

THE BIRMINGHAM POST

Work comes full circle for John Walker

Oct 28 2009 By Terry Grimley



Veteran artist John Walker tells Terry Grimley about a rare new show.

Birmingham-born John Walker is one of Britain's most internationally renowned postwar painters, but you wouldn't necessarily think so to judge from his recent profile in London.

His current exhibition at Chelsea's Offer Waterman Gallery is his first in the UK since 1984, when he had a major exhibition of paintings from a recent residency in Australia at the Hayward Gallery running concurrently with a retrospective of his prints at the Tate. The following year he was nominated for the Turner Prize, but since then little has been seen of him in this country.

That is largely explained by the fact that Walker, 70 this year, is a long-time US resident. He runs the postgraduate painting programme at Boston University, and has a home on the Maine coast where he hosts outdoor painting summer schools for his students.

Asked why he hasn't shown his work in Britain for a quarter of a century, he has a simple answer: "No one asked me," he says. "I'm not one of those artists who goes round promoting himself."

"The art world has been kind to me, but I can't go out there and tell people and show my work. This exhibition came about because a dealer from New York came and wanted pictures, and he knew this other dealer and it was fixed that way."

The National Gallery of Art in Washington is currently showing a huge painting from 2008 which it has recently bought from Walker. Twenty years ago, when Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery had yet to acquire a painting by this native of Weoley Castle, I remember counting up how many museums worldwide had work by him in their collections: there were 22 in the US alone.

The latest count (not necessarily complete) is 25, and Walker has the rare distinction of being represented both in the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

Now Birmingham has caught up, and owns three paintings by Walker – one from the 1960s, one from the 1990s and a recent addition from 2006.

As it turns out, Walker wasn't aware of this. On his last visit to the Museum & Art Gallery he wasn't that impressed: "It seemed as though it hadn't changed at all. I even felt I was waking on the same carpets that were there for 40 years."

He is pleased to hear that there are moves towards establishing a new museum of contemporary art in his home town, and suggests it should be located "in Selly Oak, or somewhere where the people are." He recalls his own introduction to art, which came just around the end of the Second World War.

"My father was a mailman. He used to collect mail out of the pillar boxes and I used to travel round with him. I would be about seven. He would open the door of the Barber Institute and tell the woman at the counter that he would be back for me in half an hour."

“He was doing it for convenience, but that was really my introduction to art.”

Later he became a pupil at Moseley Road Art School where, he confirms that he actually shared a desk with Peter Phillips, who became one of Britain’s leading Pop artists in the early 1960s.

“That was a great little art school,” he says. “Meredith Hawes, head of the Birmingham School of Art, would come round and if he spotted someone good he would get them to go there. I remember waiting for him to ask me, and he did – but he never forgave me for not being as famous as David Hockney!”

Walker was part of the generation which caught the full impact of postwar American painting – abstract expressionism and its subsequent derivations. It meant big canvases which hung directly on the wall.

He is usually thought of as an abstract painter, but there was always a tendency for his paintings to focus on some kind of visual hook which sometimes took on an explicit form – for example, the skull which appears in his Australian paintings. Other recognisable devices, including lettering, have continued to figure in his subsequent work.

Usually associated with large paintings like the Juggernaut series from the 1970s, Walker has turned to a miniature scale for his latest exhibition.

This was prompted by a move to a new studio in a former community hall, where he found a pile of discarded bingo (or “beano”, as it is known in America) cards. “They were almost the only thing left,” he recalls. “I piled them up and put them in black garbage bags to throw away.”

But then it struck him that it might be interesting to make small paintings on the cards. His first idea was to use the backs of them, but then he turned them over and started using the numbers to jump-start the paintings.

Walker tends to talk about his recent work in terms of landscape.

“I spend a lot of time sitting outside painting landscapes these days. You know what

they say about English artists – if you cut them you don't draw blood, you draw a landscape.”

Fifty years ago the tendency of British abstract painters to make references to landscape and illusionary space earned the disapproval of the renowned American critic Clement Greenberg, the leading theorist of American abstraction, with his philosophical insistence on the flatness of the picture surface.

“Greenberg always complained about my painting, but actually he was very kind to me and very supportive,” Walker says. “I think it went back to the days of the John Moores exhibition, when he was a judge and I was given a prize. He was always very interested in my art but I wasn't one of his close confidantes.”

Painting may not have the dominance or the close stylistic focus it once had within American art, but Walker believes there is still plenty of life in it.

“It's slowed down a bit in the last two or three years because of the economy, but it seems to be extremely important and young people seem to be flooding into graduate schools.

“At Boston we have 500-600 applications for 15 places. We do specialise in painting because that's what I'm good at teaching. A lot of art schools do very little, so we get all the kids who want to paint, and we can select the best.

“I keep saying I like to wake up in the morning and see what people are doing. That's very important, that I can see what young people are doing.”

[John Walker: Incoming Tide, Small Paintings from Seal Point, Maine, is at the Offer Waterman Gallery, Langton Street, London, until November 14 \(Mon-Fri 10am-6.30pm, Sat 11am-4pm by appointment\).](#)