting gloom over an otherwise microscopic desolation. Like those of his melancholic forebear, the 17th-century Baroque painter Salvator Rosa, Cooke's peculiar ruins convey all the pleasures and splendors of horror.  
—Joao Ribas

ART



**Nigel Cooke, detail of *Mirrors*, 2003.**

# ArtReview

APRIL 2004

## Northern soul

Nigel Cook's paintings bring fantasy into the urban landscapes



To describe Nigel Cooke as a landscape painter is to tell only half the story. At first glance, his work certainly seems rooted in that grand tradition – and yet the world Cooke depicts is both uncannily familiar and completely alien. His vision, which is often referred to as entropic, creates a strange third dimension, each enormous canvas hovering somewhere between lofty fantasy and solid ground.

There are strong, beautifully executed details of the everyday in these paintings – derelict buildings, daubed graffiti and urban decay suggestive of Cooke's native Manchester. But the dismal, commonplace landscape is shot through with pure imagination. Humming purple skies are split in two by a ferocious bolt of lightning forking out from a floating eye. Dismembered heads are rolled about on the ground like balls in a forgotten game; the leaves of tangled trees part to form the shape of a grinning skull. The viewer is everywhere faced with the grim reality of mortality – but is also impressed with the power of painting to transform the minutiae of day-to-day existence into something exquisite and sublime.

Back in the real world, Cooke has been busy since his first solo show at London's Modern Art gallery in 2002: working towards his PhD at Goldsmiths; taking a February slot in the Art Now exhibition series at Tate Britain; and producing a limited-edition etching for Counter ([www.counteredititions.com](http://www.counteredititions.com)). But he's still found time to put together his first solo show in New York at Andrea Rosen Gallery (9 April-15 May, +1 212 627 6000, [www.andrearosengallery.com](http://www.andrearosengallery.com)).



# Making plans for Nigel

Nigel Cooke is the subject of Tate Britain's latest exhibition - and our exclusive

.by **Matthew Sweet** Portrait by **Gaultier Deblonde**

In a whitewashed, windowless bunker beneath a tower block in Camden, north London, the artist Nigel Cooke shoulders one end of an enormous canvas and turns it on its axis until the interesting side is facing the room. The painting is encased in wooden struts and a layer of cloudy plastic - ready for despatch to the gallery - but you can still make out the subject. It's a view from the end of the world.

A bilious sky, bisected by a yellow rainbow, that suggests something saltier and more noxious than water is pouring from it. A landscape of clinker and broken rocks, scattered with junk and bones. And at the point where the horizon ought to be, it's impossible to

tell whether you're looking at a patch of air or a chunk of concrete wall thanks to the presence of the kind of lurid painted pumpkin which Hieronymous Bosch might have envisioned after a dinner of dodgy veal. "I love filthy colours mixed with very high colours" Cooke enthuses, settling in his candy-pink deck chair. "It gives me quite a direct thrill. Makes me feel good."

This is fortunate, because the processes by which Cooke makes his work are so fiddly and painstaking that they could have been devised as a form of mental torture. The sky in this painting, for instance, looks as if it has been executed with an airbrush. (Stand

further away, and you might imagine that the picture had been stolen from the bonnet of an Albuquerque truck driver with insanely fastidious ideas about art and a passionate interest in the coming apocalypse.) But such a carefree way of applying colour is anathema to Cooke. This enormous vista of crud and detritus and poisoned air has been created using brushes as miniscule as the ones used to ink tourists' names on grains of rice. Today, Cooke has a solo show running at Tate Britain, and his prospective buyers are told to add their names to the waiting list. Five years ago, he was making his paintings in a shed in

## The Independent Magazine

Right: *Silva Morosa*, (2002-03), a work currently on display at Tate Britain



Colchester, and slipping slowly into despair. He'd probably be there still if Jake Chapman - the younger and more combative of the celebrated artist brothers - hadn't come to his rescue. "He completely changed the course of my life," says Cooke, with goggle-eyed gratitude. "None of this would have happened without him".

Cooke was born in 1973 in the Cheshire suburb of Timperley, where his parents - a mechanic and a nurse - brought him up to have lovely manners. On my arrival at his studio, he makes me a cup of tea, gives me the comfy seat and asks if I mind if the radio stays on during our interview. When the battery in my Dictaphone unexpectedly conks out, he rushes off down the street to locate a replacement, leaving me to loll on his Ikea sofa with a factory-canteen-size box of custard creams. And when, on his return, I read him a school masterly comment about his painting technique made by Brian Sewell in a London Evening Standard article entitled "How Dare They Spend Our Cash?" he tells me that he took these remarks to heart, and tried to act upon them. If Tracey Emin told me that she wanted to have a serious discussion with Sewell, I'd assume that it was a euphemism for glassing him. But Cooke, it seems, would like to shake the critic by the hand for urging him to "try to understand the nature of oil paint, grasp and exploit its infinite variabilities, and use it as more than filling between the lines"

Cooke's interest in art was stirred when he inherited a paintbox that had belonged to his grandfather, an amateur landscape artist. His formal art education began at Stockport College, where, as a late arrival on the foundation course, he was obliged to improvise

his own workspace under the stairs. He's less nostalgic about Nottingham Trent University, where he spent three years being bored and clueless until one of his tutors told him that his work was entirely terrible and would be best put on display at the bottom of a wheelie bin. "That was an awfully amazing day," he says, wistfully. "The next day I brought in an air brush and took the painting I'd been working on and just sprayed over it." This act of self-destruction appalled his parents, but seems to have pleased the Royal College of Art, who accepted him as an MA student in 1995.

Once he'd concluded his studies, Cooke took a job as a cloakroom attendant at the London stock exchange, tending the polychromatic jockey-jackets worn by the dealers on the floor. Here, he met a wannabe curator who was planning to open an exhibition space in a cellar, and gave Cooke his first gig. A clutch of five paintings was hung in the Downstairs gallery, and no one but Cooke's friends turned up for the view. But he was happy. "It all looked good," he recalls. "And then everything hit the skids"

When Cooke says the word "Colchester" he's putting a name to his despair. In 1997, he relocated to the Essex town with his then girlfriend, and found a job in a warehouse that outlasted the relationship. "I just crashed and burned after my MA. I remember looking at my peers from the Royal College and thinking I wished I was in their position. I wanted the shit I was doing to be snapped up by Victoria Miro. I wanted it so much. I would have done anything just to have a little show in someone's flat" Feeling hopelessly marginalised and marooned, he spent his spare time in his shed, toiling over

a series of tiny canvases, and considering whether to pack in the whole enterprise and follow his mother into the nursing profession. Then the cavalry, in the form of Chapman, came riding over the Essex marshes, cheque book in hand.

Chapman had been alerted to Cooke's existence by Caragh Thuring, one of the younger artist's contemporaries at Nottingham. "His work was so gem-like, so jewel-like," Chapman recalls. "His painting doesn't have the same teleology as modernist art. Most modern art is trying to form some ideal modification of the real world; to show us the world made better; to present us with an image from a noumenal realm that's somehow more perfect than where we are now. What's nice about Nigel's pictures is that they are definitely material. They grub around in the scatological. They're highly sophisticated and abstract, but they're also lowly and vulgar. That's why I like them"

Chapman was soon making plans for Nigel. He advised him to apply for a research post at Goldsmiths College, the south-east London alma mater of Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst. Cooke's hand-written proposal produced an offer of a £10,000-a-year teaching position, and facilitated his escape from the creosote darkness.

Chapman's patronage wasn't, however, entirely benevolent. It wasn't a simple matter of giving a break to an unregarded young talent. Cooke suspects that his mentor noted his discovery's predilection for tortuous detail, and thought it might be fun to prolong his suffering. Despite the windowless

# The Independent Magazine



basement, Cooke insists, this doesn't make him Chapman's gimp - but the mentor is delighted by the notion that cruelty and abuse might lurk in his relationship with the younger artist.

"I think," Chapman ventures, "that there's something sadistic about the detail in Nigel's pictures. This might sound like a stupid thing to say, but they demonstrate an utter waste of time. His work satirises agony and ecstasy, but it does so in a very anorak-like way. It falls short of the Romantic prescription for the tortured artist. In Nigel's case, he's tortured because he has to work through a magnifying glass and use one-hair brushes. When the paint becomes that molecular, it squeezes out any sense of poetry. And while his paintings seem to be lavish and dedicated, they're simultaneously impoverished - because there's no aspiration in them beyond the desire to get to the point at which every little smear, every little tint, is there on the canvas as a piece of forensic muck. It's almost arbitrary. It's as if the meaning in the painting has got up and left." That may sound like a denunciation, but it's actually a rave. "Nigel's project," says Chapman, with cheerful enthusiasm, "is intensely misanthropic."

On this question, there's something of a

schism between patron and patronised. "I've managed to create a language," argues Cooke, "which means I can paint anything I like. Anything can go in. It's like a cooking pot into which I can throw anything that tastes good. And a lot of the thrill of it comes from finding out what it can take before it splits its sides. Bad imagery like pumpkins and skulls and rainbows - all the worst kind of imagery how much of that load can it take? At some point the skulls that you see in Camden town or the rainbow that you see in the Care Bears cartoon, or the pumpkins you see at Halloween had some kind of value. How much of the core values of these things can I recover?"

Optimism like this, however, is the kind of thing that makes Chapman throw up into his turps jar. "That's much too positive a view for me," he protests. "I'm quite happy to completely indulge the negativity of the work."

Cooke's career has reached an interesting juncture. His new show opened last week at Tate Britain, but as yet his name has little resonance with the broader public. (You're reading the first interview with him in a national newspaper.) He gave up teaching at Goldsmiths last year - he was disillusioned, he hints, by the brazen careerism of the

students - but he's yet to become blasé about the privilege of being able to make a decent living from painting. "What does worry me is the way in which your fear of failure begins to disappear," he says. "You feel as if a safety net is being woven underneath you, but of course it isn't really there." Success, he confesses, has chilled some of his friendships. "You get flattered. Sometimes it's impossible to avoid sounding like a wanker."

Some of his Royal College contemporaries those who leapt straight from their MA course into the arms of a dealer, without any period of penury in an Essex outhouse - might now, he concedes, be looking upon the latest Tate brochure with envious eyes. "For some of them it's just petered out. But for ages they were the ones who seemed to be making the cash. It's only now that some of them are waking up to the fact that they might not actually be that good." If Cooke's experiences are anything to go by, then obscurity may be the best medicine. "When everyone forgets who you are," he reasons, "you can do what the fuck you want." A message of hope, then, in the wilderness of crud. \*

*Nigel Cooke's 'Art Now' runs at Tate Britain Millbank, London SW1 (020-78878000, [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)), until 28 March*



# tema celeste

contemporaryart

JULY/AUGUST 2004

Despite the claim of Jake Chapman—from the infamous Chapman Brothers duo—that the paintings of Nigel Cooke have a "sadistic" quality, Cooke's canvases ultimately exude elegance and subtlety more than anything else. Sure, if one squints and looks closely at this artist's complex compositions, one can find realistic, yet never gory representations of tiny, severed human heads, and the stunning *Silva Morosa* (2002-2003) features as its center an eerie image of a skull, which has been fashioned out of leaf-covered vines and tree branches that overlap in a clever visual effect to form the outline of a fleshless face. But these meticulously rendered paintings have much more to do with art historical antecedents than with the cheap shock value, often centered on sex and violence, that has come to characterize so much of the Young British Art of the 1990s. Cooke, instead, shows off his meticulous technical skills, evident in his realistic depictions of foliage and rocks, as well as his knowledge of art history. In *Ghost on the Happy Trail* (2003), he evokes Turner's masterful use of yellow palettes; *Mirrors* (2003), an almost entirely black canvas, recalls the monochromatic minimalism of Ad Reinhardt's signature black paintings of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, in each of the pieces on view in this show, Cooke injects a sense of the here and now by depicting desolate, abandoned urban environments, replete with drab concrete walls decorated with playful, yet slightly creepy graffiti (of Halloween pumpkins in *Sing the Pumpkin Song*, 2003, or a dismembered brain smoking a cigarette on its own in *Smoking Brain*, 2003) and random detritus. Cooke's signature slum scene fades into a massive wall of blinding yellows in *Ghost on the Happy Trail* and the blackness hangs in *Mirrors* like a thick velvet curtain about to fall in front of a theater's stage, only the actors' feet are substituted by a glimpse of gravel, weeds, and murky puddles in what appear to be potholes. Cooke's surreal urban canvases are quietly dramatic, and haunt the viewer for hours and days, like a nightmare or perhaps more like a dream.



nigel Cooke

Andrea Rosen Gallery  
New York

# frieze



MARCH 2002

**Benedict Seymour  
on Nigel Cooke**

The protagonist of Abel Ferrara's film *The Driller Killer* (1980) is a frustrated painter who, lacking the talent to realize his imaginings on canvas, allows his thwarted energies to erupt into violence.

As he swaps paintbrush for drill bit, his murders become the masterpieces he could not paint. At first glance the only clue that Nigel Cooke's work explores a similar short circuit are the livid heads planted in (or growing out of) the concrete at the foot of his painting *Catabolic Vanitas* (2001) – garish, grotesque, but painstakingly rendered. Cooke, though, is interested in homicide as an allegory of the process of painting: the work itself is also a mortification, a huge waste of time and effort which gradually nullifies whatever expressive value it originally held for the artist. His painstaking art turns the driller killer's helpless desublimation of the aesthetic impulse into a measured and meticulous attack on the metaphysi-

cal bounty of Classical painting. Aiming for a deathly completeness, it invokes the visual release of the epic vista, only to mock the omniscient gaze with a surfeit of detail.

As appalled as Ferrara's anti-hero at the gap between conception and execution, between the idealized sovereignty of the artist and the abject servility of creation, Cooke's work is an allegory on the absurdity of painting in an age of virtual reality and cybernetic systems. His theme is the futility

of not just the modern painter's situation (alluded to in compositional *non sequiturs*, narrative elisions and iconographic monstrosities that frustrate the paintings' attempt to become 'good') but also the heroic enterprises of artists of previous eras. For Cooke the Sublime is no more than a bad infinity, a sealed horizon. At his hands the serene landscapes of Classical painting curdle into a cod-Existentialist phantasmagoria, a vast, claustrophobic space in which the wide blue yonder becomes a kind of open prison.

Cooke's work combines an adolescent's preoccupation with epic grandeur – of scale and narrative subject – with the obsessive detail of a forensic scientist (he wears surgeon's goggles when painting, to ensure the resolution borders on hyperreal). But this does not mean that his laborious, unnecessary diligence has necessarily escaped the mundane world of purposes. On the contrary, the painting exposes its own profanity, walking a thin line between wonder and absolute bathos, terror and technique.

The paintings read well as closed systems, self-sufficient worlds in which an event such as a lightning bolt from a bleary lunar eye illuminates a mysterious field of possibility. In the 'daylight' paintings the actual event or cause of the world is absent – we are looking at a threshold condition, before or after the cataclysmic ignition that has either set the world running or is about to do so. But the consolations of this existential stasis are immediately profaned with contemporary trash; hence in *Catabolic Vanitas* narcissistically coiffed severed heads lie around like rejected *Popstars* contestants or, depending how you read

the hairstyles, refuse from a passing age of heroic individualism.

The associations are uniformly unwholesome: this could be a concentration camp, a religious sacrifice or some J. G. Ballard schoolyard where the children have trashed the library and buried the teachers. Events and their motivation remain inscrutable: the only gesture at meaning is provided by the items of furniture that recur in both the day and the night-time paintings – the sprawl of unidentified books on the floor, the bits of discarded peel, the abandoned fried chicken boxes – to suggest a state of dissolution. Even the sky proves to be a depthless illusion, not open space but a concrete wall, punctured here and there by tiny slit windows – perhaps it's the wall of the severed heads' prison.

If each painting is a system, then the system looks like it is breaking down, reaching a condition in which language itself is depleted, unable to make distinctions. The graffiti that blossoms at the foot of the wall in *Catabolic* is (even by the genre's own standards of encryption) illegible, and there is an even more explicit aphasia in the painting *Smile for the Monkey Men* (2001–2). Here the sky/wall has sprouted a thousand windows, like a mute Tower of Babel, behind which one may infer invisible, isolated agents. Their cells are linked together by a network of lank ropes, slack lianas on which monkeys derisively swing. Now the graffiti fumes around the window slits, a routine rebellion trying to articulate identity within a homogenizing network. Signs do not open out onto other worlds but enclose their hosts within their impersonal circuits, offering a travesty of the 'communi-

cations revolution', a world governed by entropy, inertia, indistinctness.

If Hieronymous Bosch's paintings offered meaningful mutations in biblical code, obscene hybrids as visual puns that could be decoded into vernacular sayings, satiric or gnomic, Cooke's work lacks any code for decrypting the monstrosities. His paintings bring to mind Walter Benjamin's comment on Kafka's enigmatic modern-day fables: they are like proverbs for which the keys have been lost, the significance infinitely deferred. And, as with Kafka, this prevailing indeterminacy is by no means a liberating condition. But these paintings are also temporal anomalies. They have a studied look of antiquity, as though Cooke were seeking to infect our recent past of individual self-assertion with the musty antiquity of a Dutch still-life. As the title suggests, and the symbolic spray-painted hieroglyphics (a spliff-smoking skull and lambent candle) confirm, *Catabolic Vanitas* is a genuine *memento mori* but also a reminder that once death is conceived as part of a system rather than as an end point to it, it loses its clarity. Hence one cannot say if the severed heads are dead or not, but the whole question of dying – dying traditions, forms of subjectivity, states of matter – is laid to rest, perhaps as a salvation as yet to be decoded, perhaps as the ultimate joke.

Cooke's exaggerated rhetoric is as desperate as it is arch – a sombre caricature. His paintings bespeak an enjoyment of the perverse, of the sordid obverse of transparency, immediacy, the healthy energy of communication. They appear to reiterate the value of contemplation, of isolation, to restate the importance of such painfully slow and detailed work. The studio may be ridiculous but it also affords room for thought. But beyond that, Cooke's paintings are not really intelligible as paintings at all. A mere assemblage of techniques, assiduously applied paint, sedulous layering, drippings and stippings out of *Changing Rooms*, they are not organic, integrated, but more a series of devices deployed to lay bare painting's resources of consolation, its claims to exteriority, its aim to escape. The painting is not a door into another world but a quintessence of the instrumental processes that suffuse the world it emerges from – the only difference is the space of reflection, the infinite regress, it opens up. These phantasmagorical scenes do reveal 'another universe' but recapitulate in abyssal form the problems and inertia of our own state of exception. The world is the case the paintings are suffering from, but here at least the sickness is vital.



• *Smile for the Monkey Men* (detail) 2001–2 Oil on canvas 180 x 240 cm