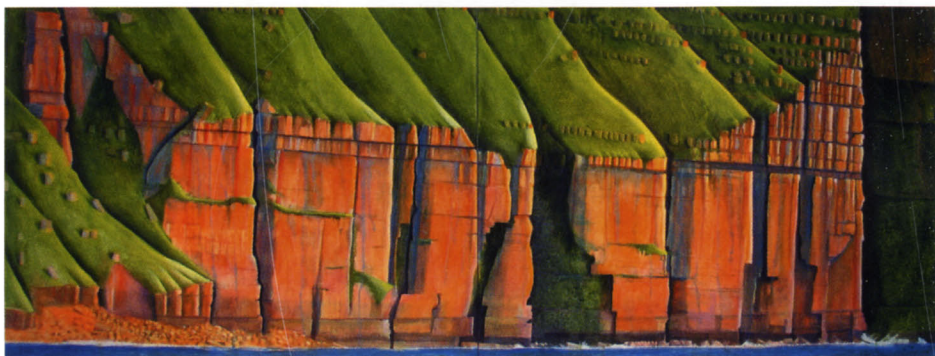

Art & Literature



Jim Curran *Rackwick Bay, Orkney* 2005
Oil on canvas



Jim Curran *Evening light on Rackwick Cliffs* 2005
Oil on canvas

JIM CURRAN

Nothing Lasts Forever

Returning across Tibet from the 1998 Sepu Kangri expedition with Chris Bonington, I was aware that the journey marked the end of an era. For Chris it would probably be his last high profile media extravaganza; for me, 20 years of expedition film-making had lost much of its allure, though I remain grateful and privileged to have climbed, travelled and filmed in many of the world's great mountain ranges. But nothing lasts forever.

I had come to film-making late. I had studied fine art in the heady days of the early sixties, and throughout my twenties and until my mid-thirties painting had been my *raison d'être*. Then in 1974 a year's secondment to the (then) Sheffield Polytechnic had dramatically changed my life. The multi-disciplines of film-making had, almost overnight, superseded the world of brushes, easels and canvas.

Superseded but not totally erased. My job lecturing on the Foundation Course at the University of the West of England kept me in touch, particularly as I taught life drawing one day a week throughout most of my career. So when I started using pencil drawings to illustrate my biography of Chris Bonington and then my travels in *The Middle-Aged Mountaineer*, I was back on familiar territory.

Starting to paint again was not so easy and it wasn't until 2001 that I summoned up the courage to take the plunge. The problem was not how or what, but why? Was there any compelling reason in the 21st century to start smearing oily pigments onto bits of canvas and abandoning the high-tech world of digital videos and computer-generated images?

It would have been all too easy to have talked myself out of doing anything at all, particularly as I still consider myself deeply lazy, and have always used the motto 'don't do anything today that you can put off until next week'. Eventually I got bored with soul-searching and decided on a straightforward course of action; to paint mountain landscapes based on some of the highlights of the last 20 years, and leave the theorising to others. A professional career in art education had to be (at least temporarily) forgotten: not so easy, for it is impossible to be consciously naïve. Knowledge of landscape painters past and present still haunted me – Turner, Constable and Cezanne couldn't be ignored and I had come to think of the work of Julian Cooper as the last word on the subject of mountain painting.

Anything I produced would inevitably be compared with him (if only by me), and how could I compete with his marvellous Kangchenjunga or Eiger series? But, nothing ventured nothing gained, and I made the first tentative marks on a blank canvas.



120. Jim Curran, *Rising Mist on Hoy*, 2004, oil on canvas.



121. Jim Curran, *Looking down the Verdon Gorge*, 2005, oil on canvas, Private Collection.

I would like to have been able to say that, like riding a bicycle, the old skills instantly came flooding back. Not so, and the first few paintings were technical nightmares. The only bonus was that while simply trying to resolve practical problems, I couldn't worry much about anything else.

Slowly, big paintings of K2, the Trango Towers, Chogolisa and Gasherbrum 4 took shape. They were based on memory, experience and, inevitably, photography, which many people still view with some suspicion, if not regard as downright cheating. But there is a world of difference in simply copying a photograph, which is not a particularly difficult thing to do. (If you don't believe me, take the evidence of my quarter of a century spent interviewing prospective art students whose folders all too frequently contained lovingly detailed copies of photographs of Jimi Hendrix – they all looked exactly the same.) But for generations, painters have found that using photography to glean information is something quite different. Vermeer used the camera obscura, Degas' paintings of race horses and ballet dancers relied heavily on photography – Walter Sickert frequently used newspaper photos and, more recently, David Hockney made endless experiments with photo-collages.

Hockney in particular intrigued me. In the mid-seventies and early eighties he made dozens, if not hundreds of what he called 'joiners', using a comprehensive documentation of landscapes to present strangely compelling images that in their almost Cubist complexity seemed to recreate the way we scan and understand reality. In particular, a series based on his visits to the Grand Canyon were later translated into vast paintings. But his supposed innovations weren't exactly new. Photographers had long used the technique of jointing prints together. Memorably, Vittorio Sella had produced his famous panoramas of the Karakoram and the Caucasus. One in particular, of K2, Broad Peak, the Gasherbrums and almost the whole length of the Baltoro glacier had stuck in my mind. One of my last paintings before my conversion to film had in fact been based on several old black and white prints stuck together showing Paul Nunn climbing in Cheddar Gorge. I had treated the image almost as a still life and lovingly painted, *trompe-l'oeil* fashion, the strips of grimy sellotape and brown sticky paper holding the prints together. The painting was one of only a few to survive and for many years hung at the top of my stairs to remind me of my roots.

Whilst on the subject of photography, I have never considered myself any more than a competent amateur (despite, or maybe because of, squillions of undocumented slides). Like Julian Cooper I have a rather perverse penchant for 'bad' photographs. Snaps, out of focus, over or under exposed images, can and do spark ideas for painting. The 'perfect' photograph doesn't do this for me, and in truth I have invariably found that viewing my best photographs for the first time has been accompanied by a twinge of disappointment.

The first exhibition I felt able to mount was during the 2002 Kendal Mountain Film Festival at the Brewery Arts Centre. It was, in retrospect, a

bit of a hotch-potch of paintings, drawings and watercolours old and new, along with photos, videos and books. It was more successful than I dared hope, and two years later I showed in the hallowed portals of our Club. I felt much happier with the exhibition and it seemed to me to be more focused.

By now I had (almost) got the ambitious Himalayan paintings out of the way and was concentrating on material nearer home, including the Old Man of Hoy. While the Alpine Club show was still on, I went back to Hoy with Terry Gifford for a few days of intensive drawing and painting of the wonderful decaying sandstone cliffs of Rackwick Bay. Their horizontal strata, towering arêtes and hanging 'grassfields' had fascinated me since my first visit to Hoy in 1983. The Old Man itself had previously given me four memorable outings, including filming Catherine Destivelle in 1997. But Rackwick Bay became an obsession and I spent most of 2005 producing drawings, watercolours and paintings. One measuring nearly ten feet by four was probably the most successful. These formed the basis of my third exhibition, this time back at the Brewery Arts Centre. This time I felt I had really hit my stride and many possibilities seemed to open out.

However, my pleasure was definitely tempered by the unwelcome diagnosis in the middle of 2005 of prostate cancer. Hopefully a wake-up call and not a go-to-sleep one, it certainly focused my mind on the remaining time I have left. During and since my treatment I narrowed my interest right down to my own Sheffield home, drawing mundane, everyday objects; bookshelves, lamps, towels draped over radiators, even flowers and a couple of self-portraits. There was certainly a therapeutic element in doing them but I discovered many of the same elements on a much smaller scale of the themes I had tackled in the mountains.

At the time of writing, I don't know where the next paintings will lead me or even what the subject matter may be. Mountains have always been central to my life and always will be, but it may well be that in order to develop my work I will have to move on to something else. Nothing lasts forever.

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