



The 'Obscure Mirror' series

An Interview between Christopher Cook and Gabriel Coxhead

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Gabriel Coxhead: I'd like to start with a question about your technique in the 'Obscure Mirror' works. You've spoken in the past about how you see your graphites as a hybrid of drawing and painting. Did working on linen, a soft support, make this series of works feel 'more' like painting? What different effects do the works on linen produce, as opposed to the works on paper on the other side of the gallery?

Christopher Cook: The linen was well-primed to harden up the surface, but yes, you're right, this sequence did feel more akin to painting. In the works on paper I had in mind a completely contemporary inquiry concerning language and possible fusions of linguistic strands. The traditional feel of the linen instead encouraged a more deliberate, slow-burn approach where the language was uneasy but not destabilized. The method allowed for more layering, and the primer gives off less light than the paper, so they also became darker – in both a physical and metaphorical sense.

GC: Yes, and not just darker, but at the same time also more lustrous, more sparkly and speckled, where the graphite catches the light. I was wondering: was it experimenting with this technique, seeing these sorts of glinting, reflective effects, that got you thinking about mirrors, which are a motif throughout the series? Or, if not always literal mirrors, then other sorts of light-reflecting surfaces...?

CC: The graphite has always had that ability, to move unexpectedly from absorbency to reflectivity – often when an attempt to produce more darkness backfires, as can happen in etching, when the white of the paper fills in and the blacks flatten. In the case of graphite, its natural reflectivity accentuates this loss of contrast. I'm sure this played its part in the development of the 'obscure mirror' idea.

GC: I guess what I'm circling around is the question of how much the 'obscure mirror' idea is a metaphor for your practice as a whole: this sense that your graphites involve this same dynamic – light-dark – which is implied by the idea of an 'obscure mirror'; and possibly the sense that when you're alone, working on a piece, focusing intensely, the work somehow becomes a sort of

reflection of you. What are your thoughts on that? Or do you intend the images of mirrors in the works – or of similar, substituted shapes, such as lakes or even eyes – to be more a kind of message to the viewer?

CC: Both, in a way. I feel that the presence of the mirror alters the viewer's standpoint slightly, in that the image is made more provisional somehow, and subject to revision via this other perspective that sits within the picture frame. I suppose this derives from my experience whilst painting - the inclusion of a mirror allowed me a distance and an irony when required, and consequently the tone of the work became more volatile and unnerving.

And, definitely, there's also an element of the obscure mirror idea that connects fundamentally to my process. I feel a potent aspect of the act of painting is the way it draws me into conversation with myself, throwing up some half-known or uncomfortable aspects of that self. That said, I don't see painting as confined to this mirroring. Much of the inquiry is into the possibilities of visual language itself, though not as much as in the paper works.

GC: I think this sense of visual possibility is something that characterizes your work. There are always certain shapes that suggest – or perhaps signify, is a better way of putting it – some reading or direction. But other shapes and forms are less distinct, indicating things that are not quite there or that perhaps only might be there. Your works are sort of alive or ornate with possibility. And, phrased like that, it sounds like quite a nice thing to contemplate. But in the 'Obscure Mirror' works this sense of possibility feels quite macabre, quite threatening and sinister. Was that something you were consciously trying to encourage?

CC: I found that the idea of the obscure mirror made me consider the closeness of certain sinister elements – elements sometimes recalled from previous works. I wanted to bring some of these back into play, as a way of reevaluating them. So the mirror became a type of window back to early work, especially to paintings I produced in Rome three or four years ago, under the influence of Baroque interiors.

In the past, using the graphite has drawn me towards the twilight vision of Dore, or Redon, perhaps. Or, in other pieces, an unexpected association with black-and-white documentary

photography occasionally led me towards some bleaker images of the inhumane. It's not that I want to speak of current events – those, say, in Syria or Ukraine, the list goes on – but more to evoke the closeness of these inclinations in the everyday. I think that's why the 'Obscure Mirror' images can look medieval at times – because the idea of the 'sinister' has not much changed over time, only its method of delivery.

GC: There are certainly all sorts of medieval and Renaissance references throughout the series: the 'vanitas' theme of piles of skulls; what looks like a horned figure in *Harbinger*; the figure of a bird, perhaps implying some sort of augury, in *Mirror Stage*. And also perhaps more contemporary parallels, such as what could be mushroom clouds in *Hallucination*. Again, is there an element of a direct message to the viewer? I'm thinking of the tradition of 'memento mori' paintings, and suchlike.

CC: A partial explanation for the medievalism is that while on another residency in Italy last year I was re-reading the translation of Dante's *Purgatorio* that I'd first read while studying in Bologna in the Eighties. It had less impact the second time around as the images that had persisted in my imagination were more to do with Dore or Blake's illustrations than the text itself. But its atmosphere provided a kind of foil to the speculative pieces on paper I was making at the time. As the act of painting includes that self-scrutiny you asked about earlier, it felt important to maintain that dark/light symbiosis.

GC: And the images of birds?

CC: They're types of messengers. I feel they denote something – some information – being carried from one realm to another, and so contribute to the feeling of transience.

GC: What about the skulls and flames? Traditionally, these have been taken as symbols of fleeting time, of the temporariness of human existence. Do these themes have a resonance for you? Your work, particularly, seems to be about notions of time.

CC: That's a complex question. I don't feel time and its passing is a particular preoccupation at the moment, but as a painter the concept of 'vanitas' can seem intimate at times – not just because of the tradition, but also due to continually trying to catch rich emotional moments and turn them

into static images. What the concept of Purgatorio offers is the possibility of change, or development – so in the sense that these paintings are also warning signs, that works for me. So, the mushroom cloud trees around the black mirror pool may threaten existence itself, but the inclusion of the caravan shows that people have learned to live with the spectre of them.

GC: In the same way that people have learned to live with, say, the spectre of urbanisation? I'm thinking of the work, *Mythic Landscape*, here, featuring what might be hazy images of an urban skyline far off in the distance, while fragments of other, more bucolic landscapes seem to billow and blot out the rest of the city.

CC: Variations on the theme of urbanisation have absorbed me for many years – in that it presents the visual imagination with an image of our relationship with the natural world, one which also reflects an internal relationship between our hardwired animal self and our cultural self. C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* – the bus ride from hell to heaven, transiting the suburbs – left a big impression on my visual imagination as a student. My work, *Mythic Landscape*, is as much a wasteland of the urban periphery, with worn-out fragments ripped from assorted landscape painting traditions, and an uncanny vessel that's out of scale and out of kilter with these vaguely romantic aspects.

GC: Is the idea to do with positing some sort of equivalence between these different visual registers; or somehow corralling and fixing fugitive images? Is that what Purgatorio means for you in these works? A realm where one has to accept the hallucinatory, unreal aspect of images?

CC: Yes, your suggestion of equivalence is right – I think that's what I aim for much of the time, and the equivalence is part of the method of corralling, as you put it.

GC: Your images of nature seem to exist on various scales. *By Two Ways*, especially, looks like something bacterial or spore-like, but also like nebulae in space.

CC: I like the blank duality of that image. Ideas of passage, or threshold, are to the fore, but with little sense of where one is passing from or into, or as you suggest, little sense of absolute scale. By

‘natural world’ I also want to include all the non-bucolic elements, the bacteria, the insects, quantum realms, and so on – not just our impact upon trees, as important as I think that is...

GC: And most of the time, in these works, that natural world seems to be something quite sinister and oppressive: erupting flames, billowing ash clouds, things that appear to threaten our sense of integrity and security. Though in *Hallucination*, as you’ve mentioned, there’s the tourist caravan parked next to the erupting mushroom cloud trees, and also a road leading to the lake, while the rest of the world dissolves away into formlessness – it’s like a sightseeing spot on the brink of reality! Is part of your thinking to evoke the terror of nature, but also the pull it has on us, the way we’re attracted to its chaos? How do you see your work in relation to traditional ideas of the sublime?

CC: The mirror sequence seemed to reject the beautiful in favour of the sublime – mainly because I feel the sublime to be a more enlivening and enlightening force than beauty. Hence I’m more at home with images that threaten, in one way or another, because making them delivers a psychic intensity that lights a path to a significant image without too much intrusion from aesthetic considerations. So to answer the question, the terror of nature on various scales, stars to microbes, is in there. As Rilke understood, terror and beauty are neighbours.

That said, I don’t wish to lose touch with irony – I’m aware of the gothic hyperbole in play, as in Dante; and so the unlikely mirrors are there in part to disconcert too orthodox a reading.

GC: To make viewers aware of and question what they’re looking at, to create a moment of self-reflection – sort of like a real mirror, in fact?

CC: Yes, as ‘vanitas’ paintings were intended to do, though in a less specific way – by forcing the viewer to confront the prospect of death they could put other concerns into perspective. The shifts of language in the sequence, including irony, should I hope allow for more subtle levels of engagement.

GC: You’ve touched on the sense of hyperbole. And several works, such as *Vanity Totem II* or *Soft Transmission*, seem to hint at spaces that could be theatres or stages, or that conjure up an

air of artifice or exaggeration. This is another theme of yours from earlier works?

CC: I've used theatrical spaces in my work for many years – it usually tends to be an empty space, before or after the performance. Of course, a painting is closely related to the theatre, as another form of self-enclosing rectangle, but I often introduce further levels of artifice 'inside' the work, of which the mirrors are another example. I get a sense that this strategy of double-artifice gives a stronger kick of the real to the work – I suppose as Shakespeare's plays-within-plays were intended to do.

GC: This really interests me, because on one level you're constantly alerting the viewer to the artifice of art-making, the fact that you're creating an illusion of sorts; yet at the same time your work taps into a parallel tradition of painting-as-process, where the truth of the mark-making is evident for all to see. It goes back to what I was saying earlier about the sometimes slightly frightening sense of possibility in your works: the idea that something can both be a line or a shape, yet soon start to veer off into resembling something, into the realm of representation... It reminds me in a way of someone like Henri Michaux, whose squiggles and patterns sit in some hypnotic, halfway state between figuration and abstraction. And of course, it also relates back to the dark imaginings of the gothic.

CC: I have strong figurative inclinations, probably to do with a three year period I spent in Italy after leaving the Royal College, but I'm as much a process painter because I want images to 'become' – though often they arise from places previously visited, so are rarely entirely unexpected or unknown. But Michaux's work doesn't interest me as much as, say, the ink drawings of Victor Hugo, because Michaux knows he eventually wants figures from his squiggles, whereas Hugo is more open to suggestion.

GC: Can you talk a bit about your own process? How do you go about 'composing' a work – that's to say, how do you go about keeping your openness to suggestion and spontaneity? Are you looking for an image to emerge? A specific image? A category of image?

CC: One reason for staying with the graphite for so many years is that it is fascinatingly unpredictable during the process, and very responsive to different instruments and surfaces. I

tend to begin with one or two potential forms, maybe relating to a previous image, and then stay attentive to possible extensions or variations. Something completely different may happen, and often the image will fail and need to begin again. I combine dammar resin and oil with the graphite powder, and this gives me about twelve hours or so before it becomes difficult to rework – but the graphite medium wipes off easily, so this gives a rehearsal feel to the failure, with the odd detail retained in the memory for the next attempt.

GC: This idea of beginning again, of repeating and rehearsing something, of slowly progressing: it sounds like the sort of process for which Purgatorio is a perfect metaphor, constantly trying to achieve a more refined state. Were you thinking about that when you were working on these paintings?

CC: I like the sense of progressive uncertainty in the Purgatorio, but in terms of my painting process, the idea of slow progression doesn't fit, as each new attempt has to be resolved afresh, on its own terms, even if it is initially prompted by the rehearsal. There are characters like that in Dante too - incapable of slow improvement! In this sequence I feel I was concerned more about sudden choices or sudden decisions.

GC: Finally, I'd like to suggest another link between the way you describe your process and the themes of these works – which is to do with the notion of time. If you make work in one sitting, so to speak, do you see the work as a kind of 'memento mori' in itself, in terms of its physical execution? After all, unlike a lot of artists' work, yours is the result of one artistic event, one completed moment. At the same time, of course, although that moment has vanished, the work remains, fixed forever in the present... I don't really have a question, except to say these are issues that I often think about, and I'd like to know your thoughts.

CC: If the current body of work has a greater sense of stillness or fixity, it could be because the repeated image of the mirror has pinned my imagination in a slightly unfamiliar way. But I don't like to think of painting as an act of 'memento mori' per se, because the liquid process is unruly, and because the images are part of an expanding inquiry into the language of painting and drawing, into imagery gleaned from the world, into the self, from which new questions are constantly being thrown out.