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## Anthony Eyton at 100: Old Age Style — A Conversation with Art and Nature

*Anthony Eyton: A Centenary Exhibition*, **Browse & Darby**, London, 21 September–20 October 2023

*Arturo Di Sefano & Anthony Eyton: Double Portrait*, **Art Space Gallery**, London, 30 June–4 August 2023

In the catalogue for his last exhibition with Browse & Darby in 2019, Anthony Eyton quoted T. S. Eliot's 'East Coker': 'Old men ought to be explorers... still moving / Into another intensity.' It's quite something to live up to, and Eyton has been doing his best. That show was called *Dilemmas and Solutions*, a title redolent of the problems that occur on a daily basis in an artist's working life, and that he personally has never ceased to grapple with. I've known him for more than 30 years, and have always been impressed by his energy and single-mindedness. His long career is testament to his belief that 'painting should be an exclamation at the validity or beauty of nature. A cry of surprise.'

It is essential, and constantly challenging, to maintain the life in one's work when there has been a long lifetime of work. Eyton achieves this by a variety of strategies, but principally by an endless curiosity about people and things, the human comedy and the phenomenal world. He paints landscape, still-life, figure compositions and the nude – the landscape of the body – with an immediate response, tempered by stringent re-examination. Each painting is not only a record of something seen, but is also to do with an idea that has formed in his imagination, and is a mixture of accident, questioning and exact record. He is a man obsessed with paint and its application: the sense of touch that turns coloured mud into living paint, and that locates the sensual response to visual data not only in the eyes but in the fingertips.

His stamina and willpower were tested last winter when he was

hospitalised with pneumonia. Many people aged 99 in a similar plight might not have evinced the same determination to get out of hospital in order to carry on painting. ‘I’ve got to go home’, he told the nurses (with whom he was a favourite), ‘I’ve a lot of painting to do’. And indeed he had: there are three separate exhibitions of his work to mark his 100th birthday this year, and Eyton always prefers to work on pictures until the last possible moment, in the hope of improving them.

He also likes to put his thoughts down on paper, keeping a journal and writing good letters. He constantly reflects upon his aims and his studio activity, liking nothing so much as a different or unexpected point of view to stimulate new thought. Thus he will listen with unfeigned interest to the opinions of visitors, and will constantly refer to the history of art for precedents and examples to compare to his current predicament. Artists like solving problems, but this cannot be done in a vacuum. Eyton is happy to call upon the great names of the past, as well as contemporary advice, to help him resolve a painting. New ideas interact with a lifetime of hard-won experience, and he will test the latest stimulus against his knowledge of Michelangelo or Caravaggio or Picasso.

He records in his journal conversations with other artists or chance acquaintances, the ideas discussed and how they might relate to the paintings he is working on. This openness to different avenues of thought is one of Eyton’s great strengths, and reflects his ability to look anew at life-long preoccupations and question preconceptions. In conversation he is liable to make reference to Constable, Watteau, Masaccio, Caravaggio, Durer, Basil Beattie, Courbet, Corot, Delacroix, and about how they might approach a problem. Often his interest in Old Masters is ‘to get one going, to prime the pump’. When I spoke to him last October, for example, he was enthralled by revolution in painting and reading Simon Schama on Jacques-Louis David.

Anthony Eyton was born on 17th May 1923 at Teddington in Middlesex and spent his childhood in Hampshire. Educated at Canford School (1936-41), his early enthusiasm for painting was confirmed by first-rate tuition from Ian Fleming-Williams, William Coldstream and Enid Canning. In 1941 he spent a term at Reading University in the Department of Fine Art, studying under Professor Anthony Betts,

who encouraged him to paint from drawings. In 1942 he went into the Army for five years, doing a little painting and experiencing much. On his discharge in 1947 he attended Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, until 1951, after which he began to teach art part-time and exhibit his work, showing at the Royal Academy first in 1954. In 1955, he started teaching at Camberwell.

As a student at Camberwell he had absorbed the discipline of *certezza*, a certainty through measuring, in a similarly rational way that Piero della Francesca and the great Italians had done. 'I think there was a moral aspect to it: it became a kind of religion to get it right.' This approach is all about perception and looking, what Eyton calls 'a formal training, but not academic. Camberwell was never versed in rules; it was versed in perception.' Eyton himself wrote in 1980, at the time of his first museum retrospective, at the South London Art Gallery (and tour): 'The world observed has always been of prime importance to me. When I am painting direct from the subject, the answers can only come from my reactions to it, spontaneous impressions that have to be marshalled into a whole. The answer must be authentic and can only come out of truthful scrutiny.'

He possesses a pictorial intelligence that ranges over the whole history of art while keeping its roots firmly in what is known as the English empirical tradition of painting, as nurtured in Camberwell and the Slade art schools in the 20th century. Empirical as in verifiable by observation, and indeed this is how Eyton still proceeds, though in old age he has adopted a late style in which he has to some extent relaxed the rules. Memory and imagination play their parts too, and truth to appearances is interpreted more freely than ever. It is an academic approach in a way, but in Eyton's hands it is so full of vitality and experiment that it is hard to think of it as in any way institutionally organised. It draws upon Impressionism and Expressionism, and on all sorts of painters from Piero to Rembrandt. The register of Eyton's artists also includes Pietro Lorenzetti, Poussin, Rubens, Caspar David Friedrich, Chardin, Monet, Cézanne, Degas, Bonnard, Sickert, Max Beckmann and late Guston. It's always revealing to note what pictures an artist hangs on his walls at home. Among Eyton's favourites are paintings by his mother and by Richard Eurich, and substantial charcoal drawings by Leon Kossoff (a monumental nude) and the abstract artists

Basil Beattie and Nigel Hall.

In the Army he had been to Egypt, but it was Italy he yearned for, and having been awarded an Abbey Major Scholarship by The British School at Rome, he was able to spend two years there (1951-3). Italy was a crucial influence and inspiration, and in 1973 he won a second fellowship to work there for another six months. Meanwhile, travel had become an important aspect of his life. In 1955 he had gone to Greece for three months, where he was much affected by the clarity and brilliance of the light. Later trips included Canada (where he taught for a while), America and Mexico. In 1972 he went to Fire Island, New York; in 1973 to Iran; and, crucially, in the winter of 1978-9 to India for the first time. Israel and Australia have been the subject of more recent journeys.

Despite his passion for foreign travel, he did not neglect his own country. On visits between 1956 and 1958, he painted industrial landscapes and factory interiors in the north of England, at places like Rochdale or the Potteries. 'I think social comment was in the air,' he has said, 'but for me there was no particular point of view to the paintings, I wasn't saying that people should do this or that. It was just a visual thing of people cranking wheels or making rubber mats or sitting in an office.' In later years, he worked extensively in Cornwall, at the Eden Project (where he was resident artist from 1999-2009), but he has above all become a Londoner by adoption.

In 1960 he moved to Brixton, to the house in which he still lives. Then in 1968 he took a studio at Spitalfields, and from its window he painted the rooftops and the tower of Nicholas Hawksmoor's Christchurch. He also made drawings of people in Euston Station and Piccadilly Underground Station, and later at Liverpool Street Station, which made him think of Brueghel. Later still, he was allowed into Bankside Power Station before it was adapted to become Tate Modern. He comments: 'A wonderful place to work, the machinery looked like modern sculpture and everywhere there were colours of rust and blue paint. I could have worked there for five years.'

In an appreciative article the painter Humphrey Ocean wrote on Eyton for the magazine *Turps Banana* (number 11, Spring 2012), he talked about Eyton's 1968 painting *Christchurch*, of the Spitalfields church which has



long attracted painters, Eyton and Leon Kossoff among them. Ocean wrote: 'Painted from a high window in Wilkes Street, his church is the clear and dirty cliffs-of-Dover white against a powder blue summer sky, muffled but resolute. This is England, so just enough blue does the trick and no more. Eyton's colour is like that.' And again: 'Christchurch has a deliberateness about it and there is nothing random about Tony's painting although it might sometimes appear to tumble and flow.'

Of the two major exhibitions celebrating Eyton this year, the retrospective at Browse & Darby will offer the most complete account of his work, but it was still in preparation at the time of writing. However, I can say it will contain early work, including a self-portrait and a painting of the Salvation Army near Waterloo from 1950, pictures of Newcastle and Rome, nudes, still-life and garden paintings. Eyton has been showing with B&D since 1978, and mounted a dozen solo exhibitions in the gallery. For decades a fixture in Cork Street, B&D has recently upped sticks and moved to St James's. Eyton will have the first show in their new space this autumn.

The other exhibition, *Double Portrait*, consists of paintings by Eyton and his colleague, Arturo Di Stefano, and is a marvellous and unusual way to celebrate a centenary. Michael Richardson, who runs Art Space Gallery, and whose idea this exhibition was, describes it as 'a portrait of a friendship'. The seed was sown by a photograph taken by Anne-Katrin Purkiss of Eyton and Di Stefano standing in front of William Dobson's painting of two poets, *Portrait of an Old and a Younger Man*, which was then hanging in Tate Britain. The echo is clear. In the photo we see two artists from different generations and backgrounds, united in friendship, both utterly dedicated to the business of painting.

There is a deep bond of genuine affection between them and they speak several times a week, often about the artist who is uppermost in their minds from their shared pantheon. As Eyton says in the hugely enjoyable film Richardson has made to accompany the exhibition: 'We've got a lovely family up there, up in the heavens, rather like angels in a Giotto crucifixion when they're all lamenting, but these are all joyous angels: Titian, Rembrandt, Cézanne, Giotto, Vermeer, Cimabue, Kossoff. They sing to us.'



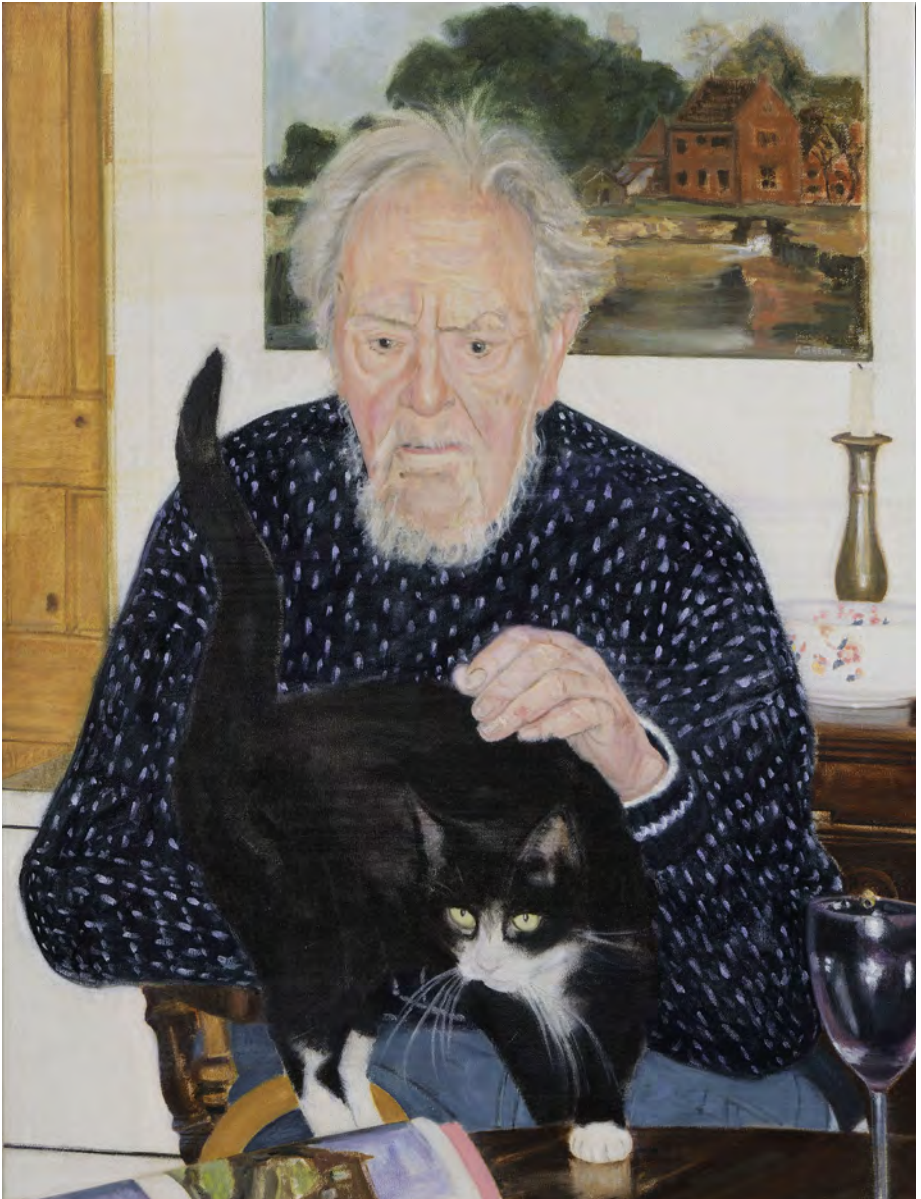
Art Space Gallery ©

*Anthony Eyton, Double Portrait, 2023. Oil on canvas, 60 x 91 cm*



Art Space Gallery ©

*Anthony Eyton, Fallen Tree (triptych), 2013. Oil on canvas, 137 x 275 cm*



*Arturo Di Stefano, Anthony Eyton and Georgie, 2022. Oil on linen, 80 x 60 cm*

In one of the many beguiling moments of the film, Di Stefano teases Eyton about his complaints at the appearance of leaves in spring. For no sooner has Eyton got used to the bare branches of winter and incorporated them into a composition, than green shoots appear ('cheeky buggers' he calls them). 'It's all too fast for me', says the man once known affectionately by his contemporaries as the Fastest Brush Alive. 'I'm very resentful of those leaves.' Arturo recalls: 'When he returned from hospital after his bout of pneumonia and was, if not quite bedbound, but restricted in his movements, he said he was more like a hawk when he painted rather than a moth flitting from one canvas to another.' Di Stefano pursues the image, aptly quoting T.S. Eliot in conclusion: 'He's been his own man for a long time, flying over the radar as it were, in plain sight, hawk-eyed, light as a moth, his eye "Quick now, here, now, always – A condition of complete simplicity."'

To greet the visitor to Art Space there's a double portrait of the two artists that Eyton has been working on, based on a photograph taken by Richardson that Eyton subsequently squared up. There's a little of Sickert's late self-portraits in this approach, and in fruitful contrast a magnificent portrait of Eyton with his cat by Di Stefano hangs to the right. Quite a prelude to the main exhibition in the handsome galleries downstairs, which alternates Eyton paintings with Di Stefano's to make a powerful double statement about the validity and richness of painting today. The show is unexpectedly magical. Here is Di Stefano on Eyton: 'Despite, or because of, his years, his work whilst firmly rooted in the visible, has shed the strict adherence to what he sees, the pictorial space conjured up by the variety and versatility of oil paint – stains, drips, impasto patchwork – created by a hand tremulously holding not so much a paint brush as a wand.'

Through Richardson's camera we see Eyton sitting at some distance from the easel and dabbing at his painting with a three foot long brush, working from the shoulder in big gestures rather than from the wrist. He bashes at the canvas with his big brush, a typical imperative of change and challenge that I remember from seeing him at work in past years. Another typical movement: darting forward to draw in, with a lump of chalk or charcoal, a possible change to the configuration of a painting that he's

noticed while we were talking. He may be older, but his mind still works at speed.

Of his immediate contemporaries, Eyton most looked up to Euan Uglow, whose painting he revered. Then there was Jeffery Camp, who was quite a close friend, and Patrick George whom he felt was rather aloof. Although he bought a painting by Craigie Aitchison, the two were not really friends. To a certain extent, Eyton has been a loner all his life, working like many artists (Di Stefano among them) in solitude, and finding some sort of social life on the Private View circuit of exhibition openings. Like Camp, Eyton has been sedulous in getting to see the work of younger artists, and supporting it when he could.

In an interview I conducted with him in 1990, Eyton spoke about composing the figures as he was going along. 'It's very much like a Japanese swordsman, one's got to land in quickly. It's a stroke method of suggested marks, which will conjure up the scene with a vivid impression.... I'm aware of the choreography of the scene and that's what I'm really after. It's giving solidity of form to the ephemeral...' This recalls something Euan Uglow wrote of Eyton in 1985: 'He paints like a fencer and when the blade gets very hot we have, demonstrated, the arc light. When this happens the paintings are very good'.

Eyton still lives in the house in Brixton he moved to with his wife Mary in 1960, where his children grew up. These days his main studio is at the first floor front where he paints still-life set-ups of chairs and crowded shelves or mantelpiece. He has fewer nude models these days, and concentrates on his garden or on big figure compositions of India he assembles in the studio from loosely interpreted photographs and drawings. Eyton will use anything that serves his purpose: his own photographs, drawings, watercolours and pastels made in front of the subject, images from newspapers, or old black-and-white photos of India from around 1910, which leave him free to invent the colour.

The garage has been transformed into another studio for big canvases (he has, for instance, painted there a vast study of a brick wall and a large canvas of Lourdes), and he will also paint on occasion in the living room or work in the garden in front of nature. Despite his enjoyment of working from the motif, at least half of his practice is to make paintings in the

studio from material collected on site. He especially loves the intricacy of brick walls and their weathered look, and has said ‘those are my best paintings, I think’. A painting of a wall can take three months and he comments ‘it takes you over completely’.

In Richardson’s film, we see Eyton drawing in the garden with charcoal on a large sheet of paper fixed to a drawing-board. His subject is the contorted oak tree he has known for decades that has now been pruned at the top. After the charcoal beginnings, Eyton reaches for the pastels and brings his drawing to vivid life with scribbly colour accents. His garden at one point held 80 different kinds of rose and the fallen trunk of a mighty walnut that came down in the great gale of 1987. (Its reclining form is celebrated in a magnificent triptych in the Art Space exhibition, dating from 2013.) Now the walnut has finally died and decayed, but the roses still flourish. Wildness is encouraged, and for Eyton gardening involves more listening than taking decisions. He has a deep love of trees and says that if he hadn’t been an artist, he would have pursued forestry as an alternative career. Perhaps surprisingly, Douanier Rousseau has been an influence on his garden pictures.

Is his work becoming increasingly abstract? Perhaps, but also he no longer feels the need to *finish* work to quite the extent he used to. As a result, his surfaces are less over-worked and sometimes less persuaded into resemblance. They are thus permitted to retain a greater degree of expressive vitality than in earlier years. Eyton at 100 has adopted an ‘anything goes’ late style in which he can take more risks and short-cuts than ever before. But not all is jettisoned. ‘Piero is still my guru’, says Eyton, ‘and Titian shows the way to be free.’ Titian, of course, famously lived into his late 80s (if not his 90s) and developed a late style of remarkable spontaneity, vitality and engagement.

I have been reading a new book by that doyen of English art writers, Christopher Neve. A painter himself, Neve has the gift of penetrating to the heart of the work of art he is evoking, or to the essence of the painter’s thought he is trying to elucidate. His masterpiece is *Unquiet Landscape*, first published in 1990 and reissued, lightly revised, in 2020, and he writes particularly brilliantly about our landscape and the painters who have celebrated it. His new book, while containing many passages of startling

beauty and perspicacity, suffers from also being an eschatological conceit. Entitled *Immortal Thoughts: Late Style in a Time of Plague* (Thames & Hudson, £14.99), each of Neve's 18 short meditations on the late work of great painters, with a footnote on El Greco, is interspersed with a commentary on a supposed plague that is paralysing the world.

It reads like an old man's book, though I hope it will not be this author's last. Neve was born in 1942, and therefore is still almost youthful in comparison to Eyton, but he clearly felt the shadow of death in writing this book. This is deeply appropriate to his theme, the late, unconstrained art made by painters in their last years. The book contains a couple of deathbed narratives, and the fact that these are convincing shows the degree to which Neve identifies with his subjects. But it also demonstrates that his art historical discourse, in its concerted attempt to capture the truth of art, has strayed into the realm of fiction.

Nothing wrong with that – any strategy is legitimate in the pursuit of artistic truth, but it does cast his book into another light, even another category. How can it best be described? Fiction, faction, a new hybrid? That Neve is indisputably drawn to fiction writing is evidenced by his little-known book *Doubles*, an abstruse novel he published in 2015. In *Immortal Thoughts*, the all-knowing authorial stance (the fiction writer's prerogative) grates occasionally. Does Neve really know these artists so well, does he understand them so completely?

Neve defines late style as 'that odd compound of thought beyond reason, when, in painting, the constraints of patronage, sharp eyesight and public approval are left behind. Part death, part memory, part intuition. A way of working that transcends technique and sets no store by the ability to finish. A willingness to take risks, to chance the arm. The urgent need to leave behind terms of reference and get to the heart of the matter without breaking off to explain.'

I have been interested in old age style for some years, partly through the close observation of artists who became my friends in their later years. I began my career helping the veteran surrealist Eileen Agar to write her autobiography, and since then I have frequently watched the development or breakdown of an artist's style over their last decades. I say 'breakdown' advisedly because not all artists achieve a late style, but instead repeat an



Brouse & Darby ©

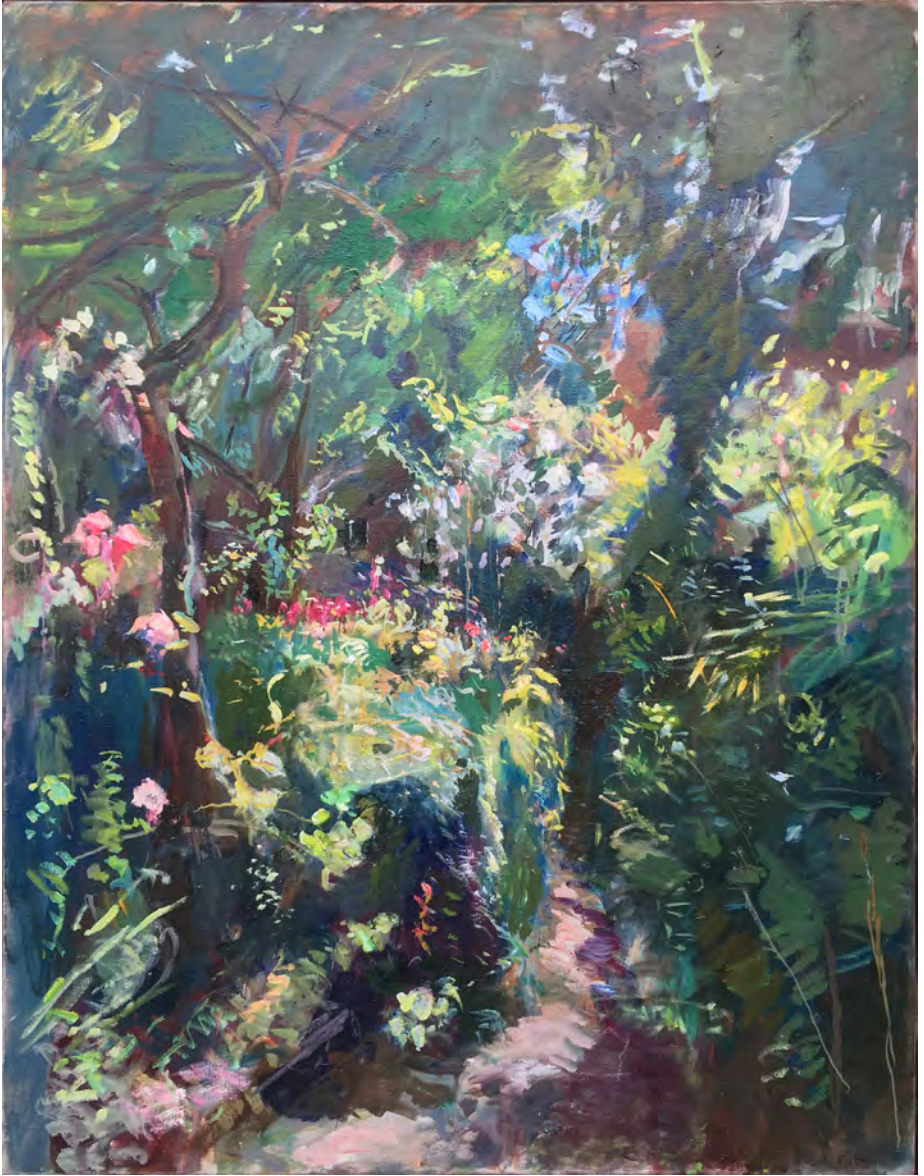
*Anthony Eyton, High Level Bridge, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 1953. Oil on board, 67 x 73 cm*



Brouse & Darby ©

*Anthony Eyton, Collapsed Shelf III, 2019. Oil on canvas, 90 x 100.5 cm*



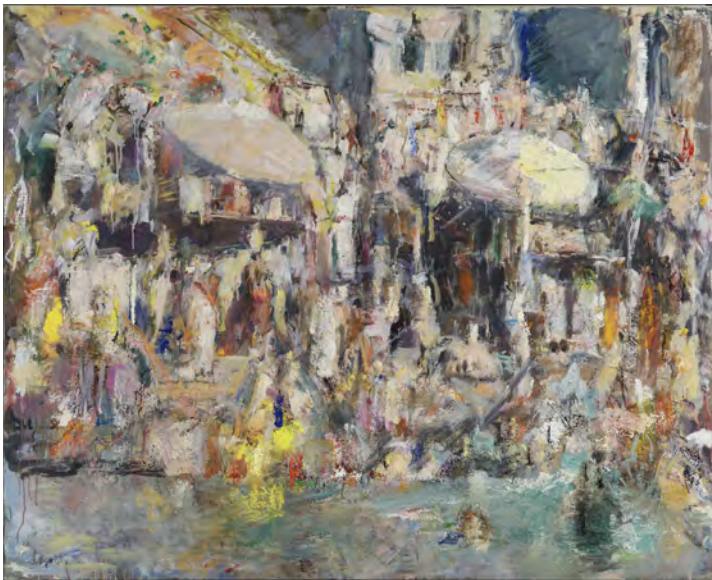


*Anthony Eyton, Brixton Garden, 2000. Oil on canvas, 115 x 117.5 cm*



Brouse & Darby ©

*Anthony Eyton, The Forum, Rome, 1951. Oil on canvas, 24.5 x 30.5 cm*



Art Space Gallery ©

*Anthony Eyton, Varanasi (Two Umbrellas), 2023. Oil on canvas, 130 x 162 cm*



Brouse & Darby ©

*Anthony Eyton, Mirror, Fireplace and Chair, 2019. Oil on board, 153 x 113 cm*

earlier formulation with decreasing skill. That is depressing. But those artists who continue to go on breaking new ground with risk and relish are a joy to witness. I'm thinking here of Gillian Ayres, Jeffery Camp, Roger Hilton, John Hoyland and especially Anthony Eyton. I didn't know Hilton, but for the others I can speak from first-hand experience. Delacroix said that only in old age does the artist become the painter he should have been all along.

In 2013 Eyton admitted he still followed the rules. Only now is he moving into old age style, when anything goes. But he is still sticking up a brush and measuring things by eye, and working out the uprights against the horizontals. He probably always will. He still gets hooked on nature, seeing the same subject differently each time he looks, and trying to resolve that superfluity into a single potent image. He doesn't have a technique, a painting develops out of what he's looking at, it's a conversation with nature. Although his natural pace is fast, and he loves beginnings, he then subjects each painting to a process of continual revision that may last for years as he re-states an image until it feels entirely right. He has up to 10 pictures on the go at once so he can move from one to another and not grow stale.

A recent and thoroughly impressive series of portraits of chairs returns us for a moment to his studentship at Camberwell where Eyton recalls that one five-minute period spent with the artist John Dodgson looking at an ordinary wooden chair was the most enlightening teaching he ever received. For the first time, Eyton was encouraged to see a chair as a complex of spaces and volumes, to register its weight and structure and how it displaces air. His late paintings of chairs, like his portraits of stairwell and banisters, are superb evocations of place and object, as well as formal marvels of free painting.

Eyton is a great painter of crowds: group scenes, figures in environments, whether skiing, on the beach, by the Ganges or in Brixton Market. These studio pictures alternate with those painted directly from nature, balancing and enriching each other. As Eyton himself says: 'It seems that one emancipates the other.' However much these paintings are based on direct observation, other elements will be involved. In the big beach pictures, he is just as likely to incorporate a figure from Michelangelo or a girl seen in a

London street. In Michael Richardson's film *Eyton* talks about wanting to make a vibrant new painting of Varanasi more like a banner than an easel painting, fresh and confrontational. It is one of the stars of the Art Space exhibition.

At Stowe School in Buckinghamshire there is another display of Anthony Eyton's work. The school was founded in 1923, thus attaining its centenary at the same time as Eyton, so an exhibition celebrating man and institution is doubly appropriate. Eyton has been a kind of sporadic artist-in-residence there for a number of years now, at least since 2014, working on paintings of the famous interior (such as the Marble Hall) and equally splendid grounds (the Palladian Bridge and Elysian Fields). Stowe, with its exquisite 18th century house and gardens, makes a compelling subject, and Eyton is by no means the first artist of distinction to work there. John Piper, for instance, drew regularly at Stowe for over half a century, also making watercolours and prints of it. Eyton shares some of the romantic bravura of Piper's vision, but has his own interests in landscape and architectural form, in the fall of light and the play of paint.

Let me leave you with some more of Humphrey Ocean's thoughts about his friend Anthony Eyton: 'Precision is the word. His reds, ochres and coal blacks, full of thought, come to rest just so. I am quite sure they do not always land right first throw, but painting or drawing, you see the history of the thing, a conflict, winding backwards, how he got there. His exactness is not a mathematician's.

'I imagine Tony working in much the same way as I think of Houdini, wrapped in chains, locked in a sealed drum and dropped in the river where the whole thing sinks. Long after we on the bank have run out of breath, either an empty drum or a painting bobs to the surface, glinting in the light, Tony nowhere to be seen of course. He is half a mile away already, if not a hundred.'

Poetry by Alice Frecknall, Elisa Colombo, Róisín Tierney,  
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