

Frank Hyder's work uses traditional techniques to deal with new experiences and new physical situations. In a certain sense this forms part of the continuing development of western art. If one looks, for example, at the tradition of painting, as it developed in Venice at the beginning of the 16th century, one sees how a shift took place from painting on panel to painting on canvas. There were several reasons for this. The Venetians had already discovered that mural painting, done directly on a freshly plastered surface, did not stand up well to the effects of the damp Venetian climate. With panel paintings, however, they could not achieve the large surfaces required for major decorative effects. In addition, panels were heavy and cumbersome and almost as vulnerable to changes of temperature and humidity as frescos. The solution was to use cloth as a support, rather than wood. Canvas, it turned out, offered an additional advantage – it enabled leading Venetian artists to make large compositions that could be exported all over Europe. This is why, today, there are more major works by Titian in the Prado in Madrid than can be found in Venice itself. Most of them reached Spain directly from the painter, as a result of Hapsburg patronage.

Today the great biennales – more and more of them, in Venice, Sao Paulo, Istanbul, Havana – offer more and more videos, more and more installations made from scrap materials found on the spot – for very practical reasons: these items sharply reduce the costs of transportation and insurance. The problem is, however, that the installations are ephemeral, and that the videos somehow lack that element of the purely physical that we still somehow expect from works of art, despite all the claims that are now made for the pre-eminence of the purely conceptual.

Hyder is a master of one of the oldest techniques for making images – woodcut. He is not inhibited by the fact that works of this sort are usually made on a fairly small scale. In addition, he has experimented with the most spontaneous form of printmaking, the monotype. He now uses a mixture of techniques, based on the idea of plunging the spectator into a primitive forest environment, or of asking him or her to complete the motions of a shoal of fish in the clear waters of a shallow pool. The complexity of his new techniques is matched by clarity of thought about the reasons for employing them.

The idea, inspired by extensive travels in South America, is to plunge the spectator into the experience of a tropical Eden and, at the same time, to demonstrate how and why the existence of this Eden is threatened by the actions of the industrial world.

He says of this phase of his work, represented in the current show: “An intense study of paper as a support began. This study also introduced many new ideas, one being simply the idea of paper as the means of story telling, as in books. Another being that I began to embed plant life from the forest as if I was attempting to paint on the forest itself. I use acrylic resins to bond these, which results in the paper having a unique character. They begin to suggest hides and animal skins similar to the ones used in indigenous artifacts... The latest form [of my art] being room sized installations where the walls are covered in randomly assembled landscape images from the forest center, which become background for these three dimensional, lighted prints, small votive boxes and the faces of indigenous, painted men. All of this creates a New Eden-like sense of wonder and curiosity.”

I believe the impact of these works will linger for a long time with those who encounter them. They capture the beauty of primeval nature but, at the same time, offer a poetic lament for the way in which this is being willfully destroyed.

Edward Lucie-Smith

Edward Lucie-Smith is best known as a writer of books on contemporary art. His titles include *Movements in Art Since 1945*, *Art Today and Art Tomorrow*. He is also an exhibition curator, poet and internationally exhibited photographer.