



Stephen Chambers: Paintings
Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 26
September - 1 November 1998
The artist is in residence at Downing
College, Cambridge, 1998-99

Chambers' paintings carry images of (mostly female) figures - simplified cut-out shapes but, most strikingly, with eyes which glare or gaze or at any rate fix the viewer's attention. It's as if these stylised eyes must conform to a set of rules: I am reminded of Ethiopian churches, where lines of angels' faces gaze down from ceiling paintings. Yet here we are seeing an artist's clearly specific and personal iconography.

His work evokes the projected image: it's radiantly coloured and full of light but, as with a cinema screen, the light is thrown from elsewhere. There is a flattening out here, an ambiguity between foreground and background: sometimes the figure seems to be made by a cutting away of the surrounding surface and sometimes the attacks made upon that surface (Nitromors serving to bleach away paint) put the figure into the foreground. The figure is often seen from a curious angle, and one might see it as 'recumbent' but it makes me think of a camera placed on the ground and looking up - a Hitchcockian strategy and one which in contemporary cinema has become a clichéd intimation of menace.

Chambers uses a number of motifs in his work, one of which is to embed a series of 'scratch' marks, scars, somewhere in a painting - often over a figure. Again, I'm reminded of celluloid, scratching being a classic procedure in early structuralist filmmaking. The marks add to the strong sense of drawing, of line, in the work. In the very recent *Even the Blind See*, the substantial area surrounding the figure and furniture (which form the painting's focus) has been blocked in afterwards with narrow shapes which read as

three-dimensional: human, chair and table are in enforced communion, packed and shut in. They're all bordered by thin lines emanating at ninety degrees to their edges, forming a strange ectoplasm, an ominous radiation.

There's a fondness for patterns - most often simply spots. A freckling sometimes lies across the figures, and sometimes forms the 'aura' given off by them. It seems as if the artist is accessing dreams this way, by this playfulness. At times it's nerve-rackingly cuddly: there are petal patterns, delicate leaves. Countering these, though, we often find a long diagonal shape, typically black, emerging at eye level, as if from the head (or perhaps assaulting it?) This shape bleeds to the edge of the canvas, as if the painting's surface has been collaged on and then ripped away.

The figures invariably stare out at us - perhaps at the artist, too, who seems to be looking into these paintings. Mostly these figures have their arms down, often with hands joined and in a couple of cases entwined in beads: paradoxically, these beads serve to ease anxiety yet they're entrapping the hands. For all their seductive colours and domestic components, these are powerful and uncomfortable paintings.