

“THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE”

Malcolm Bray, Black and White Paintings, circa 2019-2020

A tidal estuary cuts through East Yorkshire, in Northern England, its mouth at the North Sea. At Trent Falls, the confluence of the tidal rivers Ouse and Trent form the River Humber. Where the Humber River meets the River Hull sits an historic maritime city, first established in the late 12th Century by the monks of Meaux Abbey, who sought a place from which to export their wool. Since its birth as a town in the Middle Ages, Hull has continued to be a center of European maritime commerce, fishing and shipbuilding. It is also the birthplace of painter Malcolm Bray, whose recent body of work owes much of its inspiration to the turbulence and spirited indifference of water generally, and to Bray’s particular vista of water, the River Hull, specifically.

This new series of paintings by Hull’s neo-expressionist native son displays a confident use of black and white, invaded with bold bursts of color and sinuous brushstrokes that cut through dense mass the way the river carves the landscape. Bray’s paintings explore the contrasting sensibilities suggested by the storied history and changing fortunes of his particular place of origin: in recent times Hull has been described as a decaying industrial city. Yet in 2017, Hull was named the UK City of Culture, restoring its reputation as a hub of purposeful and productive energy, innovation and art. For Bray, Hull has always been about the river—the changing rhythms of tidal water, the docks, the seafarers, the worn wood and local banter of the codheads in the old pubs, the ones frequented by the locals.

Bray pays homage to Hull in several new paintings that convey complex narratives through a muscular use of black forms comprising the foreground, softened by contrast against buff and white, and shot through with bright splashes of color. “City of Culture” pulls the viewer into a whorl of energy, in which a wash of intermingled shades of blue cascades like a waterfall in the center of a gyre formed by dancing shapes of black and gray, offset against their neutral background. The overall sense is one of equipoise rather than vertigo, for breath and balance are found in the negative spaces. In “Drypool Bridge (Hull/old town)” thick gray brush strokes suggest an armature, a platform from which to gaze into the swirling black depths below, while a field of pink inflected with green on the painting’s left perimeter suggests that respite may yet be found here. In “Alexandra Dock,” black spreads elegantly from a central vortex to pulsate like a constellation suspended in a sky of negative space. In the masterful “Essencia,” the viewer can literally feel the mass of great hulking steel moored at the docks; even here, the neutral background softens the edges of the forms themselves, and the lines connecting them suggest equanimity and objectivity: the viewer can appreciate and appraise the density without feeling engulfed by it.

Bray’s recent paintings represent a new chapter for the painter, who has ventured from the liberal use of color often found in his earlier work, as well as in work of the progenitors of the

post-modern, neo-expressionist movement, in favor of a substantial reliance on a much more limited and nuanced palette: the potentially austere power of black and white. However, in these paintings, black and white do not portray a binary scheme; instead, Bray invites his viewers into landscapes of interpenetration and ambiguity, taking them on journeys to explore relationships between light and dark, mass and weightlessness, density and insubstantiality. In this body of work, there are no value judgments associated with density, mass and darkness, which are inseparable from the field of evanescence and the background of light that transforms and illuminates them, much as the moon, shadowed by the earth, still shines upon the black water of night, exerting its invisible and powerful force on the tides. We feel the power of the natural world straining against the muck and mire of human design: port, industry, poverty, culture—and in the end the river carries it all back out to sea.

Stacey Meadows