

## Mark Johnston / Scattered Light

*A picture is finished when the means used to bring about the end have disappeared.*

James Abbott McNeill Whistler

To cite a declaration like this, by a figure of Whistler's stature, at the opening of a catalogue essay, is asking for trouble, but there's no mistaking the American's presence in Mark Johnston's pantheon, nor his spectral influence on several of Johnston's best canvases of 2006. In his own era, evidence of Whistler's influence on a painter was never less than interesting, and second- and even third-hand fallout, among later generations of painters, including Johnston's, can cause unusual results. So it does among the paintings that comprise *Scattered Light*, executed by Johnston during the Autumn and Winter of 2006.

Attempting to identify painterly influences is a mug's game (why is it that the English in particular seem to need to do it?), so why the Whistler reference? In general conversation, Johnston himself comments on the impact and importance of Whistler's technique: on the layered glazes that are such valuable equipment in Johnston's technical armoury. No serious British painter will ignore their possibilities, and Johnston is also fully aware of Whistler's continuing relevance, across time, up to, and including, the British artistic present. As his comment indicates, Whistler ensures that gesture and impasto appear on the surface of the completed work: *pentimenti* are few and far between. For Johnston, putting on and taking off paint is a part of the execution of any painting ('process' isn't a word easily used in his case), and for him Whistlerian ideas and techniques are most relevant when Light is to be shed upon topography: the way it is done, and especially the way that natural light, and particularly the remembrance of it, impacts onto and into the final outcome of a painting. If they are to be invoked at all, Whistlerian undertones are at their strongest in pictures such as *Heavenly Place No.2*, for Johnston develops his topographies by seeking their essence, as Whistler ordained an artist should, by moving on from past works, avoiding specific detail, and instead combining fresh visual recall, resulting from first-hand experience and understanding, with low-grade nostalgia, and, depending on need, with imagination. The results are always expansive, whatever their sizes: distance, up, down, and sideways, is always paramount. At their largest, even – in *Scattered Light* – at their most sulphurous, they are represented by images such as [Flood]. However, there is much more evidence of the subtleties of chiaroscuro in *Scattered Light* than in Johnston's oeuvre thus far, and without appearing to have ransacked the larder of art, Johnston clearly combines an eye for a delicacy with the ability to feast well without gorging himself: the resulting range of outcomes in this collection of Winter works is expansive.

One of the most commanding features of *Scattered Light* is the compelling magnetism of its very different components. There are references to Johnston's past works, but none are especially strong. Stronger, however, are apparently unconscious, but curiously pointed references to painterly icons and to antecedents that are rather more ancient and rather less modern than previously. In the more graphic elements of his paintings, the shapes of Johnston's mark-making can suggest those of William Blake, and elsewhere the respective and collective influences of Joseph Wright, Turner, Cotman and James Ward don't seem inappropriate: there even seem to be loose references to Ward's gargantuan canvas *Gordale Scar* in the skies of *Heavenly Place No 3* and *No 4*. Given Johnston's desire for Essence, this is amusingly paradoxical, for when Ward executed his *magnum opus*, he allowed his imagination considerable leeway, and what has always seemed to viewers to be Nature meticulously observed... wasn't.

Increasingly, extremes such as this have appeared in Johnston's work, where emphasis is strongest on the *essence* of passing time, and upon the *idea* of Place, rather than on any attempt to convey an acute sense of location (the *genius loci* of Paul Nash and others). Nothing is static: air-currents, fast or slow, flow everywhere, and the atmospheres of the most barren of panoramic vistas, together with the suggestion of the immensity of their geological heave, have something in common with the quietest of havens, where the atmosphere is chilly and slow-moving. To respond to the ambivalence of distance in *Secret Blue Pool*, where the view might be near or far, or to flinch in the face of Natural force before [M10], or other combinations in other paintings, is to participate in a process in which Johnston can sometimes appear to deliberately leave some of his pictorial problems unresolved, dangerous and satisfying in turn, without ever declaring the means by which he has gained the end he desires.

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