

THE SPECTATOR

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John Walker: Incoming Tide

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Weeks ago, when the review schedules were first plotted, I had thought to include here a feature on Damien Hirst. Although I find his work unremittingly thin, I thought I would give it another chance. After all, he is showing new paintings he's made himself rather than instructed a studio to produce. But the results are so feeble and insignificant that detailed execration (however enjoyable) is more than they're worth. Hirst's product thrives on publicity, and his new show has generated so many hundreds of column inches that he must deem it another successful ploy, however vituperative the critical response. The real loser is the Wallace Collection, demeaned by Hirst's strategic incursion. At least the visitor may rinse the eyes with some of the Wallace's masterpieces after the vacuous tawdriness of the Hirst room, but in both senses it's a poor show.

What makes this unholy alliance between art and mammon all the more distressing is the amount of really good painting around at the moment. John Walker (born Birmingham 1939) is one of those artists who have slipped off the critical radar in recent years, simply because we haven't been shown his work in this country. His reputation, as both painter and teacher, stood very high here in the 1970s and 80s, although at that time his star was also rising fast in America and Australia. Since 1992 he has lived and taught in Boston, with a bolt-hole in Maine. In 2006 he began his 'Seal Point' series based on the landscape of the Maine coast, which he has painted fruitfully in both large and small formats. At Offer Waterman is a selection of his small paintings (from the 200 or so he has completed) and very fine they look too.

Walker is best known in this country for his large and powerful abstracts, full of gestural marks and intimations of primitive ritual. The painter Stephen Chambers (born 1960) recalls that when he was a student at St Martin's (1979–82), 'John Walker was the biggest beast in the playground', and many of the tutors were his 'total disciples'. Walker's influence was for a while all-pervasive. The innovative gallerist Nigel Greenwood represented him, and even after Walker moved to Australia in 1979, there was a major show of his work at the Hayward (1985). But the silence since then on the Walker front has been pretty deafening for those who remembered to listen. So this new exhibition is a major event.

How good, then, to see Walker's latest work breaking new ground and moving so effortlessly between abstraction and figuration. In a sense he has returned to his roots in the landscape, though the subject of these small upright panels (each measures 7¼ inches x 5½ inches) is just as much the way paint can be tellingly manipulated. Walker found a set of Beano or Bingo cards in a studio he was renting on the Maine coast, and started to paint on them. In some he allows sections of the grid of numbers or the lettering to show through the paint, in others he applies the paint more deeply to the unprimed card. The surfaces of these paintings are liquid and luscious. Walker explores the paradox of how he can suggest lots of detail without being at all specific. The flatness of the card is at once contradicted by his ability to conjure great expanses of space. The vertical format means that the forms are stacked up, and the fact that Maine faces east means there are no dramatic sunsets depicted. But otherwise these little paintings are marvels of compression, running the gamut of painterly effects. After such an appetiser, what we need now is a museum show of Walker's work since 1985.