TERRY GIFFORD

The Way Down

Julian Cooper's 'Lines of Descent' Exhibition

'… a vibrant winter warmth at a cold tarn corner, a crossroads, a descending coffin route, a human battlefield with the conditions, a bloodied beauty beyond the postcards'. Julian Cooper's 'Winter Sun, High Nook'.
(All images courtesy of Julian Cooper)

Julian Cooper has always sought to be innovative in extending the tradition of Lake District landscape painting that he inherited in a line of descent from his father and grandfather, William and Alfred Heaton Cooper. In doing so he has made original contributions to the British tradition and none more strikingly innovative than his recent 'Lines of Descent' exhibition at his loyal London dealer's Art Space Gallery. As I write, this show is still ongoing, but already it has been almost a complete sell-out. So what is it about 'Lines of Descent' that been so distinctively striking?

At an AC talk in Bristol last February John Porter showed a picture of himself aged 11 years old on his first summit where he was struck by a vision that was new to him. 'Suddenly the earth is beneath you,' he said. This may seem obvious. We all know that revelatory feeling when we turn around on a summit. It's a commonplace experience for all hill-goers. But John invested it with an internalised profundity: 'Climbing takes us to a place we've never been to before, beyond our everyday experience.' That place is looking down.

'Barn Ghyll', revealing 'every sheep-trodden little terrace betrays the imprint of human culture, never mind that pathetic straight-line fence, a kind of residue of attempted colonisation of wild fell …'.

So why have painters not looked down, as well as upwards or outwards? Why has the inwardness of looking down not been explored in paint on canvas, the ancient art of making marks that make us question what we see when we look down, 'drilling down', as it were, in self-discovery?

Cooper's 1998 work 'Brenva Face, Mont Blanc'. Cutting out the summit suddenly 'released all this energy'.

We all know that our lines of descent are often our most dangerous. Accidents can happen on the way down when tired and, relieved, we are often rushing against darkness, not paying sufficient attention. And that's the point that these paintings make. They are not necessarily views from the summit, but moments of pause, of attention, on lines of descent. It's not that they do not need horizons, it's that horizons distract and detract, tempting thoughts of future lines of ascent. It's about the density of landscape to be revealed without horizons – a different kind of grandeur and grace and stark reality without horizon.

What exactly is going on beneath us, down there in those lines of deep-cut ravines, sinuous brackened slopes, raw rolling screes, walled plots of ancient economies, clustered barns of family farms, rocky roads of former commerce, sawing streams to unfathomable tarns? What is flat and what has depth? How do we read what we see? What do these colours really conjure of the changes through the long past? What inherited quality of animal husbandry is still held by that figure on the quadbike? What does a quadbike's shape and colour, its sound and smell, say at the base of this almost overwhelmingly descending landscape? Is it a dramatic mechanical contrast or is it humble human adaption? Is it subsidised sheepwrecking of the land, or georgic continuity with the land? The paintings of 'Lines of Descent' challenge the viewer with question after question. They also offer, perhaps, a new kind of beauty

For his latest exhibition, Julian Cooper made sculptures, following the practice of his mother, Ophelia Gordon Bell.

and celebration in a landscape we thought we knew and with which we have become overfamiliar, not least from the prints of the Heaton Cooper Studio.

There's a map in the catalogue of this exhibition showing the locations of some of these paintings which were all made within a 20-mile radius of Cooper's home in Cockermouth, often, he says, 'when walking at mid-height on the fells'. So these are Anthropocene paintings that radically re-orientate the focus of our attention to our home. Over more than four decades Cooper has carried his canvasses and yard-long brushes through the Alps, Andes, Tasmania and the Himalaya, always examining the intersection of nature and culture, not always explicitly, as in quarrying in Peru and Tasmania, the marble of Carrara in Italy and Little Langdale, but often in the cultural meaning of mountains such as Kailas or the Eigerwand. So, partly a reflection of Covid-19 travel restrictions and a growing reluctance for long-haul flights, these paintings rediscover the same big questions present in Cooper's backyard. And look, those questions, seen from mid height, are asked by

lines of descent, lines of colour and form, vegetation and scree, water and walls, tracks and mine-tailings, to be interpreted by the painter, as he puts it, 'stretched by the demands of the subject'.

In his catalogue essay Robert Macfarlane is right to identify as a key to Cooper's being stretched, as a painter, by his subject, the moment when he first reduced and then abandoned a skyline. The painter explained to Macfarlane that in the painting 'Brenva Face, Mont Blanc' (1998) cutting out the summit suddenly 'released all this energy'. It must have been as though all the cultural clutter of what Mont Blanc's summit meant evaporated to offer an insight into the real dynamics at work in the forms and shades of the living mountain. When Ruskin had first looked up at this mountain he found himself 'associating fraternally with some ants'. When Cooper looked inwards he was challenged by the new 'demands of the subject'. He discovered that 'a concentration of dynamics comes from closing the landscape.' It is perhaps misleading to go on, as Macfarlane does, to call the paintings in this exhibition 'closed landscapes', for although the frame encloses a complex of past and present, historical human land-use and current reshaping by water and weather, these paintings rather open up new visions that result from, and answer to, the Anthropocene.

None more so than the miracle that was always there in 'Winter Sun, High Nook', but which it takes this painter to show us. It is a vibrant winter warmth at a cold tarn corner, a crossroads, a descending coffin route, a human battlefield with the conditions, a bloodied beauty beyond the postcards. In many of these paintings the lines of walls delineate the edge of a hard-won battle with bracken and ask the question Robert Macfarlane posed in conversation at the opening, 'What is a field?' Lines in the green indicate hay-cutting in 'Gatesgarth', where the eye is drawn from the thin road just in the bottom of the picture towards the lines of structure at the isolated farm, but also onwards into the sunlit slope beyond. Here an ancient wall cuts across lines of vegetation that are the same on either side of it as though the battle has long been relinquished as it has in the water-holding bog to the right of the farm. Vertical lines of a few trees offer pathetic shelter to the farm. And yet the mowed lines in that singing green, taking up the lower half of the painting, lead the eye past the farm to wild sunlit slopes and the tone of the painting is actually more celebration of nature than desperate farming culture. 'What is a field?': here, indeed. This question is asked more starkly in 'Rannerdale Field' where deep-cut becks, descending between rock outcrops, seem to threaten the thin green horizontal and vulnerable field. The huge scale of this work (275cm × 137cm) suggests what is at stake for both the farmer and the painter. It is priced at £20,000.

There is a moment of tenderness as a farmer, Dave Allen (Cooper got to know all of his subjects), leans from his quadbike to feed milk to a calf in 'Above High Nook'. But this large vertical painting is dominated by the dark fall of rocky, eroded fellside above. The red plastic bowl on the front of his bike, no less than the light on the flanks of the sucking calf, all seem about to be overwhelmed by the conditions in which, as Ted Hughes put it

in 'Crow Hill', 'Between the weather and the rock / Farmers make a little heat.' On the other hand, a girl dives in daring descent from a waterfall into a rock-backed pool in 'Deep Pool 1'. She is at home here, open-eyed, spearing deep, past water-worn rock that, by contrast, is seen rough and lit above. We are now familiar with water surface level photography and Cooper is here using the work of Robert Macfarlane's father John work in making this striking image, again on a large scale (214cm × 132cm). Indeed, the lake level painting 'Across the Lake 1' requires the same close attention that the painter is making to see, at its far right end, a wild swimmer with small red buoy, lost in a vast horizontal landscape of falling scree and cold, still lake water. The viewer's discovery is literally breathtaking.

Less successful, perhaps, are the small, close studies of eroding banks in 'High Nook Beck 3' where the thick brushstrokes overwhelm and blur differentiations within the painting. The subject is, of course, an important one and the dynamics at work between water and soil, grasses and rocks, farming and land are what this show is all about. But the technique better suits a larger scale like 'Coledale Beck', or the brilliant 'Barn Ghyll'. This painting looks into the black depths of a golden fellside being cut deeper still by a series of silver waterfalls. Its jagged edges are rock teeth as it makes a savage vertical smile. Along its left side is one of those timeless fences that feign control and up its right flank is the zigzagging echo of a feint path. Here, human primacy is diminished by more ancient forces still in full flow. It repays close attention and distanced reflection. Each brushstroke denotes a distinctive rock or patch of grass or moss. It is still in wild, unstoppable evolution, like the Anthropocene. And, like the Anthropocene, every sheep-trodden little terrace betrays the imprint of human culture, never mind that pathetic straight-line fence, a kind of residue of attempted colonisation of wild fell, which continues now in contested overgrazing.

Finally, there are three painted plaster sculptures: 'High Rigg', 'Langstrath Rock 1' and 'Langstrath Rock 2'. These are both a new departure and an obvious continuity, not least with Cooper's long interest from his sculptor mother, Ophelia Gordon Bell. Certainly these look like replicas, such that Sheffield climbers might make in their cellars of challenges they need to overcome outdoors. But they are not. They are creative responses to the close study of rock textures and formations, the ultimate distillation of gravity's work upon the medium through water, frost and heat that invite human contact with fingers and toes. Their power is immediate – tactile and visual – but hard to explain. As artworks they are staggeringly beautiful, yet hard and resistant: seductively ochre in mineral leakage, yet chillingly silver in thrusting challenge to the viewer. Ever innovative, Julian Cooper says that there is more to come in this mode, once again stretching to the demands of his subject. Printed opposite is a creative response to 'Lines of Descent' in a different mode.

• Julian Cooper's 'Lines of Descent' Exhibition was at the Art Space Gallery, London, 17 March – 29 April, 2023.

Reading the Hills Downwards: 'Winter Sun, High Nook'

I found my eye had not been trained to view [from] so prodigious an height.
Charles P Moritz, 1782.

Do not, any more, lift your eyes to the hills.
Lift your boots to the hills and then turn
to see your ancestors' labours, and your
neighbours' work now, for your food,
in the hayfields below, the sheep trods,
the walls, the tracks, in the buzzing heather,
the bracken, the enclosed woods, water-
powered gullies, the trout tarn sleeping
beyond watercressed fringes, deer-lapped.

Each change of colour and tone tells
a story of three thousand years continuous
human husbandry and fallow – letting go –
for generations of family hill-farming ideas
trying for something slightly different over
the same familiar ground. Father and son

clashed, wives and daughters dared to opine
before the hearth into the candled dark.
Look down. See their debates alive now.

Terry Gifford