

In memoriam Jeffery Camp RA

Timothy Hyman RA salutes the visionary painter and author – his friend for over 50 years



Above: Jeffery Camp RA in his south London studio

In some of the most lyrical and imaginative paintings of our time, Jeffery Camp RA staked out his own visionary territory, whose full extent has yet to be mapped. The difficulty is partly the sheer diffuseness of such a range of magical imagery, at all scales and in all formats, from tender watercolour vignettes to epic, panoramic canvases. Jeffery himself, a loveable, smiling presence at every Royal Academy assembly, remained remote, ungraspable. You could never have a ‘normal’ conversational exchange; his words came back at you from left field, already two steps further on, in slow and flat East Anglian; often epigrammatic, memorable.

I first met Jeffery in 1963, when I was a 17-year-old painting student at the Slade, where he had just begun to teach. In that bewildering Babel, he was an island of calm; like so many subsequent Slade generations, shipwrecked by successive waves of fashion, we found sustenance on Jeffery’s independent shores. At 40, he had just married the 22-year-old Laetitia; he exhibited at Helen Lessore RA’s Beaux Arts Gallery in London, pictures full of what he called ‘scurrying figures’ beside the Suffolk sea, touched in with small sable brushes. In a period when colour was supposed to be applied flat, with masking tape an essential component, Jeffery

espoused ‘touch painting’. Few of my peers took his work seriously, though I have one vivid memory: a wild party thrown at Bankside by our mutual friend Derek Jarman, with Jeffery leaning on my shoulder and expounding the essential androgyny of every artist. At his Serpentine show in 1978, seeing his two 8ft Beachy Head nocturnes, I at last woke to Jeffery’s stature: wondrous spatial inventions, the lighthouse beams so far below, creating multiple horizons. His best compositions were often ‘first person’, with Laetitia and himself as foreground protagonists.

In his picture-crammed south London base (left), he stopped painting in order to write his first, brilliantly poetic book, *Draw: How to Master the Art* (1994); it tided him over the breakdown of his marriage to Laetitia, and his ceding to her the Hastings house. He threw himself into London art life, attending countless private views, making the Thames his substitute for the windswept coastal waters. Like everyone who drew alongside Jeffery, I discovered his negativity (‘I don’t suppose there are ten people in England who really know what drawing is’) and gleefully malicious teasing. Jeffery believed in observational drawing, but as a route to transcendence; he loved Redon’s formulation, ‘putting the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible’. Close friends with Euan Uglow and others of the Euston Road cult, he had joined their seaside sketching-expedition only to see them all raise measuring pencils as the waves swept towards them. ‘Blimey! That’s when I really lost faith.’

He had found in hang gliders emblems for ecstatic states: ‘I try to paint precarious excitement.’ Arriving in Venice after a lifetime avoiding foreign travel, his art exploded into airborne angels; and later into a rhythmic, rapturous half-abstraction.

Jeffery was taken on in the 1980s by one of the foremost avant-garde dealers (‘What you need, Tim, is a “Nigel Greenwood” to legitimise you’). Years later, in 2015, Barry Schwabsky included his work in ‘Tightrope Walk’, at White Cube, and the Camps looked marvellous in that exalted company.

After Jeffery persuaded me to serve as intermediary or ‘editor’ for his second book, *Paint: A Manual of Pictorial Thought and Practical Advice* (1996), we slightly drifted apart. The great supports in his latter decades were the dealer Michael Richardson (now planning two more shows), curator Andrea Rose and sculptor Neil Jeffries RA, who helped see him through several years of dementia. When I visited he did show recognition, but then lapsed into silence, seemingly unreachable. Rising to leave an hour later, I was amazed to hear the words ‘Believe in yourself!’ – the last and best advice he ever gave me.

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Timothy Hyman RA is a painter