

# ALAN GOUK

New Paintings 2019-2022

# Foreword by Isabel H Langtry

Principal of Hampstead School of Art

**I am delighted to exhibit Alan Gouk's latest series of paintings at HSoA Gallery.**

In discarding recognisable reference points, abstract painting liberates us and is able to open a world of responses and emotions. If Gouk is painting memory then he is also creating memory, at least in me, as when I see his work it stays with me, becoming moments that I then remember as flashes of light, or sensuous velvet veils of vain feeling perhaps, as I float amongst their sharp, rich colour and subtle tonal changes. These are skilful, elegant moves that make the paintings a realm of the dreams that I desire, the escapes that I need. And perhaps glimpses into the complexities our brain's eyes are missing and which these paintings somehow synthesise for me. Throw qualia into this visual experience as you stare into a bright turquoise and note this very physical jolt, an inside outside, mind-body experience.

There is no reliance here on changing fashions, only superb timelessness.

As a patron of the art school Alan's contribution, alongside fellow Patrons Sir Frank Bowling, Francisco Gazitua, Dolorosa Sinaga and Lady Rachel Scott Bowling is fundamental to the art school's creative ambitions. Thank you Alan for sharing so much with us.

And a special thanks to Sam Cornish for his knowledgeable, insightful essay and to my trustees for supporting everything we do, especially Julia Simpson, Chair, and Reg Boorer, Vice-Chair.

# Essay by Sam Cornish

Writer, curator

Alan Gouk's paintings have a harsh beauty, at once luxurious and unforgiving, generous and demanding. He works within one of the central streams of modernist abstraction. The constructed logic of Cézanne and Matisse and the dramatic panoramas of the Abstract Expressionists set the stage for a meeting of the coloured planes of Patrick Heron and Hans Hofmann. Now in his early eighties, there has been no let up in the intensity with which he approaches image-making. In Spring 2020 he painted a group of smaller works on board, but has since returned to the large horizontal formats that are at the core of his art. The paintings shown here were made between February 2020 and April 2022.

Committed to abstract art and well-versed in the language and priorities of formalist criticism, his images nevertheless suggest the need to take a broader view, imbued as they are with a sense of mystical intensity, implying ritual and visionary states. Each canvas presents a kind of world, crude and vital, one seemingly caught in the process of being created, as if space, light and matter were not yet fully separated from each other. Their density can be seen

as a type of renunciation. They suggest it is possible to throw off the petty cares and confusions, the intricacies and doublings of our everyday social and cultural life. What is left behind is a primal scene, an unreal landscape in which the viewer confronts the world and themselves, where physicality, thought and feeling seem indistinguishable from each other.

With our habitual skepticism this all might be hard to digest. It would be easier if the paintings could more readily be considered simply as shapes and spaces arranged on a surface. But even if we cannot give ourselves entirely over to the broader view they suggest, in all its strangeness, there is certainly pleasure to be had in entertaining the possibility. His own strong belief that real art requires the bypassing of the intellect, is an idea in conflict with his broad, almost encyclopedic knowledge of the history of modern art, music and culture in general. This is a central productive tension running through his painting.

Since the late 1980s, Gouk's paintings have been filled with blocks of colour, each with its own distinct physical presence. The blocks allow him to combine the certainty and solidity of an emphatically constructed picture with the dynamic motion of gestural attack. Gesture enlivens solidity; solidity, sometimes with near sculptural bulk, gives weight, depth and permanence to the ebb and flow of gesture. The breadth of his paintings sets up a concertinaing of form, a pulse of expansion and contraction, with shape pressuring shape and forms tilting into each other, or twisting and turning apart. The epic statement is preferred to structural precision. Across the variety of Gouk's work, back into the late 1960s, there is a strong sense that each image is revolved by an individual temperament, one determined and insistent, at times even over-bearing. Yet in the end the paintings are brought to life by something very different, a kind of exuberance, a jittering nervous energy, capricious, at times almost eccentric, given to flourishes and elaboration. An analogue to this aspect of the paintings can be found in his often wonderful titles, helpfully explained at the end of this catalogue.

His blocks are often arranged in two rows, above and below. This creates an implicit horizon-line, sensed even in paintings with little other evocation of the visible world. In some the horizon suggests stability, as with the fantastical architecture of the great Deeper Sleep of Phoebe (1989). In others, such as the Raised Beach series of the mid-1990s, and in many of his new works, the suggestion of a horizon is fully submerged in a see-sawing motion, like geological strata shifted by tectonic activity. At the centre of Cowslip Walpurgisnacht (2020) is a dark void, enlivened by a spurt of red, and by spatters of white and a pale lemon yellow, marks reminiscent of the more unrestrained gestures in his paintings of the 1970s. An area of the same pale yellow lights the top right corner, providing the painting's clearest sense of release from the immersion it otherwise offers. The near primaries that rotate round the edge of the void are keyed to suggest they glow through darkness. We are encouraged to see the void as some kind of cave, and the red, yellow and white as volcanic. Here the importance to Gouk's painterly imagination of matter seen in a process of transformation has led him to a subterranean theme.



**Cowslip Walpurgisnacht**

October 2020

Oil on canvas

56" x 115"



**Kleiber's Coriolan**  
November 2020  
Oil on canvas  
48" x 96"



**A Sombre Celebrant**  
December 2020  
Acrylic & Oil on board  
48" x 96"



**Aquatic Incident**  
December 2020  
Oil on board  
48" x 96"





**Inside the Whale No 2**

January 2021

Acrylic & Oil on board

48" x 96"



**Chasing Pavements No 3**

Acrylic & Oil on board

48" x 96"



**Bhutanese Buddha**

March 2021

Oil on board

48" x 96"



**Deep into Cadmium**

May 2021

Oil on board

48" x 96"



**Turn Not Pale, Beloved Snail**

August 2021

Acrylic on board

48" x 120"



**Chocktaw Nation No 6**

August 2021

Acrylic on board

48" x 120"



**Chocktaw Nation No 7**

December 2021

Oil on board

48" x 120"



**Kleiber's Coriolan No 4**

January 2022

Oil on board

48" x 120"





**Leaping Blue Marlin**

March 2022

Acrylic on board

48" x 120"



**Leaping Black Marlin**

March 2022

Acrylic on board

48" x 120"



**Celadon and Corbeau No 2**

March 2022

Acrylic & Oil on board

48" x 120"



**A Sombre Consonance**

May 2021  
Oil on board  
48" x 96"

## Latest Articles about the artist:

- 2017 November** - Geoff Hands - writes on Alan Gouk's Retrospective Part 1 at Felix and Spear, London - in #86 abcrit.org  
**March** - Emyr Williams - writes on Alan Gouk's Recent Paintings at HSoA in #59 abcrit.org  
Ellis Woodman - Which Way is Up? - in Recent Paintings 2012-2017 - HSoA  
Robin Greenwood - Notes on an Exhibition - in Recent Paintings 2012- 2017 - HSoA
- 2014 November** - Estelle Lovatt - New Small Paintings -Hampstead School of Art catalogue - November 2014
- 2011 February** - Sam Cornish - High Abstract - Poussin Gallery Catalogue

## Latest Exhibitions:

- 2021 October** - Recent Small Paintings - Linden Hall Studio, Deal, Kent  
Alan Gouk and Steven Walker - New Paintings, The Cut Gallery, Halesworth, Suffolk  
**December** - Winter Group Show Linden Hall Studio
- 2018 November** - Alan Gouk: A retrospective Part 2 - Felix and Spear  
**December** - Winter Group Show - Linden Hall Gallery - Deal, Kent
- 2019 October** - Alan Gouk at 80 - HSoA
- 2017** Series Mandalay Reprised: 2012-2017  
Hampstead School of Art: 2012-2017  
**October** - Alan Gouk: A retrospective Part 1 - Felix and Spear, London
- 2014 November** - Hampstead School of Art
- 2013 August** - Kinblethmont Gallery by Arbroath

## Articles by the artist:

- 2020 May** - Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse Part 2: The Apotheosis of Decoration - instantloveland.com  
**March** - Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse Part 1: Open Conflicts, Hidden Affinities - instantloveland.com
- 2019 March** - Eye Opener - instantloveland.com
- 2014 July** - Alan Davie: The Phenomenon of Expanding Form  
**May** - Steel Sculpture Part 2: From Scott, Tucker and Panting to the present  
**April** - Steel Sculpture Part 1: From Gabo to Caro
- 2013 September** - Greenberg and Modernism  
**August** - The Conspiracy Theory Series: a note o the Kinblethmont Show  
**July** - Reappraising Pollock  
**May** - The Language of Painting?  
**February** - The Influences of Manet  
**January** - Review of Abstractcritical
- 2012 April** - Mondrian // Nicholson: In Parallel
- 2011 April** - Letter from New York

## Abcrit.org:

- 2018 February** - #96 Key Paintings of the 20th Century Part 2
- 2017 November** - #83 On Cezanne, Matisse and Soutine  
**August** - #74 Key Paintings of the 20th Century (a Musée imaginaire) Part 1  
**March** - #51 On the Shchukin Collection at Fondation Louis Vuitton - Paris
- 2016 December** - #48 On Katherine Gili Sculpture at Felix and Spear  
**November** - #43 On Abstract Expressionism at the R.A.  
**February** - #27 On Matisse's "Baroness Gourgaud"
- 2015 December** - #22 A Critique of T.J. Clark's "Farewell to an Idea"

# Notes on titles

## **Cowslip Walpurgisnacht** Page 1

Combines the atmosphere of a Germanic witches sabbath (as in the scherzo to Mahler's 2nd Symphony) with similar pagan rituals in parts of rural England, where cowslips are involved.

## **Kleiber's Coriolan** Page 3

A reference to a film of the ageing Carlos Kleiber conducting a performance of Beethoven's Coriolan Overture. "Perturbation of Spirit" in action.

## **Inside the Whale** Page 9

Refers to George Orwell's essay on the modern novelist's inner world, speculating on the inability of today's (then) writers to get outside themselves and embrace a large historical or socio-political overview, confining themselves to a subterranean exploration of the texture of bohemian pursuits (eg. Henry Miller, Jean Genet etc).

## **Turn not pale, beloved snail** Page 17

From Lewis Carroll's The Mock Turtle's Song, which adds the line "The farther off from England, the closer far to France". (We're living in Ramsgate now).

## **Chocktaw Nation** Page 19

On hearing that Trump's speech writer had proposed the teaching of "a patriotic history of America" in schools, I immediately thought of how Native Americans would respond.

During the Irish potato famine in the 19th century, the elders of the Chocktaw Nation set up an aid channel to help the stricken Irish workers. This act of generosity was reciprocated when a century later the tribe's elders were invited to a ceremony to commemorate the event.

This is as near to a political statement as I'm ever likely to get.

## **Leaping Blue Marlin** Page 25

From a YouTube video of a giant blue marlin leaping into a small boat, knocking over the occupant fisherman (Shades of "The Old Man and the Sea"). Of course the painting was completed before I saw a connection to the video.

## **Celadon and Corbeau No 2** Page 29

A reprise of a series of paintings from the late 1990s relating to the opening stanzas of a poem "On a Raised Beach" by Hugh MacDiarmid.



Kleiber's Coriolan No 4 Page 23

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**HSoA was founded in 1946** by a group of local artists, including Henry Moore, Bernard Gay and Jeannette Jackson, who believed that art should not be the exclusive domain of the avant garde. Today the school is an independent centre of artistic excellence, providing first class, affordable tuition in traditional observational and experimental creative skills. Our branding includes the line 'Unleashing the artist in everyone', a direct reference to our founders' original mission.

Hampstead School of Art is a registered charity, governed by a board of trustees who have ambitious plans for the school's future. Central to this has been the move to a state-of-the-art new building, designed by Allies and Morrison.

**Reg Boorer**  
**Vice Chair, Board of Trustees**

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