

Layering the Landscape

This year, Martin Tinney Gallery in Cardiff celebrates its fifth year in its current premises. Hannah Mackay reviews its recent Gwilym Pritchard exhibition, asking whether it earns Pritchard the nickname ‘Kyffin with colour’, and examines the part the gallery plays in promoting Welsh artists

Few painters can transport their viewers quite as powerfully as Gwilym Pritchard does. With a sweep of his palette knife, he carries his audience from an inner-city Cardiff gallery to the rolling hills and weathered cliffs of rural Wales. Pritchard’s evocations the landscape using a thickly-laden palette knife have earned him the nickname ‘Kyffin with colour’, and a year after the death of Sir Kyffin Williams, this exhibition came as a timely reminder of why Pritchard has become the senior figure in Welsh landscape painting.

Born in Llanystundy, near Criccieth in 1931, Pritchard has spent twenty of his adult years travelling and painting in Europe. An influential figure in the arts scene of Brittany – where he lived for seventeen years – he returned to Wales in 2001, setting up home in Tenby. Martin Tinney Gallery seems a fitting location in which to mark his homecoming. Its white walls and airy rooms create a ‘white cube’ gallery space, whilst its carpets and wooden banisters, and its position in a crescent of houses maintain a homely, approachable ethos. When the gallery moved to its present

location five years ago, its decision to open with an exhibition of twentieth century Welsh artists was progressive (and some would say daring). The gallery has continued to specialise in Welsh artists and subject matter, promoting the nation's art to a level that is unprecedented. On its fifth anniversary it is revisiting the theme of its opening exhibition, this time focusing on one of the most influential living Welsh painters, Gwilym Pritchard.

However, five years on, exhibiting the work of twentieth century Welsh artists carries a different meaning from what it did when the gallery first opened. These artists are no longer considered parochial outsiders, and this change, in part, is thanks to the Martin Tinney Gallery for its promotion of the nation's art. Speaking about this shift in regard to Welsh art, Martin Tinney says,

There is a new confidence in the Welsh market; a maturation. This is a marked change in attitude and shows a new self-confidence. There has always been an element of low expectation in Wales, but now there is a feeling that Welsh artists are as good as any.¹

The confidence in the Welsh market that Tinney speaks of is evident, with a flurry of red dots appearing beside Pritchard's paintings. These works glow with the living landscape they take as their subject matter. One might expect depictions of the natural landscape to be of a limited palette. However, Pritchard's works are alive with the changing hues of the seasons and the shifts in natural light and weather. Entering the exhibition, one is greeted by bursts of colour – dusty pinks, grass greens, rich ochres

¹ Tinney, in *Cambria – Wales' Magazine*, September-October 2007, as seen online. <http://www.cambriamagazine.com/content/view/37/9/>

and slate blues, which are never garish, but always powerfully reminiscent of the landscape that Pritchard paints so passionately. He sculpts the terrain with a palette knife, building the landscape's layers of rock, soil and grass. The changing seasons are evoked with the accuracy of an artist who has spent many years living closely with these landscapes. Looking round the gallery, one is transported from the majestic mountains of north Wales to the crashing waves of the south, through valleys and farm buildings, up hills and down rivers. Standing in front of *High Tide, Caldy Island* (2002), viewers can taste the salt of the sea spray. Moments later they feel the moonlit farm track crunch beneath their feet as they are transported by *Ysgoldy, Cwm Pennant* (2007).



High Tide, Caldy Island (2002)



Ysgoldy, Cwm Pennant (2007)

There is no doubt that Pritchard knows these landscapes intimately. He captures the shifts in light convincingly, conveying its ability to alter the colours of the entire landscape. In *Hen Felin Wynt, Ynys Môn* (2002), the snow reflects the salmon pink of the sunset, the whole landscape glowing with the passing of time. Dylan Thomas might have been describing this very scene when he wrote of,

‘This day winding down now
At God speeded summer’s end
In the torrent salmon sun’²

Similarly, the effect of the weather upon the landscape is observed with an accuracy that is testimony to Pritchard’s passion for the places he paints. His evocations of these landscapes suggest that he has walked, lived and breathed them, imbibing their

² Thomas in Jones, 1978, p.3.

smells, colours and textures. Sir Kyffin Williams attributed his own fascination with painting the Welsh landscape to,

‘The mood that touches the seam of melancholy that is within most Welshmen, a melancholy that derives from the dark hills, the heavy clouds and the enveloping sea mists’.³

Sir Kyffin’s words might be applied also to Pritchard, once again justifying the comparison between the artists.

The power of the natural landscape over humankind is evoked frequently in these paintings. They feature only occasional glimpses of human existence, often in weather-beaten, isolated landscapes. However, despite the fact that the viewer can almost feel the chilly night air or the bitter wind, these places retain an inviting warmth, such is their success in capturing their subject matter. Viewing these landscapes, one feels it is almost possible to step into them and climb the mountains or walk the coastal paths. A powerful sense of solitude is evoked, as if the viewer shares the scene before them with only the sky and the earth, and perhaps the person standing next to them. A notable shift occurs in Pritchard’s treatment of the human figure; two of the exhibition’s works – *Tas Wair*, *Lladaw* and *It Might Snow* – date from 1999 and feature human figures of rather unconvincing posture. Dressed in garish clothes, these figures are farming or observing the landscape, awkwardly positioned within it, and revealing that Pritchard’s strengths and passions lie in depicting the natural landscape rather than its inhabitants. The inclusion of the human

³ Williams in Fraser-Jenkins, 1981, p.5.

figure in Pritchard's work is confined to four of the works in this exhibition. The other forty-five paintings featured all date from 2002 onwards, and are more hinting in their depictions of human existence. Signs of human life are assimilated into the landscape; for example in *Cricht* (2006) slate fence posts stand to attention, leading to a vast peak that looms out of the dark landscape. Below the ridge, easily missed on first viewing, and overshadowed by the sheer scale of the natural landscape, is a small cottage. Nestled into the mountainside for shelter, this building can be read as a symbol of the command of nature over humankind, revealing Pritchard's humble regard for the strength of the elements. In most of the paintings, human existence is revealed by the inclusion of farm buildings and cottages. Pritchard's depiction of humankind humbled by nature is revealed by his frequent inclusion of ramshackle buildings in his landscapes. *Ruin* (2007) for example, is an image of decay, with ominous crows circling in the skies overhead. The composition of the farm buildings in *Ar Werth* (2007) ('*For Sale*') reflects the line of the background hills, drawing links between the landscape and those who work and live on it. Whilst the hills remain unchanged in this painting, the building in the foreground is a sign of our times; rural communities are in decay, with the buildings that were once part of their livelihood being sold as second homes.

The traces of death in these works are as multi-faceted as the layers built up by Pritchard's palette knife. His depictions of the death of rural communities in Wales can simultaneously be read as an autobiographical statement. It is natural that his own mortality should be of concern to the artist who is now in his mid seventies. The sun sets over the muted, snowy landscape and skeletal trees of *Hen Felin Wynt, Ynys Môn*, portraying the death of rural industry in Wales and the death of nature. Perhaps it also

offers a glimpse of Pritchard's own feelings towards human mortality, be these conscious or not. Also readable as semi-autobiographical are the shifts in Pritchard's style between different locations. Those depicting Tenby focus on human interventions into the landscape – the harbour, the houses and the people themselves – rather than the dramatic natural landscape. Here the rows of houses become the mountains, coloured dramatically not by the elements but by brightly painted stone. Pritchard paints the place that is now his home with a brighter, flatter style than is seen in his depictions of the natural landscape. Fittingly for the location, they are reminiscent of a holiday postcard.

Browsing the gallery's catalogue highlights what it is that I find so enticing about this exhibition. Images of the work cannot do it justice; these paintings need to be seen on the wall from a distance, and then studied closely. The scene must be allowed to fill one's field of vision, its layers, tones and vibrancy transporting one to the mountains or the cliffs. The powerful smell of oils that fills the gallery quickly becomes the salty seaside breeze, the crisp air of a moonlit night or the moist earth of the mountain after the rain. These works are so tactile and rich, so expert in their depictions of the elements' power to alter every tone in the landscape. In layering the terrain with his palette knife, Pritchard dispels the opening lines of R.S. Thomas' *Welsh Landscape*, which claimed,

‘There is no present in Wales,

And no future;

There is only the past'⁴

⁴ Thomas, 1973, p.9.

These works serve as a powerful reminder that Pritchard is both the present and the future of Welsh landscape painting. The effort of Martin Tinney Gallery to place it in the high esteem it deserves promises a very exciting future for Welsh art. To step inside this exhibition was be transported.

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