

bernard jacobson gallery

Robyn Denny Works on Paper

11th October – 16th November 2019

‘No painting should reveal all it has to say as a kind of instant impact. Abstract painting... should be as diverse, and complex, and strange, and unaccountable, and unnameable as an experience, as any painting of any consequence has been in the past’.

- *Robyn Denny, ISIS art journal interview, 1964*

Bernard Jacobson Gallery is delighted to present an exhibition of works on paper by the celebrated British artist Robyn Denny, one of the most original and significant painters of the post-war era and the youngest ever to be given a retrospective at the Tate (1973). This exhibition is an opportunity to discover this rarely seen aspect of Denny’s practice, spanning his entire working career and featuring more than 30 works on paper, including many exhibited for the first time.

Created in 1954, the earliest works in this exhibition predate Denny’s graduation from the RCA and emergence as one of the leading lights of the ‘New Generation’ of British artists which included Peter Blake, David Hockney, Bridget Riley and Richard Smith. From the beginning, his work was uncompromisingly abstract, bold and sophisticated, acknowledging the new American abstract expressionism of artists such as Frans Kline and Robert Motherwell but also suggesting the muted palette of Braque.

Denny’s seminal 1958 mural, *Great, Big, Biggest, Wide London* – created for the Austin Reed store and represented here by a collage maquette – irresistibly communicates a sense of gears shifting towards the engine of change that was the ‘Swinging Sixties’. This iconic mural, with its huge scale and bold red, white and blue typography, helped define the visual grammar of the time – even appearing in one of the first London photo-shoots for the Beatles.

The Sixties for Denny were a whirl of international exhibitions, including the ground-breaking ‘Situation’ at the RBA Galleries (1960), an invitation to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1966, as well as a host of shows with the leading commercial galleries at the forefront of the ‘new wave’, including Waddington, Tooth and Kasmin galleries. For an artist whose work was notable for its huge scale and sometimes vibrant colour during this period, it’s intriguing to encounter the intimacy, calligraphic brushwork and delicate muted palette of these works on

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paper, combined with forms suggestive of the doors or portals which were to become Denny's 'signature'.

Exploring modes of perception, these utterly urban, shifting, interlocking and architecturally-inspired forms pervade both Denny's large-scale canvases and his smaller-scale works on paper during the 70s. They lead us in and capture us with their voluptuous but subtle use of colour contrasts and simple yet complex mastery of space and form. Sometimes they also surprise us with a dash of extravagance, like the playful use of shining silver card which contrasts to gorgeous effect with the muted mist-blue and fog-pink of *Silver* (1973).

The 1980s saw another shift in Denny's practice, prompted by his move in 1983 to the artist community of LA's Venice Beach. Inspired by his fog-filtered view of the LA sky, we see a transition to the quietly gestural, stippled, ripe and dusky paintings which prompted the art historian David Alan Mellor's description of him as an 'abstract Turner'.

Denny returned to London in the 1990s, setting up a huge studio in Southwark where he was to create a suite of enigmatic works on paper collectively titled *Moody Blues*. Where the paintings of the 60s and 70s were expansive – suggestive of a world of infinite space and volume – these paintings appear almost secretive in the intimate and contracting world they hint at.

The final works in this exhibition, created in the last decade of Denny's life, surprise and satisfy in equal measure with their adoption of organic forms suggestive of flowers and rocks, demonstrating an artist still at the height of his inventive and creative powers. Collectively titled *The Private Pictures/Fully Frontal*, they are as sensual and beguiling as their name suggests, whilst the *25* series conjures the irregular solidity and hard mass of geological formations.

Examining the achievements of an artist through the chronology of his life and work can go some way to explain the importance and meaning of his work – but not all. Some truly great artists manage to transcend time and fashion. As the art critic Matthew Collings explains, 'These paintings don't have to be explained in terms of the meanings that seemed exciting... when they were done. They're good enough without them. In fact, they don't really have to be explained at all but just celebrated. It's amazing to have such a gift of precision and freedom, of economical means and dazzling enjoyable richness.'

Sometimes Denny has been described as an overlooked artist, and whilst that might be true in the shallow and immediate world of the contemporary art market, it shouldn't blind us to the deeper truth of an artist of rare intellectual enquiry and conviction, maintained throughout his

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long and successful life as an artist. His first wife, the artist Anna Teasdale, encapsulated this fundamental truth in an interview given to the Telegraph in 2018: “He stayed true to that absolute belief in the abstract. It was like a light: once he had found it, he carried it around forever.”

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