

The What it is to be

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Aristotle

[to ti ên einai]

John Long's onetime mentor, the late Euan Uglow, has been described as 'priestly' in his attitude to his work. His pupil, I suggest, tends more to the judicial. He observes his subject, bears witness to it and proceeds to present the viewer with his evidence. He lays the subject bare for our consideration. Like an anatomist stripping down through the flesh and muscle to reveal the nervous system, he gives us the benefit of his experimenting. His scalpels take the form of light and colour. It is not the dialogue between light and shade which takes centre-stage but the wielding of light and shade to promote the objects. We are looking at a staged set: everything of importance is highlighted as in a performance; only the proscenium arch is lacking. Finding the universal in the particular, he is a poet yielding us the essence, the Aristotelian what it was to be of the thing. And, like Aristotle, he is ruthless in his methods of investigation: first defining the subject matter, then weighing up the difficulties involved by reference to earlier artists' take on that subject and finally presenting his own solutions.

Scrupulous in his search for the truth, like Velázquez before him and Piraiikos before him, he does not shy from depicting the mundane and the trivial. Like Chardin and Cézanne, he has a passion for little things and an inclination to save them from dismissal. Because, like Chardin, he 'uses colours, but paints with feeling', his themes are not numerous nor are they varied. Of all his avowed influences, the contemplative spirit of his work is most reminiscent of Velázquez's early bodegones or kitchen still-lives. Almost in a state of trance, Long's figures are oblivious of any observer, existing only for themselves and their thoughts. Whilst Velázquez presented groups of figures, Long focuses on a single figure, on a concentrated presence undiluted by others. There is no eye-contact between the model and the artist/viewer and so no engagement. The spare starkness of the still life elements produces great immediacy, great intensity. His dark grounds emphasise the relief of the figures and objects, focussing our full attention on them.

Again like Velázquez, Long paints figures in a landscape form: hence the hunched poses at tables. Let us compare, for instance, *Girl Sleeping with the Spaniard's Two young Men eating at a humble Table* (Wellington Museum, Apsley House). The latter, a typical bodegón, presents two men hunched over to fit the space. They are accompanied by a disposition of objects, which, though natural-looking, are yet very carefully positioned, each thing having precisely the form, colour, light, weight and position necessary to animate and balance the different parts of the whole. Widely considered one of his most successful paintings from a compositional point of view, *Two Men at Table* displays many correspondences: the orange with the man's head, the pile of plates with his collar, the pestle and his belt. Long too, disposes his objects naturally

yet carefully: the girl's head is echoed in the loaf of bread, her ear in the lemon, her arm in the knife, the bowl in the label, the chair in the frame; the whole embrasure of her shoulder to hand cushioning her head finds echoes in the relationship between the bottle and the pieces of food. Just as Velázquez uses the orange to counterbalance the large surface of dark colour comprising the man's jacket, so Long introduces the white object on the table to counterbalance the dark ground. Like Velázquez's orange it is a small area of colour but shrill enough to command our attention. The distribution of the light tones in Velázquez's work leading from the mortar, through the plates and the napkin to the collar of the man on the right follows the same sinuous curve as that in Long's: from the shoulder-blade to the shoulder and on through to the arm and hand before sweeping to the bowl and up into the label on the bottle. 'Nothing', wrote Velázquez's master, Francisco Pacheco in his treatise, *Arte de la pintura*, 'is more fraught with difficulty than contour. It is in this that the giants themselves must struggle throughout their careers, unable to lay down their arms even for a second.'

There is a separateness, an anguish and a longing for unrealised experiences in John Long's work which calls out to the 21st-century viewer. His figures are locked away in their private, silent worlds. Introspective, self-contained figures absorbed in what they are thinking and unaware of the world around them: they are frozen in that moment, with that particular gesture and that particular stance. There is more than a hint of the Beckettian in their somewhat bewildered dignity, all slow and quiet and preoccupied. Stripped to their bare essentials, Long's protagonists, like Beckett's characters, bear witness to the meaninglessness of post-modern life. Communication having failed us, we are closed off in our own silence.

"... before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

Molloy, Samuel Beckett