

THE HISTORY ROOM
Paintings by Charlotte Moore

The background of the top half of the page is a painting of a gallery wall. The wall is a deep red color. On the left, there are three small framed pictures. In the center, there are two tall, slender vases. Between the vases is a larger framed picture showing a scene with a yellow surface and some figures. On the right, there is a doorway with a dark silhouette of a person standing in it, and another small framed picture to its right.

THE HISTORY ROOM

Paintings by Charlotte Moore

Internet Edition

Edited by Charles F. Ryder

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Front and back page illustrations:
Florentine Pair, 2001. Oil on canvas.



Postcard, Charlotte Moore studio
Drawing, People in Prospect,
Holburne Museum of Art, Bath, 2001
Monoprint after Velasquez, 2001

Preface

This exhibition celebrates Charlotte Moore's return to England after her 10-year sojourn in Australia. England's loss was Australia's gain, for Moore taught and exhibited widely while in the antipodes. I invited Moore to exhibit at the Stanley Picker Gallery virtually on first sight of her elegant paintings, which are rich in painterly values and visual sophistication.

An encounter with Charlotte Moore's history room will appeal to anyone interested in painting, and especially to those who learned about culture in museums and galleries. In an era when it could be said that 'photography has won', her paintings assert the quiet dignity of traditional art practice. The first impression is of material beauty, of the sensuousness of the studio, of canvas, oil, brushes, the palette. The second impression is of intellectual coherence: Moore's paintings are a testament to her knowledge and appreciation not only of Western painting, but also of the deep underlying currents of classical and world cultures. She knows about making and about history, so her work has both integrity and narrative purpose. The light in the history room is both limpid and analytical.

The Guardian newspaper recently published in its Saturday review section a series of essays on 'difficult' art forms: sound, installation, minimalism. Painting too is a 'difficult' art. To meet the challenge of writing about paintings – their meanings, pictorial values, and intentions – we decided to construct this catalogue as an exchange of correspondence. The writers are Chris Jennings, Charlotte Moore, Charles Ryder, and Jacqueline Thomas. It is right and proper that most of the ideas are Moore's: like the painter Howard Hodgkin (whose work she admires), Moore can now add aesthetic discourse to her skills as an artist.

Charles Ryder
Curator, Stanley Picker Gallery
Kingston upon Thames, December 2001



Introduction

A huge tattered black and white reproduction of Ucello's Battle of San Romano has always had a place on Charlotte Moore's studio wall. To her the special appeal of this fifteenth century painting is Ucello's extraordinary effort to make his figures and horses move in space, and the sense that his subjects will ultimately come to life. This element of anticipation, the stillness of a stage set before the play begins, is often reflected in Moore's work.



She explains that her paintings are not 'reality' in the sense of still lives or landscapes, but representations of reality, in which the painter herself acts as an intermediary. Examples of this concept appeared in many of her early still life paintings in which she determined the subject matter by creating all the components herself. When she wanted to make paintings of earthenware jars or draped cloth, she first made the jars and dyed the cloth. Through this method she maintained her role as intermediary and avoided what she calls the 'dusty bottle' genre. Having been created to be included in still life and related compositions, her painterly objects were temporarily dynamic, painted in a particular moment of time, rather than permanent and still.

This desire to somehow 'be there' is an implicit concept in much of her work, and one of the major reasons why she so often used stagecraft to produce the reflections and illusions in her paintings. She began by experimenting with the light, shadow and reflection of open windows, looking both outwards and inwards at her subjects with the intention of confusing the real and the reflected figure.

She found that the distortion of images through glass, and the use of mirrors as a powerful illusory device, allowed her the freedom to stage-manage her subject matter. She often inserted her own image in the background, first to show that the painter herself was not an illusion, and second to provide a reference point from which the composition might be understood.

Although in later works her own pictorial presence became superfluous, she has continued in her belief in the pre-eminence of the artist and his palette, most clearly articulated in her recent series of paintings, Velasquez's Palette. In this set, each of the five paintings focuses more closely on the artist's palette until it is the only subject which dominates the final canvas.

Moore has always been curious about the ambiguity between subject and viewer, and amused by the reciprocal stare in the context of the zoo, the museum or the figurative painting.

Museum displays in particular have provided the background inspiration for much of her work, her interest lying not only in the objects themselves, but also in the way in which they are displayed. She reflects on the intensity of concentration required to focus on the world inside the case, the idea of a window into another domain. It is that undefined area between the real object and the unreal context which proves the most essential characteristic of her work.

JT November 2001

Above, Charlotte Moore, ca. 1984.
Right, Reflection, acrylic on paper, ca. 1985.





Dear Charles

I'm looking forward to exhibiting at the Stanley Picker Gallery in December. I wonder what initially attracted and interested you when you first saw my paintings in the summer of 1999?

Charlotte, 12 January 2001

Hot like a summer day but, cool like a museum . . .

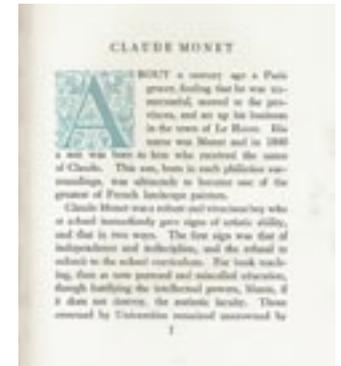
Dear Charlotte

I am astonished that we first went to see your studio as long ago as 1999. It seems like yesterday, so fresh are my memories of the day. We took the train from Waterloo East to Forest Hill, not far from the Horniman Museum, where you find strange things in strange rooms. I once went there for an interview, then again to lecture on installation mountmaking for fragile objects. It reminded me of the Museum of Natural History in New York, not as it is now, but as it was in about 1960 when I visited as a boy on my own.

As we crossed Devonshire Road the heat of the earth-breaking sun rose from the streets and pursued us down the alleyway. I remember the colour green, or anyway black-like-green, and a narrow stair. Arriving in your studio, I knew at once that it was a place as an accident in time, a place for working so soon after Australia. Hot like a summer day, but cool like a museum. That's because of your paintings. Literate, knowledgeable, beautifully made. I liked the surface of your paintings, the record of the work, the intention, the marks, the happy mistakes. Your understated comprehension of art history is a real plus.

I found an obscure and wonderful monograph on Monet at a Winchester antiquarian bookshop last weekend. Written by someone called Xenia Lathom and published by Philip Allan in London in 1931. I must show it to you: 24 duotone illustrations and an essay of charming interwar innocence and fragile polemic. In the Preface Lathom says that there are few books in English on Monet (can you imagine?), and that another is justified. She has "written this one with certain very definite views on the nature of Art." Later she sketches out the close friendship between Monet and Manet, citing one good-natured outburst by Manet: "Dash it! The fellow starts by stealing my name and then goes on to steal my pictures."

More soon,
Charles, 31 January 2001



Damaged in storms and battles . . .

Dear Charles

It gives me great pleasure to know that you immediately recognized my commitment to painting and that you responded enthusiastically to the work.

Like you, as a child, I enjoyed museums. From the age of eleven or twelve, at least one day of every weekend was spent in the National Gallery or the British Museum. In the National Gallery I used to wait patiently in the room with the Renoir 'La Loge' painting until a moment when the room was empty and kiss the painting, I must have done it for several months. I'm not particularly taken with Renoir now but it is a wonderful painting. What a strange child, and to think how the National Gallery has changed. I loved the quietness of those empty galleries, knowing little but absorbing so much.

The British Museum, before the ethnography department moved to Piccadilly, was an endless source of fascination. I had phases of being attracted to one section then another, in particular Javanese masks, Chinese books and Inuit bone carvings. I remember so distinctly as a child poring over cabinets of tiny bone carvings and feeling that these precious artefacts would be grateful for my interest. I always bought the postcards so that I could own a little bit of what I had seen and I still do when I go to galleries and travel abroad.

I am describing my fascination with museums to explain why my paintings are as they are. They are based on museums, books, paintings and buildings. I love the idea of 're-seeing' something and giving it a new reality according to my personal response. I suppose my work is as much about the act of painting as the original source material but the source is the essence of all that interests me.



Book Painting, 1986.

I am working on a series of paintings of stained glass windows based on the chapel at Farleigh Hungerford Castle. The windows have been damaged in storms and battles and reconstructed in a delightfully random and asymmetric way, vignettes of various periods and styles. It is like an imagined space, a dreamed museum hanging in the air.

I like the connection of present and past, the connection of artist to subject, and quite as much the connection of artist to artist whether it be historical or contemporary. The closeness of Manet and Monet and the coincidence of them being contemporaries with all that these two great artists initiated is a perfect example.

Best wishes
Charlotte, 3 February 2001

People in Prospect . . .

Dear Charles

There is a lovely exhibition at the Holburne Museum of Art in Bath. It is *Love's Prospect*, an exploration of the 18th century Marriage Portrait, featuring Gainsborough's newly restored 'The Byam Family'.

'The Byam Family' has the strangest child looking out of the picture at eye-level with the viewers. Another painting has two seated and one standing figure, when a visitor stands in front of the picture, he becomes part of the group in a most surprising and convincing way.

"People in Prospect" is myself as artist in residence at the Museum. So far I have done eight small oil paintings 4" x 6" of people looking at the paintings. The sensation is rather strange, the portraits are life size in the main, but being above floor level appear even bigger, the visitors seem very small and drab in contrast. The portraits look real and dramatic and the people insignificant, it is very theatrical, large well-lit pictures like a stage and the public the audience, which indeed they are. The surprising part is that the painted figures have so much more presence than the live people.

I'm not yet sure where this project will take me but I hope to think of a way of translating this experience. Degas and Vuillard both painted, etched and engraved delightful pictures of their friends in the Louvre.

I was most impressed by Chris Jennings' exhibition. I like the way he stretches his sensations and his intellect beyond the visual, so that his works encompass ideas, for which he nevertheless finds a visual solution. I have seen so much work where both the idea and the result are disappointing, an idea with little rigour and a result with little substance.

Best wishes
Charlotte, 6 March 2001

The Louvre

Dear Charlotte

I am sending with this note the Monet monograph "written with certain very definite views on the nature of Art". Please borrow it for as long as you like.

The book evokes the worlds of Degas and Vuillard with their friends at the Louvre that you mention in your last letter. Those people lived in a turn-of-the-century world, one that I am convinced we are seeking still to recapture. And yet we live in our own turn-of-the-century. It is a very exciting time to be alive, one that I am glad I can appreciate from the vantage point of maturity rather than youth. Back in New York in the 70s, living amongst young architects and artists and musicians I felt a similar enthusiasm for the possibilities of the era – indeed, saw the era both from within, as a participant, and from without, as a detached observer. Life was very theatrical.

Perhaps this is something of what you are doing in your paintings. I am thinking of your account of *People in Prospect*. I think most pictures in the pictorial tradition are actually stage set designs: real or imaginary or combinations of the two. From table tops to interiors to paysages. Even Poussin. Or especially Poussin. Definitely Braque and Picasso in the cubist years.

Evening is drawing in. Time for tea. More news soon. I am gearing up for a substantial treatise. Thank you on behalf of Chris Jennings for your thoughtful words on his show.

Best,
Charles, 14 March 2001



The painting *stands for* the lily pond . . .

Dear Charles,

I have recently been reading the Monet book you sent me, published in 1931. It is delightfully naive, about Bohemianism and Paris cafés, amusingly different from exclusive essays on art written by and for the cogniscenti. But what I really love about Monet are his late water lily paintings, where, finally, subject and paint gloriously fuse. I think that it is at this moment that he really becomes a great painter. Up until then the subject dominated. The Haystacks and Rouen Cathedral almost achieved this but the water lilies actually reach this perfect point.

I read an article about Howard Hodgkin at the weekend. He too, reaches this fusion of subject and paint, although his starting point is not so directly with the visual but with a visual memory which embodies an emotional moment or situation. Hodgkin's pictures include remembered things, a city, a room, a meal for instance, but the subject itself is a vehicle to carry the painting, it's about the painting itself. He says that when the painting is finished it 'replaces' the event or emotion, or in Monet's case you could say that the painting stands for the lily pond, but is not a picture of a lily pond. Hodgkin says that, 'the more people want to know the story, the less they want to look at the picture'. And of course Turner shouldn't be forgotten as a great exponent of the fusion of subject and paint.

These artists are so different from the portraits I have been looking at in the Holburne Museum of Art for the past few weeks. As you say, they are stage sets, couples posed in landscapes, where the content of the picture is all, likenesses to the sitters, real or imagined landscapes, their dogs and houses, it couldn't possibly have been allowed to happen that the subject became of less significance than the painterliness and uniqueness of the painting itself. Although in Gainsborough's last painting, 'Morning Walk' from the National Gallery, the brush marks become marks first and representational second; leaves, clouds and chiffon hover delightfully between painted marks and representation, though they do eloquently represent leaves, clouds and chiffon to perfection but not as tightly as before.



Contemplation, 2001. Oil on canvas, 133 x 158cm.

I want my paintings to reach this culmination where the fusion of subject and image is complete, where the subject becomes the painting. One might then think that abstraction would be a solution but if there is no subject to be wrestled with, a subject to be resolved into an image, then, for me, there are no paradigms, the solution is only one of paint, resolving abstract colours and shapes into a satisfactory arrangement, for me this avoids the really interesting problem of how to make a subject into a painting.

Best wishes
Charlotte, 29 March 2001

Regarding abstraction

Dear Charlotte

Thank you for your letter regarding Hodgkin, Gainsborough and the ineffable magic of painting in the immaterial world (I paraphrase . . .).

I am now beginning to see the structural outlines of this project. We have identified a number of themes: the importance of museums and galleries, the dynamics of representation and painting, the lure of abstraction, the lure of history. I think that we should examine these in more detail. But first we need to look at how your work has developed over the last twenty years. Then we can return to the thematic enquiries, perhaps inviting a couple of people to take part in the correspondence.

Later I would like to develop ideas about the space of paintings, in particular the notion of the stage set: I am convinced that in framing a subject, one establishes a plane of contemplation wherein the parts of the picture are arranged in layers with foreground, background, and atmosphere. It is not necessary to know the story to know that there is one, and a Hodgkin says, perhaps knowing the story is a hindrance to knowing the painting.

Regarding abstraction, I would appeal to Braque as the master of fusion, to Puvis whose overtly representational pictures achieve poetic lyricism far in excess of the represented subjects, and surely this must be as matter of the abstract. But these are my own favourites, and I have only an amateur's knowledge of abstraction as a technical and theoretical phenomenon.

In two weeks I will go to Kendal in Cumbria to see the Paula Rego show at Abbot Hall, then on to Edinburgh for a *rendez vous* with Richard Demarco and a chance to promote some of the Gallery's shows, including yours.

Best,
Charles, 31 May 2001

Woodlands Art Gallery announcement, 1985.

Las Meninas

Dear Charles

I am enclosing some reviews of exhibitions I had in the 1980s before I went to Australia. Re-reading them they seem surprisingly consistent with what I'm doing now. I think, even then, the paintings had a quiet self-contained feeling; they aren't narratives or pictures with attitude.

Here I think your idea of space in a painting is interesting, you're right, a picture can be like a stage set, a different and separate reality from the everyday. I find this exciting, it's not divorced from reality, not unreal, just as real but enclosed within the frame. (I can't help thinking of Velasquez's 'Las Meninas' while writing this).

It is not unlike a play or a film, which, if you're enjoying it, is totally absorbing, the reality is on the stage or screen and for the duration is the only reality, however fantastic it may be. As you say, in a painting you don't need to know the original story because the essence, ideally, is transformed into paint, which is, while you're looking at, it the most real thing, and excludes however briefly the outside world.

I'd like to hear Jackie's impressions of the Venice Biennale.
Looking forward to your replies.

Charlotte, 16 June 2001



Venetian Interlude

Dear Charlotte

I had to write and tell you that the Venice Biennale is an amazing event. The city buzzes with excitement all day and most of the night. It's very intense with everyone dashing from one opening to another, carrying mobile phones and cameras and armfuls of catalogues. Conversations are almost exclusively about which openings one has attended. I would love to return in the late summer when it's more peaceful, and have a serious look at everything.

However, I did come to a most unexpected realisation – that there is, or can be, something really exciting about video art. There were dozens of video pieces around, of which I saw only a few, but out of those there were two or three that really stood out. In these I got the sensation of almost being *inside* a picture, standing in a space and seeing the 'painting' moving all around me as though I was part of it.

For the first time I realized why artists find it so fascinating, I suppose the moving image rather than the still one is actually closer to the way our minds work. So I think I have found ways in which I can decide for myself whether I find work interesting or not, which is quite an exciting discovery. My preference is for paint on canvas, but I can now see why it's so difficult to be a painter.

On a change of subject, there was a particular piece in the Russian pavilion which I thought you would really enjoy. In the centre of the room there was a revolving glass cabinet with two or three shelves. Inside there were tiny models of all the most significant works of three dimensional art, and some architectural icons, of the 20th century. Tiny models of Picasso pieces, Giacometti, Degas, Tatlin's Tower, and lots of others. As the turntable revolved the models were projected onto the surrounding walls, so huge images appeared to sail slowly by. I thought of your interest in museums and museum displays, and how you might have found something really appealing in the moving image too.

There was also a pavilion with a central arrangement of office equipment, telephones, books, pens, paper etc. The projectors worked differently here so that when you looked around, a telephone, or an open book, might sail around the walls or over your head. It was surreal I suppose – nothing whatsoever to do with painting but amusing and skilled and imaginative.

As I write I keep thinking of other things I saw in Venice which caught my eye for some reason. One piece was simply a room being painted by two 'artists', one using black and the other white, all day long. Sometimes conceptual art is just too much effort, none of the people I saw strolling through the room actually took the time to read the lengthy artist's statement – they just looked completely bewildered.

I confess to finding it hard to eliminate aesthetics from art. I'm planning to visit the new Vermeer exhibition at the National Gallery. What could be more appealing than that to the eye? You can just stand in front of one of his paintings and try to see what was in his mind. You don't have to read about it.

See you soon
J., 26 June 2001



Leonid Sokov, Russian Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2001. Detail.

Giverny, Grenada, Madrid

Dear Jackie

I have just been reading your letter about the Venice Biennale and sensing your excitement about the variety of exhibits. Not surprisingly what most appealed to me was the Russian exhibit you described with the glass cabinet and the images revolving around the walls, I like the idea of re-affirming images that are in a way too familiar.

But perhaps this is very conservative and backward looking and one should really be finding new images and new ways of creating works of art. I know that for me painting will always be my medium but it has to remain personally relevant and contemporary, or I should say it always has to be innovative in finding new ways of expressing and exploring one's own particular and personal aesthetic. Art, whatever the media, has to do this, otherwise it is just a cliché of something else.

I went to Monet's garden at Giverny a few weeks ago, it was wonderful, exactly like the paintings, sumptuous and delicious but what amazed me was that at every point where you could recognize the viewpoint of a Monet painting, there was someone sitting on a stool at an easel doing their damndest to recreate the very thing. It was really quite bizarre.

I read a lot about contemporary art and see some, and find myself to be far too dismissive. I should have a more open mind – you allowed yourself to do this in Venice and found a lot to excite and interest you which is how it should be.

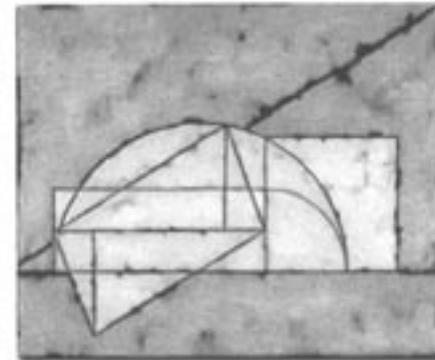
I love the description you gave of the videos on all walls giving you the sensation of being within a painting, it in motion and you in the still centre.

I am working on a painting about Madrid, on similar lines to the Granada painting, it is about the colours and formality of the city, very different in feel from the Alhambra which expresses repose, love, secrecy, poetry, all sensuous and indulgent. Madrid is quite different, it is grand, formal and regal. As always the subject is a vehicle for the painting rather than what the painting is about and for me the problem is to encompass the subject and the paint into an idiosyncratic thing which stands only for itself. Anyway I'll do it, instead of talking about it.

Charlotte, 7 July 2001

Editor's Note

The artist Chris Jennings joined the correspondence here. His commentary reflects his abiding interest in problems of abstraction, especially within the pictorial tradition. The American critic Dore Ashton, in her catalogue essay for Jennings' 2000 Picker Gallery show says, 'Having thought about Jennings' works, I saw that he has undertaken many dismantlings in order to find his own accent in a common language. He has examined, methodically, every element that can be described as inhering in the painter's art: line, depth, color, spatial determinations, surfaces. He has done this with almost scientific rigor, looking for the repeatable as a scientist does, in order to attest to his experience of art as a visual language'¹.



¹Ashton, Dore. *Scrutiny and Immanence: Selected Work by Chris Jennings*. Kingston upon Thames, 2001. Illustration: Jennings' Eight Exercises on the Notebooks of Wittgenstein, detail.

Enquiries regarding abstraction (Chris Jennings)

Dear Charlotte

It was good to speak to you the other evening and of course I would be more than happy to discuss concepts and practices of abstraction in the context of your Picker Gallery show. However, what a massive project! I am currently supervising a Ph.D student who is writing her dissertation on this very subject, so I'm very aware of the weight of such an undertaking. Nevertheless, here goes!

I feel that I have to start from some first principles and various reference points which have been critical for my own investigations into this problem. Therefore I have taken the liberty to examine some personally relevant words/concepts and quotes from Wittgenstein whose work has been seminal in my development as an artist. I hope you'll bear with me, for I hope this might shed some light on future discussions we may have on the subject.

It seems important to focus upon the nature of the perceptual moments which initiate a work or indeed a whole body of work, its intention, direction and methodology: what is the experience and incarnation of this 'drawing from' abstraction? In addition I suppose we have to say that what concerns us here is abstraction as it applies to visual language, and in our case painting, since abstraction may be approached from many different positions.

I suspect that an orthodox perspective on Western 'modern' visual abstraction would be derived from the birth and development of Cubism (via Cézanne) with its systemic ability to both dis-assemble and re-assemble the observed world, while at the same time setting in motion a whole empowerment of artists to reconstruct the picture surface/plane (although to my mind Cézanne was far closer to the heart of the matter of what may be termed the metaphysics of abstraction). However it seems to me that the orthodoxies of spatial consideration and manipulation essentially remained unchanged in respect of the picture plane which, while probably being reinforced and moving outwards toward the edges, was something into which you looked rather than onto which you looked.

I should like to emphasize that some of my greatest and enduring heroes of painting – Bellini, Mantegna, Titian, Vermeer (in particular), Velasquez – were engaged in all the richness of two-dimensional spatial



Links, 2001. Oil on canvas, three panels, 46 x 102 cm. each.

constructive problems. However, my own engagement with issues of abstraction goes back, at the very least, to the early Renaissance and beyond; I suppose to periods when concepts and depictions of the 'real' world and the consequent mission or obligation of the artist were very different from our own 20th-21st century perspective. It could be argued that, for example, the paintings of Reinhardt or Newman are a re-examination of the potency of a visual language which had been established some centuries before, and of course not only in Europe. This language being pregnant with meaning and testament (but without 'readings'), in the sense of the formal ingredients being totally at one with themselves, a totally integrated coming into the world and fleshing out of concept and intention, (I guess that this is what you mean by 'where the subject becomes the painting').

In your correspondence with Charles you say ". . . subject and image are complete, where the subject becomes the painting. One might then think that abstraction would be the solution, but if there is no subject to wrestle with, a subject to be resolved into an image, then, for me, there are no paradigms, the solution is only one of paint, resolving abstract colours and shapes into a satisfactory arrangement, for me this avoids the really interesting problem of how to make a subject into a painting".

I'm not clear what you mean by subject and image: do you mean content identified/embodyed into subject, then resolved into image? When does a form become an image, and what are the distinctions you make between the two, if any? At what point may a form become, through its own authenticity, a representation? What guise does it need, if any?

Also, when discussing the super Gainsborough 'Morning Walk', you say, "the brush marks become marks first and representation second". I think I know what you mean and you raise a very important point about this whole business of becoming, of the nature (and function!) of the point and moment at which the mark is made and its relationship to that which is (re)presented. Are they marks first and then become representational? Marks are marks after all. This may seem like angels on the head of a pin stuff, but I think it's very important.

You also say that ". . . I suppose my work is really more about the act of painting than the original source material but it is the essence [my italics] of all that interests me". I'd like to know more about this. How do you think this happens: what is the 'chemistry'?



Florentine Pair, 2001. Oil on canvas, 112 x 305 cm.

Given your previously declared primacy of narrative and/or subject I'm not clear how you resolve this; is there a contradiction here? How will I know, what will be the nature of my experience, when you describe for me something essential?

I don't know if you managed to see the wonderful Botticelli drawings at the Royal Academy. They made me want to re-read the Divine Comedy. I am particularly moved by the Paradiso. There is the exquisite concept of the experience of the Pilgrim as he progresses towards the Empyrean, witnessing images of souls. However, these are only projections, and he is uncertain of their substance, indeed of his own substance. As he progresses in this journey the images dissolve into pure and incandescent light (truth).

There is something here which I find deeply affecting and confirmatory which sets some sort of target for my humble offerings: resolution, integration, radiance. All this, I suspect, I can only achieve as a painter through a rigorous exploration of formal considerations, not the least of which is that of abstraction!

There is so much to say on this subject but I hope that I've given a few pointers to what concerns me. My questions are not rhetorical. Please let me know what you think!

In the meantime I send regards and very best wishes.

Chris, 1 July 2001

Form, authenticity, mark-making, and the essence of a painting . . .

Dear Chris

Thank you for your letter. I have spent days trying to answer in your terms, but have decided to use my own way of explaining.

I think the question is what happens between the idea and the execution, or the visual stimulus and the finished painting. What changes (apart from the obvious transformation from thing to paint)? It's obvious that representation isn't enough, more has to happen, the painting must have a life of its own, and good paintings do – eventually it doesn't matter where the scene took place, who the sitter was etc., because it's not relevant, the subject becomes the painting, not the thing but the inspiration. If that doesn't happen then there is no painting. We've all seen utterly dull portraits. I have a few quotes that illustrate what I mean:

Auerbach: The work ends when it has achieved a reinvention of the physical world that has its own equal reality.

Matisse: The closing of the gap between the realistic starting point and the formal goal was the most problematic of all.

Braque: I seek nothingness, that is the annihilation of the concept of the thing to arrive at the thing itself.

Braque: One thing cannot be in two places at once. One can't have it in one's head and before one's eyes.

I'll address some of your specific questions. You ask about subject and image. I identify the subject as the content of the initial idea and the image as the final resolution on the canvas. (I realize after referring to the dictionary that this is somewhat idiosyncratic).

Form, meaning the outward visible appearance of something, becomes an image when it is transformed into marks which stand for that form. The distinction is between the outward form and the marks on the canvas.

The authenticity is when the paint on the canvas stands absolutely for the form. Some of Matisse's paintings have this sense of the image absolutely standing for the form from which it derived. Think of *The Morroccans* (1916) and *Open Window, Collioure* (1914).



I think the authenticity is all in the painting whether it be figurative or abstract. To me it's a matter of transforming the idea and the visual experience into a two dimensional language which embodies that idea.

A mark is a mark, representational or not. There are wonderful marks and ordinary marks, and in the case of Gainsborough his wonderful marks have the quality of being delicious and sensual and also, but here is the point, separately, being a lace cuff or a dog's tail. I believe there is a real distinction between the subject of the painting and the marks and that they are two separate things.

By the essence of a painting, I mean the initial idea, and that idea has to remain strong throughout the painting. If the essence is lost the painting loses its vitality and can't be completed. This happens when the original idea is not strong or clear enough. The essence, the excitement is essential to the painting however much it may be transformed.

Chris, I realise that our approaches to painting are very different but I hope that what I have written makes as much sense to you as your writing and paintings do to me.

Best wishes
Charlotte, 27 July 2001

Austerly and Opulence, 2001. Oil on canvas, 68 x 117 cm.

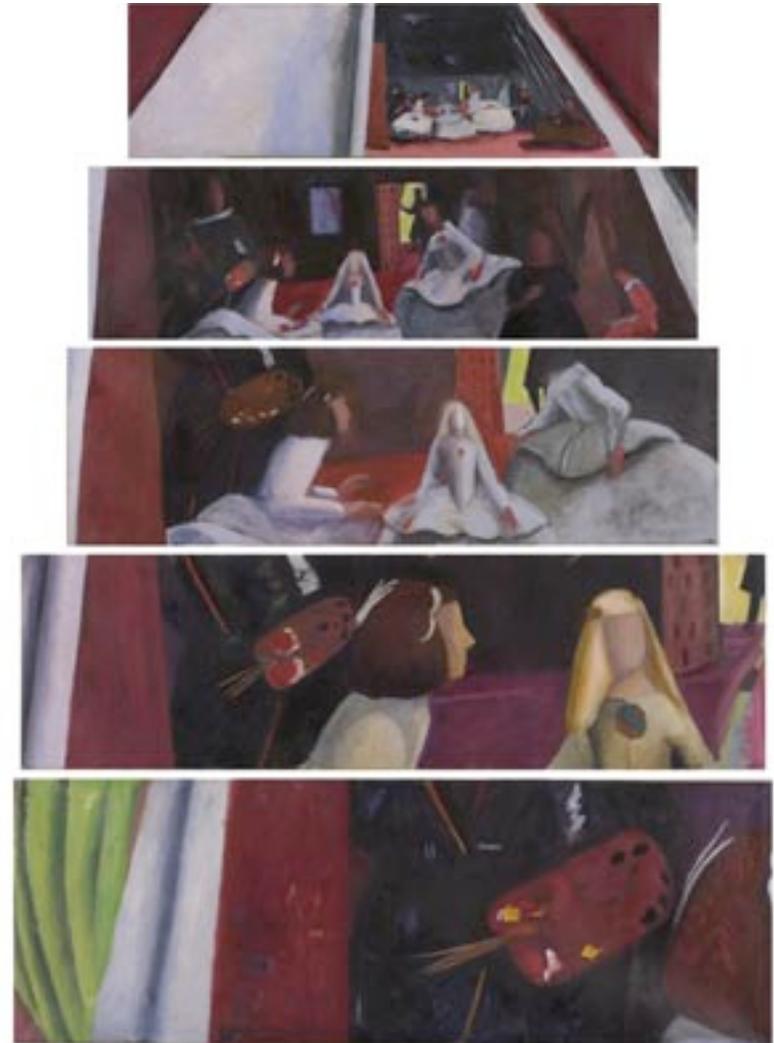
Art and illusion, or, rabbit and duck

Dear Chris

This is a footnote to the letter I wrote a few days ago. I came across exactly what I was trying to explain in Gombrich's 'Art and Illusion' regarding marks and representation.

Gombrich demonstrates how one figure can be seen as two different things. In the book the example is of a drawing which can be seen either as a duck's head or a rabbit's head, as you look the image alternates between one and the other, at no time can you see both images simultaneously. Kenneth Clark told Gombrich that looking at a Velasquez he wanted to see how the brush strokes transformed themselves into a 'vision of transfigured reality', as he (Clark) stepped backwards and forwards, but try as he might, he could never hold both visions at the same time. Like the rabbit and the duck, it can only be one thing or the other, brush marks or a fold of silk (or whatever) but never both simultaneously.

Best wishes,
Charlotte, 2 August 2001



Velasquez's Palette, 2001. Oil on canvas, 5 panels, 329 x 90cm. overall

The transcendence of painting

Dear Charlotte,

Thanks very much for your letter which I thought cleared up many points; not the least of which is that our practices as painters are fundamentally different. Of course this is fine. The generic category 'painter' is about as informative of detailed practice as that of 'scientist'.

I feel that, in broad terms, your work is essentially deductive (based on reasoning) whereas mine is inductive (logical, based on examples). You speak of what happens between inception and completion of a work. To what extent is this a pragmatic process for you?

I'm working from the premise that the driving force of your work is the observed world. For example, you use words like scene, sitter etc. However, I'm curious to know to what extent formal (or even geometric) considerations play a part in your thinking before mark-making takes place. Here I'm thinking of those terrific still lifes of Cotan: which comes first to his mind; the fruit and vegetables, or the parabolic arc?

To what extent, for example, do you make decisions of spatial displacement or allocation before images, forms (or narrative) are committed to the surface; or within the overall direction of a work, are the structures (or even images) responsive and pragmatic, a matter of trial and error?

I liked the quotes you sent me, particularly Braque's, although in the last one (with all due respect!) I think he's quite wrong to say that one can't have it in one's head and before one's eyes. This would seem to contradict the basis of, for example, all devotional painting (Early Renaissance), Islamic art and whole areas of phenomenology etc. In fact I feel that having the work in one's head and in one's eyes simultaneously is exactly what occurs at the fusion of an authentic point of production and the point of perception.

I suppose that the differences in our work are rooted in our notions of how the material and visual processes of our work stands for, or is keyed into, not only a testament of experience of a perceived and lived world, but concepts of the paradoxical transcendence of painting. Let me know what you think. I look forward to hearing from you.

With regards and very best wishes.
Chris, 5 July 2001

Different kinds of painting . . .

Dear Chris,

Yes, you're right, we really are talking about completely different kinds of painting. Your approach is logical; you know at the outset what you want to achieve and how you can do it, whereas I have an idea with no real image in my mind of what the result might be. A painting changes all the time - in composition, colour and even scale (I paint the canvas unstretched so that I can change the proportions and even the size before putting it onto the stretcher.) I am therefore painting by reacting to the marks I have already made; it is, to some extent, a matter of trial and error. I keep the idea in my mind but the process is pragmatic, the result is never clearly foreseen, but the result must remain faithful to the inspiration.

My paintings are not from directly observed reality. Although they are representational, they are developed from figurative ideas, which are transformed into images that express those ideas; it is not in any sense painting from observation.

I understood the quote from Braque, *One can't have it in one's head and before one's eyes*, to mean that the reality of the observed object and the painting become separate things; the painting must stand on its own without comparison to its source.

I feel now that we are doing such different things that you might feel that these communications are not worthwhile. I hope that this is not the case because I have been finding your letters challenging and thought provoking.

Looking forward to hearing from you again soon.

Very best wishes,
Charlotte, 15 August 2001

Paradiso

Dear Charlotte

Thanks for your last letter. Here are some additional reflections on the business of abstraction. The thing I'd like to focus on, and which is significant in its difference from my practice, is what you say about initiating a work on unstretched canvas and allowing the work to define its own edges. Needless to say this could not be further removed from my approach. To point up this fundamental conceptual separation, I hope you won't mind my talking about the development of a piece of my current work.

As I mentioned to you in a previous letter I was very affected by the Botticelli drawings of the Divine Comedy, particularly of the Paradiso. I have been re-reading this and am making a diptych using Dante's metaphor of the spirit's inevitable journey toward God as an arrow shot from Instincts Bow. As the form of the arc, or in this instance a bow, has been so persistent in my work this readily slotted into my visual dictionary or scheme of things . . .

I refer back now to what you said about allowing your paintings to define their own perimeters. If in my own work I had tilted the arc or indeed brought the tips of the bow/arc inside the edges of the canvas, immediately it would have become a picture of a bow and I would have come bang up against problems of illustration. This would also lead us now into issues of resemblance: critical and problematic!

One thing that I feel I want to restate in my own interests is that despite what sounds like rather tedious methodology there are developmental imponderables which surface in the course of the making of the work, notably colour, pigmentation, glazing etc. From the inception of the work there is a core of intention and direction which remains essentially immutable but there is some flexibility in decision making thereafter but only in order to reinforce the generating concept. Maybe it's a case of making one's own luck. In any event, the world of the spirit, poetics and of aesthetic pleasure is also my companion!

I thought that the point you raised about perimeters/parameters was worth pursuing and had many ramifications.

With regards and very best wishes,
Chris, 23 August 2001



First Impressions, 2001. Oil on canvas, 110 x 124 cm.

Bonnard

Dear Chris,

Thank you for your letter. I don't think it's tedious methodology at all, actually I feel rather envious that you have such a clear vision of what you want to do and why. For me it's much more a matter of starting with an idea and getting there by trial and error. I know that this must seem very arbitrary to you, and indeed it often is, but I am guided by the marks I have already made. Every change, and there are many, can only be made with regard to what I have already done. I understand that for you it's more a matter of fine tuning to match your concept, and of course there are matters of colour, texture, spacing, all the things in which we use our personal aesthetic.

Bonnard painted his canvases before they were stretched, so that he could change the size and proportions. I imagine him starting with what first struck him, such as a carafe on a tablecloth, and then expanding outwards until it connected with a related and significant thing, parts of the painting being in focus and other parts making corrections. The relevance of this being that perhaps he worked from one part to another without a complete vision of the whole. He was interested in peripheral vision and how his awareness expanded outwards. He could see something of interest with almost heightened vision and also be aware of things that were around him without choosing to focus on them.

Well, there are as many ways of making paintings as there are artists. Yours and mine are poles apart and it's so interesting to read your letter in which you can explain with such precision your source, conception and method and I am tempted, but refuse, to feel that my approach is too loose.

Thank you for writing and explaining how you work, I find it fascinating and very appealing in its clarity.

With best wishes,
Charlotte, 28 August 2001



Recuerdo de Granada, 2001. Oil on canvas, 118 x 148 cm.

Unstretched Canvas I

Dear Charlotte,

A footnote to my last letter: I've been thinking about your working on unstretched canvas. Of course, it is again very different from the way I work and a few general questions come to mind.

Are you intending that your canvas or field of activity functions a bit like a spider's web/ fishing net/ snare, that you position in order to 'see what occurs', what is 'captured'?

Needless to say, whatever occurs is initiated by you to one extent or another. Do such 'webs' need conceptual supports/structures to exist; if so, what are these for you? Is this what you mean by finding essence?

If this is the case, do you feel that this open-endedness makes, or allows your work to 'bleed into' the world (or the perceived world, at least)? Even an unstretched canvas has its edges. Maybe Christo could wrap the whole world! But then the chances would be that we would be on the inside (the subject?) not on the outside.

Reinhardt's clear distinction between art and life seems self evident and unavoidable to me. Where - but more importantly for us as artists - how does one end and the other begin?

Doesn't this acknowledgement of the distinction paradoxically unshackle us within our formal and material practice, a bit like photography liberating painting? For me, transcending not picturing? What implications does this have for abstraction? I'd like to know what you think.

All the best to you and for the work.

Chris, 2 September 2001



Castles in Spain, 2001. Oil on canvas, 118 x 148 cm.
Collection of Benjamin Costello, Kingston upon Thames

Unstretched Canvas II

Dear Chris

Following on from your letter to Charlotte of 23 August (the one I like to refer to as the 'drawing the bow' letter), I would like to attempt some answers on Charlotte's behalf to the questions that you posed subsequently.

Are you intending that your canvas or field of activity functions a bit like a spider's web/ fishing net/ snare, that you position in order to 'see what occurs', what is 'captured'?

No, I think not. Charlotte's compositions are vigorous and deliberate, and in fact highly ordered. The freedom that she has in developing her surfaces are neither incidental nor passive. She knows what her paintings are about – literally, in terms of their content – and technically, as to how they are made. She is essentially a traditional painter, by which I mean that she starts with an idea, lays it out, and develops it with a range of techniques until it's done.

Needless to say, whatever occurs is initiated by you . . . to one extent or another. Do such 'webs' need conceptual supports/structures to exist; if so, what are these for you?

We talked about this with Charlotte. Her compositional methods are pretty straightforward, entailing division of the canvas in halves, quarters, etc. The composition is drawn in sepia turpentine, and blocked in with washes. Underpainting follows, usually in the root colours that she anticipates for the final finish. Development of the surface is vigorous and pragmatic. I think that the conceptual supports are *a priori* and remain constant as she works.

If this is the case, do you feel that this open-endedness makes, or allows your work to 'bleed into' the world?

Charlotte would resist the notion that her paintings are 'a part of the world' any more than any other object. In a recent painting she includes images of Spanish Renaissance era stone marquetry; as one would never imagine that these stone tables should merge with the world, so too do Charlotte's paintings stand as extrinsic objects.

Reinhardt's clear distinction between art and life seems self evident and unavoidable to me. Where – but more importantly for us as artists – how does one end and the other begin?

I would like to know more about this question. Perhaps when we meet you could show me the Reinhardt reference. I've got some ideas about where art and life begin and end, but would do better justice to this question after a little research.

Doesn't this acknowledgement of the distinction paradoxically unshackle us within our formal and material practice, a bit like photography liberating painting? For me, transcending not picturing? What implications does this have for abstraction?

As for no. 4, I look forward to our conversations this evening!

Best,

Charles, 4 September 2001



Boston Encounter, 2001. Oil on canvas, 87 x 156 cm.
Collection of Virginia Woodrow, London

A Man Who Suddenly Fell Over

Dear Charles,

I went to the Michael Andrews exhibition at Tate Britain recently. Andrews was a figurative painter whose early work I have always found very engaging, in that his subject matter is odd. I particularly like his 'A Man Who Suddenly Fell Over', there is a very large man actually falling and a woman looking frightened and shocked behind him. Many of his pictures are composites of drawings, newspaper cuttings, imagination, improvisation and memories, later of his own photography, which I like less. There is a series of paintings about parties, two of the best known are 'The Colony Room' and 'The Deer Park,' in which Rimbaud is in the centre. I like fantasy which isn't surreal or sentimental and the absurdity of actual incidents and moments.

I have been thinking about subject matter lately and to what extent I use composite images, as in my paintings 'Recuerdo de Granada' and 'The History Room'. Andrews often used these composite images in a rather brash and unapologetic way which I find appealing and interesting and I am beginning to feel that this may be a way of extending my visual resources for paintings.

Best wishes,
Charlotte, 6 September 2001

Revisiting Boston, 2001. Oil on canvas
4 panels 26 x 109 cm. (smallest) 38 x 109 cm. (largest)



Australia

Dear Charles and Jackie,

Thank you for coming here last Monday, I think we made some good decisions and can now see how to progress.

I 'm going to try to fill you in on how my ten years in Australia fits into the body of painting you have seen, which has been completed since I returned to live in England in the spring of 1999. Before I went to Australia



in 1989 I had been painting art books and museum cases based on The British Museum and on the ethnography exhibits in Birmingham City Museum, and for some time I continued with the same theme in Brisbane where, to my surprise, I found that Queensland University had

a delightful little museum of Greek vases and artefacts. But after a while I felt that I should be painting about Australia, in the sense that my life there was totally different, as were my surroundings, the vegetation, the birds and the heat which are so much part of living in a subtropical environment, but since I'm not a landscape painter nor a naturalist I found it very difficult to relate to this new life. I was still much more interested in museums and still lifes than the natural environment.

I was lucky enough to meet the professor of aboriginal studies at the university who introduced me to aboriginal artefacts. He showed me the university's wonderful collection, which is held in trust by them. They are sacred objects, not for public view, they consist of all manner of things, the most exciting to me being the animals, birds and figures which are carved from ironwood and painted in natural ochres; white, red oxide, yellow ochre and black. Their charm and strength lies in the curious mixture of being only an approximation to the animal or figure represented and yet being so exactly and touchingly real. I enclose a couple of reproductions so that you can see what I mean.

Having seen these beautiful carvings I was able to discover more, through contact with the keeper of aboriginal artefacts at the Queensland Museum, so I had my subject and painted them on their shelves and when they were exhibited in the department of aboriginal affairs in the city and in the Queensland Art Gallery. Later I went to The Museum of the Northern Territory in Darwin, which has a fantastic collection of carvings.

I became fascinated by aboriginal art and so came to know about aboriginal painters and some of the meaning of their work. Although they are usually abstract in form they have very precise meanings. The paintings represent maps or journeys, tribal knowledge of the deserts, the waterholes, the lie of the sand dunes, where food could be found and incidents of the journey. The style originated in sand and body painting and it was not until the 1960s that they were painted on canvas and made permanent. Here again we encounter the crossover of abstraction and figuration (as in the wood carvings and cave paintings).

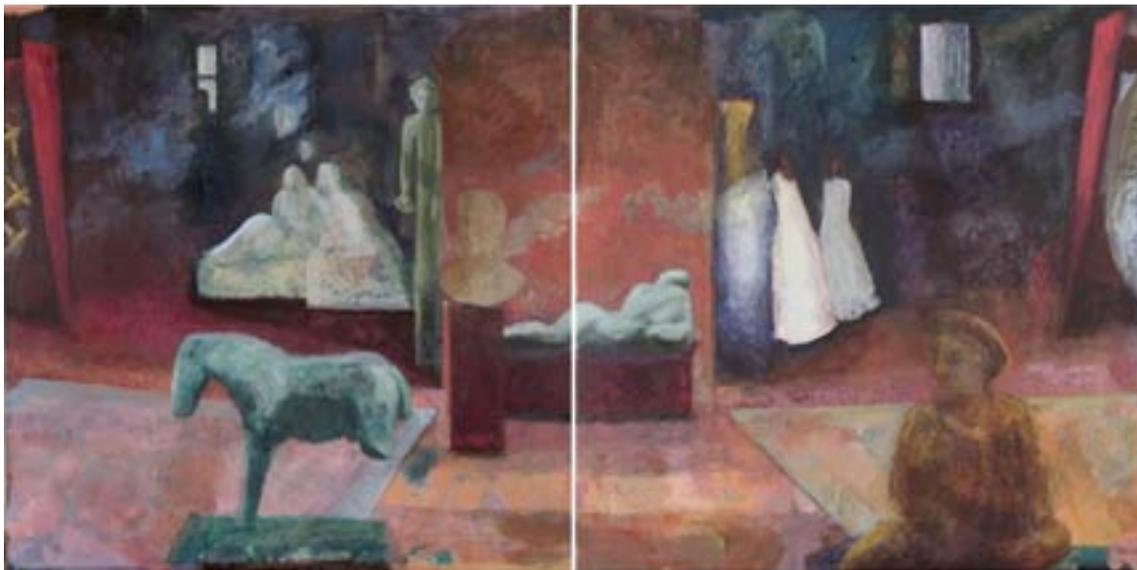
The happy discovery of aboriginal paintings and carvings allowed me to continue with my abiding interest in museums and history in a completely different and unexpected context. This is what I came to love about Australia, a rich culture beneath the surface of the very urban and rather bland western facade. I found a richness there that I hadn't known existed and which will always stay with me.

With best wishes,
Charlotte, 17 September 2001





Castle Chapel, Bristol, 2001. Oil on canvas, 5 panels, overall dimensions 145 x 306 cm.



Boston Reflection, 2001. Oil on canvas, 122 x 244 cm.

Afterword: the world at your feet and other miracles

Dear Charlotte

In these letters we have explored certain ideas about the painter's engagement with the subject, the significance of history, the interpretation of figurative and abstract realities, and matters of facture and painting construction. If there is a conclusion to be drawn from these words and images, it is that tradition is and always has been a significant and healthy motivating factor in your work. Yours is restless sort of tradition, embracing Antonello da Messina and Howard Hodgkin with equal enthusiasm. Your compositions are not 'historical' in the sense of being complacent or backwards-looking. Rather, they evolve through a process of inquiry, of dedicated research celebrating the dignity of form and the romance of imagery.

When you spoke at the gallery about your work, you said that the exhibition was dedicated to the pictorial tradition, citing Uccello, Velazquez, Matisse, Hodgkin, Diebenkorn. You suggested that your paintings are based on linked art historical styles. By this I take it to mean that you are drawn to historically diverse paintings for your inspiration and in certain measure for your subject matter. Your practice thus resides within the realm of history, where creativity is 'connected with a related and significant thing'. You also talked about the impossibility of creating something from nothing, and so you construct your paintings not only on the basis of art historical models, but also using archaeological and anthropological references, as in your Australian paintings. You do not plagiarise or appropriate. Rather, your method is a positive act of building on collective or cultural ideals, making contemporary paintings that resonate with tradition. The power of your intention contributes to the beauty and resonance of the individual works. Your approach is distinctive in that it validates contemporary aesthetic experience without abandoning tradition. At the heart of it all, you are dedicated to the simple act of making paintings: to canvas, paints, and brushes.



Looking and Seeing, 2001. Oil on canvas, 4 panels 33 x 92 cm. each.

I was delighted that Chris Jennings agreed to participate in this correspondence. Chris described your practice as deductive, based on reasoning, and his as inductive, based on the idea that a general law exists because examples of it exist. You make paintings on a *de facto* basis, proceeding from a basic plan through an empirical process of composition and adjustment, while Chris proceeds *a priori*, from a highly formulated plan to an elaborate, programmatic scheme of geometry and surface adjustment. His compositions often extend beyond the single work to encompass adjacent carefully placed panels approaching the condition of sculpture. Yours, even when comprised of more than one canvas, remain essentially single paintings.

It seemed at first that your positions were so divergent as to be irreconcilable. Chris quoted Cézanne to the effect that the task of the painter is 'to dis-assemble and re-assemble the observed world [and] to reconstruct the picture plane'. I think that you are essentially in agreement on this, although I would argue that while Chris reconstructs the picture plane, you reconstruct the picture space. But 'marks are marks after all', and in the end I am gratified by how much you actually have in common. Your figuration and Chris's abstraction are equally indebted to art history. It's a matter of being literate, of knowing Piero, Chardin, Cézanne. Neither of you make superficial references. The geometries are similar. Where you diverge is not in the realms of formalism, but as to the question of how to make a subject into a painting.

I can easily imagine your shadowy childhood journeys to the Museum of Mankind and the National Gallery, and your desire to make dreamed museums hanging in the air. Thus we all benefit from your anthropological interests, your study of Greek pots and Etruscan columns, and not the least the 'Aboriginal interlude' when you studied sacred, mystical painted carvings. In the spirit of André Malraux.

The History Room was an homage to museums, galleries and sacred places, with their ineffable timelessness, order, and mystery. The exhibition was a primer for looking at paintings, an investigation of viewpoints and painterly analysis. It resided in the world of traditional curating, far-removed from 'gallerism', but nonetheless powerful and relevant to contemporary artistic practice. Your depictions of paintings within paintings will inspire young and established painters and your sense of the different and separate realities that we experience through art will continue to appeal to everyone who likes paint on canvas.

Best,
Charles 27 April 2002

Charlotte Moore

1965-1966 Chelsea College of Art
1966-1969 Falmouth College of Art

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1998 Dogget Street Gallery, Brisbane
1996, 1997, 1998 Gallery 482, Brisbane
1996 Dogget Street Gallery, Brisbane
1994 Riverhouse Gallery, Brisbane
1990 Palace Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
1987 Bury Art Gallery, Lancashire
1987 Brewhouse Gallery, Taunton
1986 Winterbourne House, Birmingham University
1985 Woodlands Art Gallery, Blackheath, London
1982 Stafford Museum and Art Gallery
1980 Midlands Art Centre, Birmingham

Selected Group Exhibitions

2000 Artmonsky, London
1995, 1996, 1997, 1998 Gallery 482, Brisbane
1993 Andrew Vincent Gallery, Brisbane
1992 Euro Gallery, London
1986 Worcester Museum and Art Gallery
1985 Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery
1981 The Brewhouse, Taunton

Residencies

2001 Holburne Museum of Art, Bath
1998 Contemporary Arts Centre, Mass. U.S.A.
1991 Tividale Comprehensive School, Birmingham
1987 Cheslyn Hay High School, Staffordshire
1984, 1985 Staffordshire College of Agriculture

Cloister Windows, Bristol Cathedral, 2001.
Oil on canvas, 3 panels, 100 x 44 cm. each.

Commissions

1988 Mural, Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Birmingham
1987-1989 English Artists Wards, Battle Hospital, Reading

Selected Reviews

1987 Arts Review Magazine
1985 Arts Review Magazine
1984 Arts Review Magazine
1982 Arts Review Magazine
1982 The Guardian

Collections

Worcester City Museum and Art Gallery
Leeds Education Authority



Charlotte Moore: The History Room

Stanley Picker Gallery, Kingston University
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Charlotte Moore

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