Andrew Johnstone

More than a Painter
23rd May - 10th June 2017

Private View
Tuesday 23 May
6 - 8.30pm

Gallery Hours
Monday - Friday 10am - 6pm
Saturday 11am - 6pm

CADOGAN CONTEMPORARY

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Andrew Johnstone was so much more than a painter. A scholar, linguist, soldier, diplomat, political officer, craftsman, carpenter, artist, father and husband. The compulsion to create prevailed throughout his life, presenting itself in all variety of medium.

This exhibition brings together work created between 1995 and 2011, during the period of concentration when painting was his primary focus.
He believed a work's 'history' should be seen in a painting; the evidence of the process and hours that led to the final image. The surfaces he painted upon were not clean white canvasses but had accumulated their own history before being used. Boards could be around in the studio for years, lying under a work-in-progress, splattered with paint and mug stains, marked with the early scribbles of drawings and ideas before finally being committed to a painting.

Andrew worked roughly, using large brushes, charcoal, sandpaper, scalpels, washes and thick paint. The simplicity of a composition and block use of colour often belied the lengthy process and numerous techniques Andrew afforded to achieve the final surface.

Material things did not engage Andrew much – for him the simpler the lifestyle the better. He was interested in ideas, in the small events of nature, the company of friends and long, often hilarious, discussions over a glass of wine. It wasn't the quality of the wine that mattered to him, but the quality of the people and the conversation.

Inspiration for Andrew came from many sources, often reflecting upon themes from the ancient world: Homer's Iliad, the legends of Gilgamesh, the Gods, the Sumerians, the story of the Queen of Sheba and her journey to Jerusalem to meet King Solomon, as well as Andrew's own adventures in the Arabian deserts. But home life and modern life inspired him too. His wife's photographs of bull-leapers in the Camargue inspired a series of paintings, as did photos of white-painted Greek churches.

Like the Cornish painters he admired, his work was intended for the domestic scale. Johnstone depicted Porthleven harbour near where he lived for over 30 years, reflecting daily life. He also painted a series of city traffic paintings, titled very much tongue-in-cheek 'I Love London'.

Respected painter, friend and mentor Bryan Ingham often urged Andrew to concentrate on one type of painting for which to become known and celebrated but it was not in Andrew's nature to stick to one style for long. Re-visiting earlier work often set him down a path travelled before so themes 'reappeared transformed and transmogrified many times'. He did not understand the desire to find a 'winning formula' on which to build brand recognition. Once he had mastered what he wanted, he moved on to try something different. Curiosity drove him.

Though he was keen for feedback when he was pleased with a painting he was working on, he rarely spoke about his work once one finished and never wanted to hang pictures at home. He was in no hurry to show his work, wanting paintings to stay in the studio for some months after they were finished, allowing for a window of time for the 'fallible eye' to pass.

Andrew understood the value of borrowing technique and idiom from the artists he admired. As well as learning a lot from Bryan Ingham, he found inspiration from other Cornish painters Roger Hilton, Ben Nicholson and William Scott.

"Take your ideas where you can."

-AJ

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Andrew could and did turn his hand to almost anything, but painting gave him the most fulfilment. Throughout his long life he knew what he wanted to do, and he always did it successfully. Few people, perhaps, have the same self-belief and ability. In pursuit of artistic recognition, Andrew (and his family) at times faced great hardship but his resolve stood firm. To hell with what anyone else thought. His sense of humour, his detached outlook on life and his own talent carried him through.

"Take your ideas where you can."

-AJ

"I am not setting out to build a career - it is a bit late for that anyway - but to let my imagination wander over what I have seen years ago or yesterday."

-AJ
Untitled (7), 2011
mixed media on board
73.5 x 81.5cm

Untitled (6), 2011
mixed media on board
73.5 x 81.5cm
Symi Harbour (1049)
mixed media on board
81.5 x 91.5cm
Reds (1051), 2008
mixed media on board
81.5 x 91.5cm
I Love London (1030), 2007
mixed media on board
112 x 82cm

I Love London (1025), 2007
mixed media on board
81.5 x 91.5cm
Blue Road to Jerusalem (1970), 2006
mixed media on board
73.5 x 81.5cm

mixed media on board
81.5 x 91.5cm
Untitled (996), 2002
mixed media on board
81.5 x 112cm
“Attack and destroy ruthlessly.
If you have an idea, try it, even if you may spoil what you have done.”

-AJ
Iliad Ships (675), 2000
mixed media on board
81.5 x 91.5cm

Black War Ships, Iliad, 2001
mixed media on board
81.5 x 91.5cm
Cornish Harbour VI (661), 2001
mixed media on board
81.5 x 91.5cm
Two Ships at Sea, 2000
mixed media on board
20.5 x 39.5cm
Dogs in the Country (607), 2000
mixed media on board
73.5 x 81.5cm
"I go where my imagination takes me."

-AJ
Untitled (14), 1999
mixed media on board
81.5 x 73.5cm
Untitled (337), 2000
mixed media on board
81.5 x 91.5cm

Untitled (344), 2000
mixed media on board
81.5 x 91.5cm
Blue Door (265), 1997
mixed media on board
55 x 65cm
Small Gods (360), 1997
mixed media on board
65 x 79cm
Untitled (Bottle and Glass), 2000
mixed media on board
23.8 x 26.8cm

Untitled (Treelover), 1997
mixed media on board
40 x 31.5cm
Abstract (24), 1996
mixed media on board
47.5 x 65.5cm

Untitled (Greek)
mixed media on board
23 x 20.5cm
Early Iliad (272), 1997
mixed media on board
42 x 65cm

Cornish Trawlers (153), 1996
mixed media on board
39 x 57cm
Across Sea, Deserts and Mountains (186), 1996
mixed media on board
23 x 28.5cm

Where We are Now II, 1996
mixed media on board
27 x 60cm
Troy (99), 1995
mixed media on board
45.5 x 81.5cm
“Weren’t the atom bombs worthy of Hephaestus or Zeus at their most destructive? They were appalling bolts from the sky that shattered the dastardly enemy and brought instant victory and salvation to those possessing them. Straight out of the ancient myths. The gods were there.

I think a lot about the gods.”

-AJ
A Grand Procession of Soldiers (1026), 1996
mixed media on board
35.5 x 76.5cm

Untitled (War 438), 1995
mixed media on board
81.5 x 91.5cm
Aj at his British council exhibition, Rawalpindi
Andrew Johnstone was born in 1933 to journalist father James and opera singer mother Dorothea. He was educated at Pinewood School and then Marlborough College, leaving at 15 after doing his Higher Cert to embark on a motorbike adventure through Europe in 1949 and 1950. His journey took him to the University of Strasbourg and the Sorbonne where he became fluent in French and German.

He joined the Scots Guards for two years for his National Service. He served in Egypt’s Canal Zone and then learnt Arabic in the copper bazaars of Baghdad. Johnstone went on to read PPE at St John’s College, Oxford, where he indulged his childhood passion for painting, studying drawing at the Ruskin School of Art for two terms.

From an early age, Andrew showed a determination to walk in the opposite direction to his peers. While most Oxford undergraduates headed to London and the debutante balls during their holidays Andrew applied to join the French Foreign Legion. When he was refused, he applied for a visa from the Russian Embassy to walk all the way to Moscow — also refused.

Though he joined the Foreign Office after coming down from Oxford, he was never really at home in the Establishment. His postings in places such as Syria, Pakistan, Cambodia and Ireland were perfect for him.

First to Beirut where Johnstone studied at the famed MECAS adding fluency in Arabic to his repertoire, before continuing to the Trucial States, Oman and Damascus. Many adventures followed including a great friendship with Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, a legendary camel trek to Liwa Oasis and the rescuing of a long-suffering slave.
At all his foreign postings Andrew Johnstone painted and drew. He had a one-man show in Rawalpindi with the British Council and exhibited at the Living Arts Exhibition in Belfast and the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin. Concentrating mostly on figurative works, these exhibitions and commissions hinted at a potential second career.

In 1963 Johnstone married Diane, before being posted to Syria and then Cambodia in 1969-71.

His final posting was to Ireland and then in 1973, in his forties, Andrew took early retirement from the Foreign Office. He moved his family to a smallholding high on a hill near Helston in Cornwall.
He felt that the flagstoned cottage and thirteen windy acres were infinitely preferable to spending several years in London ‘finding out how Whitehall works’ as one Foreign Office mandarin put it. Though Andrew told his wife that he now wanted to paint, he had to put all his energy into making and selling things in order to keep the wolf from the door - including fantastic automata, hand-made and painted clocks, hand-dyed rugs, plan-chests, dolls’ houses. From his remote home on the Lizard peninsula, he crafted life-size sculptures of wooden dogs that sold around the world.

He eventually made a good business creating bespoke and often very complex frames for artist friends, which the National Gallery named the ‘finest Rococo frames of 20th century’. In 1989 he was subject of a Channel 4 documentary called Consuming Passions by BAFTA-award winning filmmaker Jonas Grimas.
Rug, toys and sculptures hand-made by AJ
For 20 years Andrew rarely drew or painted. But in 1993, after attending an etching class given by his great friend the artist Bryan Ingham, Andrew was so appalled by how much he had forgotten that he began to draw and paint again, and he finally started taking his art seriously once more. In early 1994 a gallery owner visiting Andrew’s workshop to collect paintings he had framed for others saw some of his paintings and commented how they could sell. From that time on, Andrew concentrated more and more on painting.

He exhibited regularly at the Royal College of Art, the 2/21 British Art Fair and the Islington Art Fair, with the Gordon Hepworth Gallery and Wilson-Stephens Fine Art. He had a few one-man shows with Gordon Hepworth in Chelsea and in Cork Street, before regularly exhibiting with Cadogan Contemporary. He had numerous solo shows at Cadogan, until his final exhibition of drawings in 2010, establishing a distinguished following of collectors. His work can be found in numerous international private collections.

Johnstone stopped painting regularly after 2006 and in the autumn of 2011 he had his first stroke. In 2013, Andrew and wife Diane celebrated their golden wedding anniversary and after a long well-lived life, Andrew passed away in February 2015.