

## BERNARD DUNSTAN

The deft, spontaneous and ‘intimist’ paintings of Bernard Dunstan depicting nude or draped figures in interior settings - particularly of his long-time wife and fellow painter, Diana Armfield - continue a venerable tradition within English art that elevated tonal impressionism, elegance of drawing, economy of design and a French-inspired painterly flourish above all else. The observational naturalist approach he pursued in invariably small scale formats encouraged an affectionate *alla prima* immediacy of response to subjects almost chosen randomly, or chanced upon, from his everyday experience. Owing a palpable debt to Sickert and through him both to the ‘realism’ of Degas and the intimism of Vuillard, Dunstan kept to well-practised and time-tested principles throughout a long, exceptionally productive and commercially successful career. Drawing practised on an almost quotidian basis was of course fundamental to this; if the inexorable play of light ‘eroded’ concrete or architectural form then Dunstan met the challenge head-on to register interiors of outdoor scenes with an acute feeling for ‘genius loci’, for atmosphere and the subtleties of human presence.

Dunstan’s reveries and gorgeous, tactile sensuality was neither hedonistic nor overtly erotic. He also avoided the grandiose or overly opulent. Similarly, a classic timelessness in celebrations of simple domestic ritual eschewed social realism or the avowed ethos of modern consumer life. However influenced by Sickert at the outset of his Slade-trained career, Dunstan, the younger man, rejected the bawdy realism of the music hall or the mundane realism of grubby Camden Town bedsit land. His paintings of orchestras set about their rarefied high culture without fuss or ostentation, true to the modest restraint and neutral discretion at the heart of this prolific and consistently sensitive painter’s essential vision.

Unlike Bratby, the kitchen sinkers and their pop art successors, Dunstan was not ‘flash’ and did not court the limelight. But critical approval, indeed lavish praise when it did come, flowed from the pen of major writers like Brian Sewell or Peter Fuller, the latter using the Dunstans as part of his 1980s modernist revisionism and retrenchment when stating that “Dunstan’s love of world, flesh and woman is self-evident”. Fuller’s statement is abundantly borne out in ‘*A Girl Lying in Bed*’, a recumbent but wide-awake figure luxuriously wrapped in the crumpled randomness of an unmade bed; in ‘*Dressing, Striped Jersey*’, where the unassuming ‘model’ is captured in the anecdotal activity of dressing, or in ‘*Nude in a Doorway*’, in which a more basic, rustic interior setting reflects their Welsh mountain retreat, an antidote to the Kew-based family’s southwest London suburban base.

Even in humble kitchen scenes like ‘*Kitchen II*’ Dunstan avoids proto-pop kitchen sink brand labels, preferring a generic range of anonymous teapots, mugs or jugs as receptacles of light on uncluttered and un-posed tables. The protagonists fulfil no obvious culinary role and portray no narratives while adding to the humour of cottage life. However discrete, Dunstan’s art is visibly one of process and we can see the palpable outcome of both his materials – commonly oil paints or pastel – and the loose but masterly manner he worked them. The sketchy vibrancy of ‘*Summer Evening*’ sees Dunstan draw in *alla prima* mode with colour. The powerful, sculptural and iconic corporeality of ‘*Girl doing her Hair*’ invites comparison with Sickert, while in ‘*Morning Sun, Venice*’, with its pronounced, almost abstract, wallpaper patterns and combination of interior and unmistakable outdoor Venetian townscape, Dunstan emulates Vuillard or Bonnard.

Dunstan’s muted, earthy palette with its olives, beiges, lemons, siennas and azure blues was one way he expressed his love of Italy. Another was his outdoor celebration of Italian architecture. In ‘*San Rocco, Venice*’, for example, the artist captures complex architectural detail in pronounced, convincing terms of highlight and shadow. This picture emulates Sickert at Bath or Dieppe, or Monet at Rouen. But it is in the series of studies

during different times of the day based on *'The Campo, Siena'* that he perhaps comes closest to the famous monetesque theme of motifs reflecting changing light and conditions.

Dunstan's practise and art historical awareness made him a formidable teacher during spells at the West of England College of Art, Camberwell, Byam Shaw and City and Guilds. His willingness to share his long experience at the easel also spilled over into publishing several notable guidebooks and manuals, culminating in notable publications like *'Painting Methods of the Impressionists'* (1976) and his editing John Ruskin's seminal *'Elements of Drawing'* (1991).

Alongside teaching and writing Dunstan also undertook his duties as longstanding Royal Academician (since 1968) with due diligence. During the 1980's he preceded Mary Fedden, another Slade-trained painter and near neighbour in southwest London, as President of the Royal West of England Academy in Bristol.

Although planned and patiently assembled during the artist's lifetime, this revealing exhibition is the first posthumous survey to celebrate a long and distinguished painting career.

**Peter Davies**

**2017**