

Colin Watson
The Presence

13 – 29 September 2017

John Martin Gallery

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Boys Playing on a Cliff Top, 2016, oil on canvas, 101 x 140 cm, 40 x 55 ins
Awarded the Gold Medal, Royal Ulster Academy, 2016

The Presence

PRESENT, ever-present presence,
Never have you not been
Here and now in every now and here,
And still you bring
From your treasury of colour, of light,
Of scents, of notes, the evening blackbird's song,
How clear among the green and fragrant leaves,
As in childhood always new, anew.
My hand that writes is ageing, but I too
Repeat only and again
The one human song, from memory
Of a joy, a mode
Not I but the music knows
That forms, informs us, utters with our voices
Concord of heaven and earth, of high and low, who are
That music of the spheres Pythagoras heard.
I, living, utter as the blackbird
In ignorance of what it tells, the undying voice.

Kathleen Raine, 1987



The Field, 2017
oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cm, 40 x 55 ins



Landscape with Two Figures by a Lake, 2017
oil on canvas, 122 x 152 cm, 48 x 60 ins



Girls on a Hill, 2017
oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cm, 36 x 48 ins



Injured Swan, 2017
oil on canvas, 101 x 140 cm, 40 x 55 ins



The Bay, 2017
oil on panel, 91 x 122 cm, 36 x 48 ins





Twilight, 2017 (and study, previous page)
oil on panel, 91 x 122 cm, 36 x 48 ins





The Dog, 2017 (and study, previous page)
oil on panel, 76 x 76 cm, 30 x 30 ins

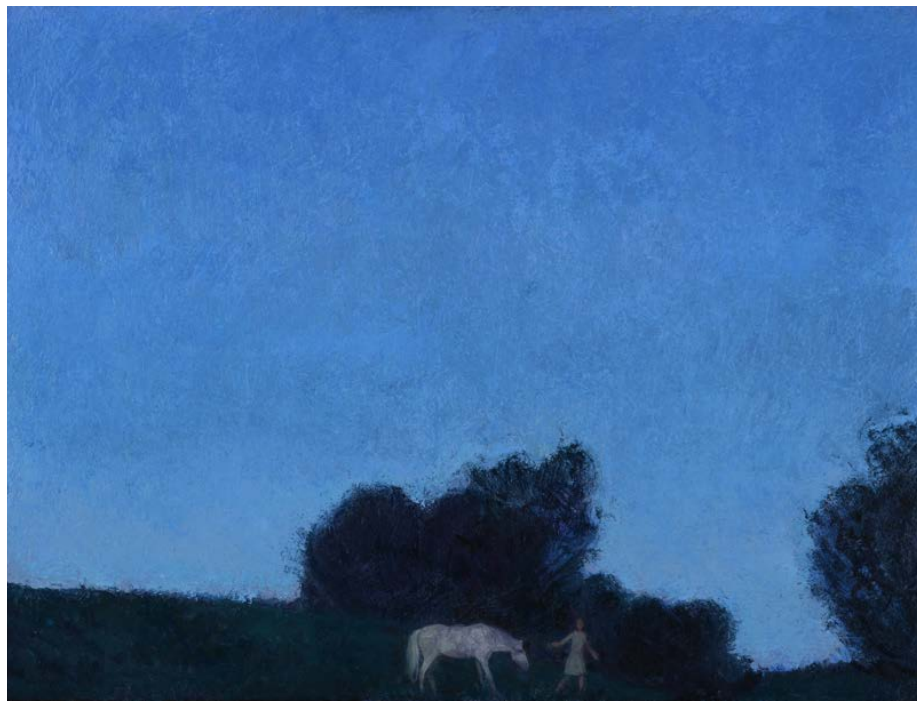




The Ocean, 2017 (and study, previous page))
oil on panel, 51 x 61 cm, 20 x 24 ins



Landscape with Two Figures and a Dog, 2017
oil on panel, 30.5 x 40.5 cm, 12 x 16 ins



Twilight, Girl Leading a Horse, 2017
oil on canvas, 30.5 x 40.5 cm, 12 x 16 ins



Two Figures on a Hillside, 2017
oil on panel, 30.5 x 40.5 cm, 12 x 16 ins



The Clearing, 2017
oil on panel, 30 x 30 cm, 12 x 12 ins



Horse and Rider, 2017
oil on panel, 30.5 x 30.5 cm, 12 x 12 ins



Dance on a Hillside, 2017
oil on panel, 30.5 x 40.5 cm, 12 x 16 ins

Colin Watson's paintings are quietly subversive. Despite the viewer's expectation that human interaction might suggest a narrative or that a landscape could allude to a particular place they remain deliberately un-literal. These canvases mediate between the artist and the viewer, and ultimately between the viewer and their own experience of the world. They set the scope of human experience, in its emotional, physical and psychological range, in the context of a natural world that is an expression of the intangible and indefinable Presence of the exhibition's title and also of the Kathleen Raine poem printed here.

Watson closes us off from any sense of an explanatory narrative and the resolution that might emerge from this. He depicts what Cecil Collins called "an incomprehensible image of life", that acknowledges the impossibility of explanation while uncovering meaning within our existence and environment, meaning that builds towards an apprehension of what is unknowable. The significance of the single figures and groups who play out a series of dramas is clear from the drawings shown here, in which, isolated from their surroundings, the powerfully expressive formal arrangements become even more dynamic.

These lines and forms are both continued and softened as they extend into the surrounding environment, into landscapes which become the meeting-point at which we begin to transcend our own experience, becoming conscious of something beyond our understanding. The abstract arrangements and relationships within each work are as important to an understanding of it as are any specific definitions of place, person or activity; the organisation of the composition makes it clear that the landscape is as significant as anything happening within it. It is difficult not to be engaged by these paintings. A reaction might be initiated by something familiar, however elusive; suggestions of memories evoked by these vast landscapes, recollections of certain people, events that we witnessed or in which we were involved. Watson's figures, lakes, forests and mountains are, however, mythical as much as personal, and their meaning for us is defined by other associations as much as by our own experience. These could be Titian's Diana and Actaeon, or Bacchus and Ariadne, as much as any figures from our own world. The heightened recollection of experience is enriched by Watson's use of colour, achieving an elusive intensity that only exists in memory or imagination.

But beyond this there is another, more universal reaction, that is to the intimations of peace, monumentality, harmony and permanence that are conveyed within Watson's landscapes and, above all, in the skies, the dominating element within these works, which most completely contain the Presence that the artist seeks, their expansive, unchanging certainty counterbalancing human activity.

Colin Watson creates tension in this balancing dialectic, between a world understood on human terms and one shaped by an unchanging and inexpressible force. These images transform our understanding of our environment. A shadow cast on a hillside seems at first unnatural, then makes us aware of how symbolic a presence landscape can be in our lives. This sense of harmonious visual and structural connections between figure and landscape reveals Watson's enduring interest in Poussin and recalls Kathleen Raine's "Concord of heaven and earth, of high and low" .

It is not necessarily useful to position an artist within a group of influences, but it is clear that Colin Watson's engagement with a broad range of creative traditions across cultures and periods is as much indicative of an understanding of the significant and continually challenging role of the artist as it is of the influence of particular styles.

Watson asserts that art is one of the most appropriate tools we have to understand that there are deep spiritual implications contained within the material world. These are paintings that provide an experience for the viewer that is both powerful and subtle, complex yet continually revealing. They are ultimately about ambiguity and mystery, avoiding the need for interpretation. It is contradictory but inescapable that the only way we can express the intangible that lies behind this life is to paint the life we experience.

Dickon Hall, 2017



White Horse, 2017
oil on panel, 30.5 x 40.5 cm, 12 x 16 ins

Colin Watson lives and works in Belfast. He has held seven solo exhibitions in London, at John Martin Gallery, the Pym's Gallery and at Simon Dickinson Fine Art, as well as in Dublin, Northern Ireland and Morocco. In October 2008, Colin was invited by HRH The Prince of Wales to accompany him on the Royal Tour of Japan, Brunei and Indonesia, as his official Tour Artist.

Colin Watson has exhibited at the Royal Academy in London, the Royal Ulster Academy and the Royal Hibernian Academy, winning awards at the latter two. He was also awarded the Ireland Fund of Great Britain Annual Arts Award in 1999. His work has been included in the BP Portrait Prize Exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, The Royal Society of Portrait Painters annual exhibitions and at the Discerning Eye at the Mall Galleries in London.

Colin Watson's work is held in collections worldwide, including the Royal Collection and those of HRH Prince of Wales, HRH Duchess of Cornwall, the King of Morocco. He is also represented in a number of public collections, including the Ulster Museum, the Arts Council for Northern Ireland, the National Self-Portrait Collection of Ireland, Limerick and the Royal Geographical Society, London with a portrait of Sir Wilfred Thesiger, the British explorer and travel writer.



The Parting Light, 2017
oil on panel, 25 x 30.5 cm, 9¾ x 12 ins

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The Presence by Kathleen Raine, 1987
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