

# Necessary Law

Julian Freeman. 2009.

' ... when they had asked him for perfect solutions, guaranteed to eliminate all risks, he would reply: "Experience will establish the necessary laws. The proper understanding of laws never precedes experience." ' *Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Night Flight / Vol de Nuit, 1931*

John Long's art requires and commands descriptive cadences, in which a range of visual interrelationships are explored inquisitorially, from intellectual and emotional positions. In it can be found cast shadow, stark contrasts of light-to-dark, warm-to-cool colours, and, alongside these, symmetry. There have never been quick fixes in Long's work, and so it should be unsurprising to learn that his subjects have a history; that they have always been roughly the same since his earliest paintings. The strict analysis of his chosen subjects are traceable to his early years at the Slade, but the postures and arrangements of his figures come from an older visual source, pre-dating Gower Street: from the world of the art book, discovered in childhood, and from the world of Velázquez in particular. The latter's bodegones, the wine shop habitués who people so many of his paintings, and which Long first discovered some distance from any gallery wall, remain the sources of many of his figure studies, not simply in the poses they strike, but in the strict geometry of the arrangements within which they exist. It seems that Long, like his Spanish mentor-by-extension, has remained as much interested in the formal interrelationships between figures, as in their narrative qualities. Each new series of his paintings not only reconnects him with his earliest use of the human figure, but also with seemingly incidental objects, his props, the bowls and vases that regularly reappear in these images. These were made by Long's father, and have featured again and again for more than twenty years, in different settings. For Long, each painting is restorative, a reconnection between the temporal present and the timeless: nothing here strictly represents Time at a standstill. For us, his audience, we see what we may, and in most cases, he himself acts as Master of Ceremonies, prompting our involvement in different ways.

The late Euan Uglow presided over Long's studies at the Slade, and, as with many other master-pupil associations, it is best for audiences to set that fact aside. The measuring marks that characterised the paintings of Uglow and those of William Coldstream will probably forever recur in Long's work, and not simply because they own a peculiar and meaningful rationale: even a glance determines that the merest form of visual engagement with these works ensures that the eye quickly ceases to skate across their picture planes. And from Fennel to Nocturnes,

from the smallest to the largest, there is no question but that Long's pictures are entirely his own.

There's an argument that promotes chamber music to a level of incisive, cerebral achievement at which it is said that it can frequently supercede the expansive qualities of a major orchestral work, and there are paintings by Long that might echo that notion. Fennel, one of the earliest paintings in this show, establishes the basis for a sonic equivalence, with a palette that immediately demonstrates upper and lower spatial and formal tones, and a trademark brushstroke whose delicacy delivers crispness, sharpness of subject outline, and bodily form, in the globular jug-ness of the vegetable itself. A similar execution characterises Two Cuttings and Daisy, very different paintings whose subtleties of light and tone result from small brushstrokes that reflect the artist's minute examinations of each subject. But if this is chamber music, it's Aarvo Pärt rather than Schubert: sinew rather than muscle. Long's approach to his smaller subjects has altered in recent years. His treatment of such images has become more substantial, as shown in Two Quinces, where the drawing and laying on of colour creates a delicately fruity equipoise in a setting whose colour, light and structure suggest the craquelure of classical wall painting. His control of these smaller observations remains unchanged. As Long himself says, they are more contained: it's the bigger pictures that he finds more challenging.

For a painter to introduce such a concept is not so strange, but in the context of Long's work, the word 'bigger' is interestingly relative. It doesn't refer to the area of the picture plane but to the visual and technical demands of any pictorial arrangement, to the active or passive elements, and in the placement of figures and objects. In Long's oeuvre, 'bigger' is usually as much about sturm und drang, daring, will and determination, as it is about size. Night Studio and its study prove the point, not least because the study is in many ways as sound a painting as its successor, with an entirely satisfactory and self-supporting geometry that is only challenged by the later work. But both these pictures are jumping-off points for more recent activity. Night Studio itself contains several of Long's signature figure arrangements: outstretched arms, averted heads, and the sensation of weariness or remorse, complemented by an array of objects that appears busy, despite itself. Since then, his larger pictures have increased in their complexity, his colour has intensified, and real contrasts have been introduced. Girl with Two Tables sees a major development in Long's world's eye view. The picture's active narrative marks a change in his process: the open door is symbolic as a technical announcement at least, and the marks, spatial considerations, and an accessible iconographical acknowledgement, in the form of the Cézannesque napkin are changed or new. This progression continues in Villa of the Mysteries, probably the most complex painting of his in recent years. In ways hitherto unseen in Long's work static elements that by themselves might appear muted or subdued suddenly come alive. Several different interrelationships are employed through extremes of hue, the blue bowl, the pink drape, the tactile qualities of the reds and the hard/soft contrasts of colour and shape. Through these, and the associations to be

had from an external engagement with the painting, emotional and narrative finality is suspended.

One painting key to this stage in Long's work, and to some extent to the newest Nocturne pictures, is *Mask – Studio*, the splendidly and darkly austere interior in which arrested motion enters one of his otherwise customarily contemplative arrangements. The tonal extremes here are very different from those encountered earlier in his oeuvre. The mask on the back wall is frozen like a comet along its trajectory, and though the tabletop promotes stability, neither the isolation of the small fruit or its opposing bottle do much to secure that sense. These tensions and the increased spatial depth, in the Nocturnes and in other smaller paintings, seem to herald an important and awaited dimension in Long's work which are capable of introducing transformative possibilities, until recently only latent. It is perhaps most instructive to see such tendencies as summarised in the most misleadingly informal paintings in this collection, landscapes executed as exercises or for pleasure, as if somehow these were of less importance than the hard-fought studio compositions. The distances depicted in these small paintings contrast acutely with the constraints of the studio, and call into questions once again that issue of 'bigger'. What are some of these views if not bigger pictures, enjoyed for their panoramic possibilities, and painted for the same reasons? The artist makes no special claims for them other than affectionate ones, but they should not be seen as lesser objects in any overview of his work. Certainly, some are as important as the discarded napkin in *Girl with Two Tables* because they ponder older ideas, and deliver new responses, in much the same way as Long repeatedly turns to older themes, and to old props to inform his work. Such a cyclical approach does not inhibit the orbit from a shift in axis, and in this new collection, Long proves emphatically that, in the past few years, he has moved steadily on, and outwards with his work, not once but several times, employing and requiring new vocabularies in both paint and text.