

Elephant in the Room: Joan Baker revisited

Joan Baker: a retrospective (National Library of Wales) and accompanying 68 page book published by the University of Glamorgan; *Joan Baker – painter*, film by Pixel Foundry for Culture Colony

What makes art good or not? In choosing to make an exhibition of Joan Baker's paintings, Ceri Thomas has confronted an issue that critics often shy away from. It strikes me that he has showed some courage in bringing Joan Baker's work to the fore. Finding her work ignored by the great and good who have already surveyed Welsh art (Eric Rowan, Peter Lord and Peter Wakelin), Ceri Thomas has carried a torch for Joan Baker's work since 1999. She was a founder member of the Welsh Group, and not the only woman to feel put down in what was in effect a men's club.

A 1940s reviewer praised Joan Baker's paintings for their placidity. It was a compliment but therein hangs the complaint that used to be made, and is still believed, about 'Welsh art': it's just too damn quiet, or in other words second-rate.

But can you really call the work of people like Ceri Richards, Cedric Morris, Mary Lloyd-Jones, John Selway, Brendan Stuart Burns, Ernest Zobole, Tim Davies, John Uzzell Edwards, David Tress, Glenys Cour, Sue Williams, Terry Setch, Kyffin Williams and Peter Prendergast, quiet? Whether there is such a thing as Welsh art and what it consists of are other questions which have been answered by abler writers than me, notably Iwan Bala, Shelagh Hourahane, Osi Rhys Osmond and David Petersen.

For those that have never heard of her, Joan Baker is a painter and former art teacher who lives in Cardiff. Her pictures are mainly of landscapes of south Wales, often revisited. Most are done in a loosely impressionist style that lets you look long and deep into their silent expansive spaces as though contemplating the places themselves. In the 1940s – when she often painted figures in interiors or urban settings - her style was naively post-

impressionist, full of joie de vivre and the exuberance of being able to let go of one-point perspective in favour of giddy exaggerations that without being Cubist, introduce the illusion of movement, and of seeing something from several different angles at once.

These early pieces were often subdued in colour (and occasionally in content) and the exhibition highlighted her progression to much brighter paintings of the 1960s when she was playing with Op Art, and then to the frankly glorious 'late' work, made after her retirement. It showed how figures gradually made an 'exodus' from her scenes in favour of landscapes.

Those landscapes are empty of people but full of a human response that sees and relishes nature - and the occasional dog – afresh each time. Observing their pastel colours, Dr. Thomas says that one reason for their brightness is that south Wales gets the sun from the south, which is why they seem 'placid' by comparison with Kyffin Williams's famously lowering scenes of the north where the mountains are usually in shadow. The book lets the paintings down only by failing to reproduce their real colour – and of course the size - of her easel paintings.

Is it just me who heaves a sigh of relief at being able to luxuriate in these mountain, woodland and beach scenes without wincing at the pain of not understanding? Does that make her paintings second rate?

Not cutting edge, maybe, but I'm not even sure you can say that: there is an edgy social awareness in her work – look at *Spring Evening*, c.1949 (Aberystwyth School of Art Collection) with its hurrying householders and their wind-blown hair. Ceri Thomas confronts the issue of Joan Baker's uncoolness differently:

'Could it be argued... that... viewed from a relatively long perspective in contemporary art historical terms, Joan Baker's painting has never really been out of fashion... (but) merely out sight...?'

He quotes a telling passage from Frances Spalding's *British Art since 1900*: 'It has taken a long time for twentieth century British art to receive the attention it deserves... One reason for this is that a concern with modernism has blinkered critical evaluation of twentieth century art.'

During her long life (she was born in 1922) Joan Baker taught around 3000 students. Several of them are better known to art enthusiasts than her: the above mentioned Mary Lloyd Jones and Peter Prendergast, plus Ivor Davies, Glyn Jones, Islwyn Watkins and the much younger Sally Moore. Joan Baker's tutors were Ceri Richards and Evan Charlton. Ceri Richards (1903-71) had an astonishing talent – he is one of the great British artists - and though more conservative, Evan Charlton showed how being a good foil can be as valuable as taking the limelight. She in her turn played the steady, supportive figure to Tom Hudson's charismatic persona when he shook up the Cardiff art scene when he worked at the School of Art in the 1960s.

Joan retired in 1983. Four months later she had her first solo show. It was one of only four times that her work has been exhibited between then and now. Up until the time of the film which Pete Telfer made of her in 2009, she was still painting vigorously more or less every day. Whereas the show and the book are excellent and will serve scholars for years to come, the film is a revelation. Set free to say what she liked on camera without interference from anyone else, she is confident, generous and outspoken. In a long dress and with wildly flowing hair, the passionate painter-gardener appears like a benevolent, beautiful ghost, espousing a philosophy of good sense and self-mockery.

In two other essays, Tiffany Oben and Julie Mathews argue for a reappraisal of Joan Baker's painting. They like her willingness to portray marginalised people, such as the black woman who appears in a 1960 canvas, and her qualities as a landscapist who having retreated from abstraction, has created a more intimate, real and revealing interpretation of the subject than before.

Ceri Thomas concludes: 'As we contemplate the last leaves of 2009 and enjoy... the fruits of Baker's sixty-five-year painting career... we can... allow ourselves to be enriched by the living heritage of the trees and the wood in which, without her quietly refined art as aide-memoire, we could otherwise forget we all find ourselves.' Or in the painter's more modest words: 'I am a rooted in the ground person... I like that sense of growth and change; it's interesting.'

So it's with good reason that a self-effacing art historian has championed a self-effacing artist. Thomas places Joan Baker as 'connective tissue' between the 1950s, before Conceptual art took centre stage in British art, and the present when we are, with luck, waking up to fundamental environmental issues that make artistic fashions, and the question of who dictates what is or isn't good art, seem so trivial. This elephant needs to come out of the corner.

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