

Creative Contradictions

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‘Christopher Wood: Sophisticated Primitive’

Pallant House Gallery, until October 2

Katy Norris, *Christopher Wood*

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Two contrasting views of Christopher Wood's Paris cottage, painted in the last year of his short life, hang together in Pallant House's comprehensive survey. In "The Artist's Cottage, Paris", a calm light suffuses a charming domestic scene, with a seated woman in silhouette inside, and vegetables on a table in the garden, in preparation for lunch. But in "Little House by Night", the same setting is charged with menace: a violent sky dominates the cottage, now isolated from the shelter of its surroundings; a side wall has grown, while the tree has shrivelled; the silhouette is now of a standing man, and playing cards lie fatefully on the table. As Katy Norris, the show's curator and author of the accompanying monograph, puts it, "here the resounding contradictions that had preoccupied the young painter for much of his adult life are brought into stark contrast: day and night, light and dark, feminine and masculine, innocence and experience".

Sophisticated Primitive traces these tensions productively across some eighty works selected from Wood's astonishing, at times feverish output of around 500 paintings between his move to Paris in 1921 and his suicide at the age of twenty-nine in 1930. If there isn't always space on the walls to explore the show's binary terms (the gallery texts rely rather heavily on scare quotes around the term "primitive"), then this is more than compensated for in the nuanced and meticulously researched publication.

Before proceeding chronologically the show presents an illuminating study of influence. Van Gogh is invoked explicitly in a series of vases of flowers, Utrillo in a Paris street scene, and Cezanne in a landscape of Vence and some still lives of fruit; there is even a version of "The Card Players". That one of the vase paintings comes from 1928, when Wood was producing some of his best-known work, reminds us just how early on he was in his career at the time of his death: how in a sense he was just starting out, still learning from his artistic heroes. But a restless openness to both influence and experimentation leads to the exhilarating idiosyncrasies of his greatest work.

Many of these apparently derivative works are, in fact, extraordinary. They are not academic studies, but rather show the young artist internalizing the complex approaches and techniques of the modern masters, whose end point was, paradoxically, a clarity and simplicity of vision. This was an unprecedented method of intuitive learning, supplemented only by sporadic lessons. It worked because of Wood's great gift not just for assimilation, but for unerringly sensing the most significant qualities of the new, and their potential for development; and it brought about that most difficult thing for a British artist: acceptance among the Parisian avant-garde.

"Bridge over the Seine", for example, from 1927, develops Paul Cezanne in a romantic mode, bypassing Cubism. It extends Cezanne's notion of "seeing like a man who has just been born" by reducing its figures to outlines or silhouettes, and by rendering their scale entirely subjective. It is a childlike way of seeing appropriate to the spirit of play in the subjects (two dogs frolicking while children look on, a passing canoe, and a distant game of football), but at the same time it is subtly intricate in engaging several different perspectives in a single painting. The paradox is reinforced by the setting, which merges the pastoral with the urban.

Biography has been both a help and a hindrance in the assessment of Wood's painting. Although she doesn't shy away from some strong autobiographical readings, Norris is sensibly cautious, while engaging insightfully with Wood's personal mythology of the connectedness of an artist's life and work, much of it derived from his reading of Van Gogh's letters. The most poorly served aspects of Wood's biography, projected onto the canvases from a position of speculation, have been his death and his sexuality. An alternative account for the faux-naïf style is that it derived from Wood's posture in Paris as the ingenue, a role possibly played to attract the interest of the older, and wealthy, homosexuals who would become a key part of his Paris circle. Anthony Powell went so far as to suggest that Wood's bisexuality was a part of this act, though this seems absurd given the extent of Wood's various relations and his attempts to keep them separate.

Both his male and female nudes can display excitement and also detached calm; and there is strong fascination in the portraits of Jeanne Bourgoint as "La Gargonne". Bourgoint, and her brother Jean, were the inspiration for Jean Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles*, and Wood's portrait drawings take something from Cocteau's own pared-down sketches, but with a unique counterpointing of highly worked heads against minimalist torsos. They demonstrate how simplicity can coincide with refinement. With their faultless sense of line they give the lie to another myth: that Wood may have been drawn to the naïve to disguise an absence of technique. In the painted portraits we often find something of the quality of the sketch, as well as the influence of Modigliani. In "The Bather", Bourgoint lies on the beach, framed by a phallic shell and lighthouse, her hair cropped and one breast exposed: as much as he sets up strong contrasts, Wood is also interested in exploring in-between states.

Wood hoped to follow the example of Cocteau and Picasso in collaborating with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. In 1925 he produced designs for their upcoming *Romeo and Juliet* that contrast conventional perspective with flat decoration; and he conceived a ballet of his own, "English Country Life", to be set in a pub. Although nothing came of either project, the designs gave him another way of thinking about space and colour, and the interest in spectacle lasted: like so many modernists he dramatized the artist as a clown. The episode led him to pursue further ways of combining his French experience with his English heritage.

In 1926, Wood met Ben and Winifred Nicholson in London. Wood had already visited St Ives, and the Nicholsons were immediately struck by the freshness of works such as "China Dogs in a St Ives Window", with its formal clarity yet informal, homely spirit. Wood went to stay with the Nicholsons at their farmstead in Cumbria in 1928, and as Winifred put it, "inspiration ran high and flew backwards and forwards from one to the other". All three began painting the surrounding countryside in related ways. Scratched and scumbled, with rhythmic brushstrokes that leave areas of canvas exposed, and the rough offsetting the smooth, these works push the techniques learnt from the Post-Impressionists still further, in the context of an ancient, mystical English landscape.

It was with the Nicholsons in St Ives that summer that Wood met Alfred Wallis, the retired seaman who had taken up painting in old age. Painted on old pieces of board, and uninformed by conventional perspective, Wallis' work represented for Wood the natural expression of his own willed effects. Though untrained as a painter, Wallis was highly skilled as a seaman, and this found expression in the sophistication of his nautical detail. Wood carried these contrasts, between realistic graphic detail and stylized space, forward, together with a renewed emphasis on texture and materials.

"More & more influence de Wallis" he wrote, illustrating his delight in syncretism. Back in France, Wood extended his exploration of Celtic seafaring culture through two trips to Brittany, in 1929 and 1930. The resulting works fuse observation with memory, fantasy and a new symbolic dimension. Churches compete with tarot cards to represent the spiritual domain, while the physical world is celebrated in the dancing of sailors with women wearing the outmoded Breton winged-headaddresses, making clear the emulation of Gauguin in these searches for a purer way of life.

While there is joy in the depiction of local traditions, darker notes enter: a lugger threatens to run aground, the cards of fate laid out on the shore; waves appear choppy within a harbour than without. Some of his figures are subject to distortion and dissolution, rendered featureless, reduced to contours, or even scratched out. Such hallucinatory effects are usually attributed to Wood's opium addiction; they are continuous with his agitated experiments with form, but far more disturbing. The summation of these figures is "The Yellow Man", painted during a final trip to London, of a ghostly figure who emerges in radiant costume from turbulent shadows, together with a red-caped child. It is hung, insightfully, alongside a series of contemporary cabaret costume designs, which show the passage of Wood's urban life from beau monde to demi-monde. In "The Yellow Man", all Wood's previous techniques are applied simultaneously, to excess, so that the paint is at war with itself. Till the end his paintings thrive on irresolution.