



Tony O'Malley

TONY O'Malley is a believer in 'the body of work' and rejects the 'bed-end graph' approach now common among art pundits - the idea, in other words, that an artist could have been producing sensational work last year but alas this year 'it's gone off' ... all this is an absurdity in his view. He is happy to be assessed on a lifetime.

It is true enough when you encounter Tony - when you begin to pick your way through the work accumulated in his studio, in his cottage, on other people's walls - that there is a sense of continuous activity which asserts itself strongly. The notion that an artist needs to be 'working towards a show' is quite foreign to him (though the satisfaction of seeing his work exhibited is none the less for that) - rather, he just goes on with it. That is not to say that it comes easily. But whilst most artists would acknowledge an element of compulsion in their involvement with their work, in O'Malley's case I sense that drawing, painting and the 'making of things' has become nine-tenths of his relationship with the world. It is his medium of understanding. Tony O'Malley has had no extensive period of formal training in art. Despite the current trend being so firmly to the contrary, it seems to me there can be advantages in this. At its most simple, the path O'Malley has taken can mean there is less need to justify - but more than this, it should be said that an artist who's any good will be learning anyway, over many years, and remains free to take a cupful of many influences, advice, or technical practice at such points as he feels ready for it. Furthermore, O'Malley took up art later than many: not until his early thirties. Again, despite the current preoccupations with 'bright new talent', there is something to be said for having the freshness of the beginner when the artist has the maturity of experience upon which to draw. Anyway, in the case of Tony O'Malley, these two factors seem to have combined to free him from inhibitions (that itching anxiety to make the right move at the right time) and allow him to listen to the authentic voice of his own talent.

O'Malley's work is a definitive rejection of the dogma about 'abstraction' and 'figuration'. His inspiration simply doesn't accord these terms any meaning whatever. The more of his work you see - be it in the books filled with drawings made in the landscape or be it the paintings worked in his studio - the more you realise you are witness to the steady creation of a personal language which describes the world but possesses its own rules, and consequently its own poetic structure which is apart from the world.

The work of O'Malley's I know best - the quintessential O'Malley for me - is made on board rather than canvas. In the early 1970s particularly, he would often use odd-shaped ('found') pieces of board and work on them. What I am getting at is a strong sculptural sensibility: the paintings are as much objects as they are surfaces. Sometimes his work seems to me to be almost 'heraldic'. Please ignore the kitsch overtones of nowadays and think rather of war shields using an ancient system of meanings. A very common procedure for O'Malley is to create a 'field' set a little within the actual edges of the board, and this in turn will often be divided into smaller fields or areas - all this done very much in a freehand and intuitive, irregular way. In other words, he seems often to make a 'serious play' over the fundamental ambiguities of painting. He takes something and puts a painting on it. Even if this could be traced to a 'virtue from economy' tradition (Alfred Wallis?), O'Malley's work is just so far from the 'naive' approach that it seems scarcely appropriate. This play with surface and object seems to be very necessary to him. I have an idea he finds canvas a problem, as if it were weighed down by a certain academicism ... as if it resists him.

For, with board, he almost invariably attacks the surface - cutting it and piercing it. This activity proceeds in tandem with the application of paint, and the manner in which the cut edges of the surface lift as the paint works in there gives the whole a great richness. These actions (with knife, nail or whatever sharp implement comes to hand), being irrevocable, perhaps have a particular advantage for O'Malley in that they insist on the

total concentration on, a total engagement in the working, with which he is most at home. He is uneasy about trial and error, about amendment and correction; he prefers to live with whatever 'happens'. I have a hunch Tony O'Malley works in a deeply intuitive way - the kind of hiker who never takes a map - and it is probably quite a time before he is able to stand back from a painting and form his own assessment of it. Any work of his is very much a record of its making and, by extension, his 'body of work' is a record of a life given to this activity. He finds it hard to arrange his own work in preferential order - his relationship with every piece is too personal. There are advantages and disadvantages to this: a critic might well say: 'He is a poor judge of his own work'. On the other hand, there is actually a certain humility here which might be emulated by those labouring under a surfeit of certainty.

When I think of Tony O'Malley, I think always of birds. For one thing, birds seem to supply so many motifs in his work: wing shapes, bird's head or beak shapes, birds in flocks crossing sky or ground in wedges, in arrow-heads - even tracks made by their feet. For one of the deepest satisfactions gained from a study of his work is the sense of 'fields across which life is moving, leaving traces'. O'Malley often uses very small rhythmic marks of intensely bright colour (feathers?) against these extraordinary brown or grey backgrounds - though not really brown or grey but subtle myriads of colours laid there ...

And he migrates! Every summer he moves from St Ives to the Scillies for a few weeks, and every winter, courtesy of a third party, off he flies to the Bahamas... Envy aside, the important thing is that the effect on his painting is enormous: the smoky greys, the black-brown tints drop from his palette. Under the impact of that incandescent light, he sets to work with a shimmer of bright colours - and here he does use canvas because he can carry a roll under his arm, there and back. Relative to his whole career so far, this has been a recent experience - an annual treat which, though it sets him problems, has been a great stimulus and has, I'm sure, been a greatly enriching influence on his work. On his return, burrowing back into that tiny cottage in St Ives in midwinter, the work darkens again. Out comes the board ...

St. Ives and its art tradition has been written about often enough. All I would say, by way of conclusion, is that for me Tony O'Malley typifies that tradition. He exemplifies it. I noticed on the occasion of my last visit that his signature was to be found in the concrete of the step outside his front door. His reputation will be even more enduring.