The Painting of Stephen Cook

The Painting of Stephen Cook:

Enhanced Naturalism in a Post-War British Figurative Tradition

By

Stephen Miller

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1882-5
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1882-7

For Pauline and James Cook, the artist's wife and son

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To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour…

~ Auguries of Innocence, William Blake

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Unless otherwise indicated the following images are of original paintings by Stephen Cook. They appear with the permission of the artist. Unless otherwise indicated all photography is copyright of David Hughes © 2022 & © 2023.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book follows my three previous monographs connected with the visual arts, which, in one way or another, began life as my dissertation and assortment of connected papers, written for my Masters degree at King's College London (in association with The National Gallery, London), in 2013 and 2014.

My independent research for this latest book is the first published critical study on the work of Stephen Cook, a living British artist of which little has been written. It will serve as both an introduction to and analysis of a selection of Cook's work, set in the context of a post-war tradition of figurative painting in Britain. It will look at the artist's formal training and the affinities shared with artists in the centuries since the Renaissance, as well as the shared aims of artists in the post-war period.

My thanks are due to the artist Stephen Cook for unprecedented access to his paintings and permission to use the images of his work included here, as well as for the valuable insights into their execution, gleaned over a number of years. Also, for his cooperation in the recording of one of our conversations, included here as a transcript in the Appendix.

I acknowledge the galleries and estates that have granted permissions for a small selection of other images used. These are separately credited. I would particularly like to thank the Browse & Darby Gallery for permissions in connection with Euan Uglow's estate and in supplying the image material used for certain Uglow paintings reproduced here and also thank the artist David Inshaw and Bridgeman Images UK for the permissions and images for two of Inshaw's paintings. Special thanks are due to Tate Britain for allowing me to study certain paintings in the Gallery's store of works not currently on show, and to the National Gallery and Tate Britain for granting a scholarly waiver for the images used in this first edition. This is an important initiative in support of scholarship and the encouragement of research into the nation's collection of paintings,

invaluable to academics and researchers alike, and especially to those working with limited budgets.

My thanks are due to the photographer David Hughes, for supplying many of the high specification photographs of Stephen Cook's work used here, as they are to my daughter, Lucy Miller, for also providing several photographic images. In addition, the artist himself has made other images available, typically of his relatively older works, that appear in many private collections and galleries in the UK and throughout the world, from his own photographic records. Any other photographs not attributed to one of these three were taken by me.

Unrestricted access to King's College Libraries has proved of great value during the research phase of this project. My thanks are also due to the British Library, the Warburg Institute Library and Senate House Library and to the helpful library staff of all of the above.

My warm thanks go to Adam Rummens, the commissioning editor responsible for inviting the proposal for this book (as a returning author) and to Amanda Millar (typesetting) and all editorial and production staff at CSP involved in this project, for their unflagging support in helping to successfully resolve the various publishing complexities necessary to steer this work to its conclusion and for generally making things as painless as possible in the process. Finally, thanks to all of those others, too numerous to mention, for the very welcome encouragement I have received in this endeavour.

London, Midsummer Day (St. John's Day), 24 June 2023

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INTRODUCTION

This book is the first published critical study on the work of the living British artist, Stephen Cook (born 1952), of which little has been written and less adequately understood. Many, indeed most, of these images are published here for the first time. The book sets out to describe and catalogue a representative selection of the artist's work and will serve as both an introduction to, and analysis of, his creative output in past decades. It will position Cook's achievement within a figurative context and tradition of the visual arts in post-war Britain, a period which the artist's own lifetime spans.

The attempts of artists to represent and focus on particular aspects of both the natural and 'real' worlds—the perceptual and conceptual—are also dealt with here in comparative sections. These sections include close attention to five war/post-war artists—Alberto Giacometti, Lucian Freud, Euan Uglow, Eric Ravilious and David Inshaw—as well as a more general concentration on groups of artists, including the likes of Francis Bacon, Leon Kossoff, Frank Auerbach, Michael Andrews, William Coldstream, Claude Rogers, Victor Pasmore and Cook's own tutor Fred Cuming RA. Affinities (and differences) with an array of artists in the centuries since the Renaissance will also be investigated in order to establish a historical context for Cook's work, which include (while not limited to) the likes of Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein, Diego Velázquez, Rembrandt van Rijn, Johannes Vermeer and John Everett Millais.

We will pay particular attention to Cook's own approach and response to the phenomenological world, which I have come to refer to as 'enhanced naturalism', which scrutinises and interrogates figurative elements of the natural world and, in that examination, glimpses something of the essence of the reality that supports that world. If all art is essentially illusory Cook's work seeks to show something of the archetypes on which that illusion hangs. His work combines both perceptual and conceptual elements but is nonetheless firmly set in a tradition of British figurative painting.

The label of Photorealism and connection to those American (and British) proponents in the 1960s and 1970s of that style, falls short of what is presented to us here. Rather, through the isolation of his subject, emphasis is concentrated on its integral significance. The subjects of Cook's scrutiny—whether a bird of prey, a wild flower, a still life of sea-shells, or of windblown fruit—point to a representation of a reality outside of the flux of things and of our everyday experience, albeit one that is derived from and is at once familiar, in its particular form, as part of the immediately recognisable natural world. This is achieved not only through a method of close observation, but through the rigour of the application of that observation. Cook's subjects are at once elevated from the commonplace and mundane to a position of preternatural significance, or what is described here as the miraculous. We are viewing the warp and woof, the very fabric and pattern of the 'seen' world in the work discussed and on view in these pages.

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CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS AND EARLY WORK

Stephen Thomas Cook, born on 8 August 1952, is the second son of Edward and Angela Cook (née Sullivan). His mother died in the late 1970s, when the artist was in his mid-20s and his father almost a decade later in 1987. His brother Austin is some eight years older. Stephen was raised a Catholic and attended church until 16 years of age. He is since lapsed in his Catholic faith. His early education was at Campion School, in Hornchurch, Essex (a London Borough, of Havering, since 1965), a Roman Catholic school for boys from the ages of 11 to 18. The school was founded in 1962 by the Society of Jesus and received part of its initial intake from St. Ignatius College, which was then located in Stamford Hill and for the first couple of years Jesuit teachers were in the majority and lived on site in the Community House, which later became the first of three sixth-form blocks. Later a single (non-residential) Jesuit chaplain was retained as a link to that order.

Following his years at secondary school Cook studied at Hornsey College of Art, in the early 1970s, on a one-year foundation course, and thereafter at Walthamstow School of Art. At Walthamstow he was tutored by the sculptor John Maine (born 1942) and the landscape artist, Fred Cuming (born in South London in 1930), who had previously taught at art schools in Medway and Hornsey. Apart from Cook, the likes of Ian Dury, Zandra Rhodes and Peter Greenaway were notable among his students. Cuming had himself studied at Sidcup School of Art and the Royal College of Art and before his death (in June 2022) he was Artist in Residence at Christchurch University in Canterbury. Cuming's sketchbooks were central to the practice of the making of what he called 'notes' *en plein air*.

By the time Cook first encountered Cuming, in the early 1970s, Cuming had won a following at the Royal Academy with such works as *Studio with Setting Sun* (1962) and *Port at Twilight, Rochester* (1965) and had been elected as an associate of the Royal Academy in 1969, at the age of 39. Five

years later, in 1974, he became a fully-fledged Royal Academician. Already established artists, such as Ruskin Spear and John Minton, had encouraged and championed Cuming, even though his style was perhaps too unfashionable for either the Hayward or the Tate, who had seemingly ignored him. Indeed, despite his recognition by the Royal Academy, Cuming's first solo exhibition was not staged until he was nearing 50, at the Thackeray Gallery (founded in 1968 by Priscilla Anderson), in Kensington, London.

Cook later re-established his connection with his erstwhile tutor through the art dealer John Brandler, at the Brandler Galleries, in Brentwood, Essex, which showed the paintings of Cook and Cuming (and others) in a series of group shows. Cook's admiration of Cuming emerges, to this day, in some of Cook's less well known (and less promoted) landscapes such as *Fishingboats, Wells* (2014), *Clearing Rain* (2021), *Lowtide, Leigh-on-Sea* (2021), *Tide Mill, Woodbridge* (2023), *Night Comes In* (2023) and *Chapel of St. Peter-on-the-Wall* (2023). (See Plates 6, 7, 8, 9 and 62.) In my several conversations with Cook in past years it is clear he retains an affection for Cuming who he only came to fully appreciate when showing at the Brandler Galleries. It was through these group shows that Cook really became aware of Cuming's range, output and quality. In conversation with me Cook remarked:[1]

> …it was only then [in the early 1990s] I saw Fred's work in a new light and I really liked it […] He's got that subtle palette, these lovely mauves and greys and silvers, that he uses in his work, that are very aesthetically pleasing.

While nothing of Cuming's influence is seen in Cook's typical closely-observed detailed work, many of his mostly smaller (but sometimes large) and looser, landscapes (including those mentioned above) indicate something of Cuming's style and influence. Cook elucidates:[2]

> …In my more detailed work, I don't know if there is anything there that is influenced by Fred's work, but in those landscapes you were talking about I think I would and, to an extent, do like to aim for that sort of thing […] I would love to paint like that. I love the way he gives you a feel of something without actually painting it, he hints at things and you can see his lovely

> coastal landscapes, where you can see a town off the edge of things that you can't quite make out anything of the detail. You can see these […] barely visible forms, but you can immediately sense what it is and what's going on […] I would love to do something like that in my own work… but again I get drawn back to the detail… I find it hard to work in that broad style.

Cook works in a markedly different way from usual in producing these coastal landscapes. He confesses it is a much more liberating way of working:[3]

> When you've spent a few weeks, or more, working on a picture it's nice to get something a little bit smaller and just slosh the paint on and perhaps use a palette knife rather than a small gauge brush, it's quite cathartic. And you would think, if you saw one of those landscapes [see examples, Plates 6, 7, 8 and 9] against one of my larger studies of leaves, or an owl, or whatever else, that they were not done by the same person.

After his time at Hornsey and Walthamstow, Cook continued his academic studies at the Chelmer Institute of Higher Education, where he gained his Bachelor of Arts Honours degree, in Art/English in 1980. On graduating Cook exhibited three paintings with the 'Chelmer Artists' (of the Chelmer Institute) in January/February 1980.[4] Thereafter, in 1983, he completed a postgraduate art teaching certificate (ATC) at the prestigious Goldsmiths College, which encouraged, as Cook recalls, 'creativity at all costs'.[5] As Cook's reputation increased he became sought after as both a practitioner (taking commissions) and as a teacher himself and since the early 1990s he has run a range of busy private classes embracing all media, but centred on oil painting. In 1992 he established his own drawing and painting classes at the Fairkytes Arts Centre and has shown his work in a series of one-man art shows at the adjacent Fry's Art Gallery (in February/March 2018, November/December 2019 and February/March 2023).

After an initial flirtation with abstract art, or rather a style which attempted an abstraction of natural forms, his passion for the thoroughbred racehorse led him to specialise in the sporting genre, for which he adopted a straightforward figurative style. His oils and pastels of racehorses and equestrian compositions can be found in collections throughout the UK,

Europe and the USA. He quickly established himself as a leading and much sought after artist in this genre (see Plates 1 and 2, *Nashwan winning the King George*, and *Going Clear*, of the racehorse Peeping Fawn, as examples of the commissioned work produced during this period). Some of his early shows of this genre of work include those at the Osborne Studio Gallery (then based in Floral Street, Covent Garden, where it was opened by the Princess Royal in March 1986).[6] Major exhibitions including Cook's work (and a myriad of minor ones) have been staged since the mid- to late-1980s, notably at the Osborne Studio Gallery and the Society of Equestrian Artists, at the Westminster Gallery, Central Hall, Westminster, where Cook exhibited his oil on canvas, *Low Tide*, in 1988 and subsequently, in 1995 and 1996 at Christie's, St. James's, with three paintings, including the oil studies *Fast Work* and *Driven Out.* Cook's son James was born in 1996 to Cook and his long-term partner Pauline (née Sibley). Stephen and Pauline were married in 2002.

Other galleries, devoted to the sporting genre, that were keen to take Cook's work, during this period of the mid-1980s to 1990s, included the Wingfield Sporting Gallery in Sibella Road, London SW4, in 1989, and in June/July of that year his work appeared, with 10 other artists, at Richmond Hill Gallery's 'Game, Set & Match' exhibition, 'A Lawn Tennis Exhibition of Period and Contemporary Paintings and Prints'. His work also appeared in 'A Winter's Game' exhibition at the Richmond Hill Gallery, with two oils on canvas including one depicting racing on the sands of Laytown Beach. In the 1990s Cook became associated with the Equus Art Gallery, run by Lydia and Terry Minahan. The gallery was established in 1990 in the heart of Newmarket, just off the High Street, which links the Cambridge Road to Bury Road, in Sun Lane. Cook contributed four polo studies—two oils and two drawings—to an exhibition titled 'The Polo Field', of 18 artists, in May/June 1992. 'The Spring Exhibition' of April/May the following year featured new paintings by four artists: Stephen Cook, Betty Maney, Julian Seaman and Martin Williams.[7] Cook showed seven oils and two Conté pastel drawings, including an oil on canvas of the 1992 European Champion two-year-old colt, Zafonic, who put his field to the sword in the 1993 2,000 Guineas at Newmarket at the beginning of May, while the exhibition was running (in April/May 1993). Cook was successful in selling a healthy

proportion of his work on show at the gallery at this and at other shows staged there, such as the 'Summer Exhibition' of 1992 and the 'Winter Exhibition' of 1993/94—proving lucrative for both Cook and the gallery.[8]

In February 1994 Cook sent five horseracing paintings (three watercolours and two oils) to the Heath Galleries in Winkfield Road, Ascot (of which 20% was taken in commission, with a further 5% to the Society of Equestrian Artists). The same year Cook's oil painting *Spellbound* featured among 48 paintings selected for entry to a Spinal Injuries Association (SIA) competition, 'Art and the Racecourse, 1994'.[9] His work also regularly featured in the annual book series *Travelling the Turf*, in the 1990s.

Cook's work had been represented by Brandler Galleries, for a time since the mid-1980s. John Brandler had started out dealing in antique furniture while still at school. He purchased his first Carel Weight at a house sale and it was largely through Weight that he was introduced to other Royal Academicians and set up on his own account, as an art dealer, through his art gallery in Brentwood, Essex. Cook's work appeared in an exhibition organised by Brandler in Great Russell Street, London WC1, in May/June 1988 and thereafter at Brandler Galleries in April 1990—'The Definitive Decade', an exhibition of the works by artists active during the twentieth century, 'who will be known as setting the standard that Modern British Art will be judged by'.[10] Those on show included John Nash, Norman Hepple and Michael Rothenstein as well as artists 'who must be noted for the future'—including Stephen Cook, David Hurrell, Mary Goward, John Reay, Maurice Shepherd, Leslie Worth, Paul Dawson and Gordon Butler. In a later exhibition, in March/May 1992 Cook's work featured alongside that of Fred Cuming, Ruskin Spear, Carel Weight, Mick Rooney and others.

A letter of recommendation from John Brandler (24 April, 1991) to the local Arts Officer responsible for arranging art shows in the London Borough of Havering, at the time, confirmed that Cook had been known to Brandler, 'for a number of years'. Brandler urged that it, 'would enhance the artistic standing of the community [in Havering/Essex]', if Cook's work were to be displayed, adding that he (Brandler) showed Cook's painting, 'alongside the work of many famous Academicians and there is one at the moment holding its own alongside a Carel Weight and Stanley Spencer'.[11]

Cook's work was subsequently shown in wide-range of local venues across the borough (including a solo exhibition of some 43 oils, watercolours and pastels at the Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch and an Essex Wildlife Trust exhibition in Brentwood, in July 1999). Cook also presided on a judging panel of Artists in 2001 in which Arts Officer Chris Cole wrote a letter of thanks, extoling, 'a great show and a credit to you and Havering artists'.[12]

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Notes

1) See Appendix, 'Stephen Miller in conversation with Stephen Cook' (Friday, November 25, 2022)
2) Ibid.
3) Ibid.
4) At an exhibition at Central Library (Romford), simply recorded in the catalogue sheet as Painting 50 (£150), Painting 51 (£50) and Painting 52 (£150), by Stephen Cook.
5) See Appendix, 'Stephen Miller in conversation with Stephen Cook' (Friday, November 25, 2022)
6) The gallery, now based in Belgravia, was named after the sculptor James Osborne who played an integral role in founding and running the gallery until his death in 1992. The current director, Geoffrey Hughes, has continued with the theme of sporting paintings and bronzes (with a strong emphasis on horseracing), by leading contemporary artists.
7) See illustrated advertisement in *Horse & Hound*, 8 April, 1993
8) Invoice details show the gallery charged a hefty commission of 33.33%
9) 'Art and the Racecourse 1994', exhibition catalogue (London: The Spinal Injuries Association (SIA), 1994, p. 7). Patron: Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal
10) Printed on the invitation card to a private view, on Sunday, 8 April, 1990, at Brandler Galleries, Coptfold Road, Brentwood, Essex
11) Letter from John Brandler to Chris Cole, 24 April, 1991
12) Letter from Chris Cole to Stephen Cook, 2 August 2001

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CHAPTER TWO

REASSESSMENT OF STYLE AND METHOD, MATURE WORK

Despite his conspicuous success in the racing/sporting genre Cook was cautious not to be categorised exclusively as a horse painter and developed his oeuvre to include a wide range of mostly British wildlife (although also more exotic foreign species) and to also embrace his interest in botanical studies, at which he excels. He had shown regularly at the Society of Botanical Artists, at Westminster Gallery, Central Hall, Westminster, as well as at the Mall Galleries, in the heart of London. Cook has been represented by several high-profile galleries over the years, including the previously mentioned Brandler Galleries, from the mid-1980s, at which he was shown alongside his former tutor Fred Cuming RA and other post-war artists active in Britain. His work lately also appears at the Caxton Gallery, Frinton-on-Sea, where his still-life paintings and drawings of sea-shells, plants and fossils (see Plates 54, 55 and 56, for example) and his coastal landscapes, mentioned earlier, are especially sought after.

Cook developed a special interest in the work he prepared for the Society of Botanical Artists. The Society held its first 'Open Exhibition' at the Mall Galleries London in 1985, followed by its 'West Country Inaugural Exhibition', at Burwood Gallery, Wells, the following year, and its 'Flowers and Gardens' Open Exhibition at Westminster Gallery, Westminster Central Hall, Storey's Gate, London, in 1987. In 2010 the Society staged its first international exhibition, by invitation from the Palmengarten in Frankfurt, where it returned for its second international exhibition in 2012. Cook first exhibited two oils (*Garlic* and *Honesty*) in 2014, at the Society's twenty-ninth annual exhibition, 'Botanical Garden', at the Westminster Gallery. Both were very modestly priced at £675. The following year (April 2015), at the Society's 'In Pursuit of Plants' exhibition, again at Westminster Gallery, Cook showed *Peony* and *Sunlit Autumn Leaves* (priced at £825 and

£475 respectively). In 2016, in the Society's, 'Shape, Pattern, Structure' show, *Conkers* (priced at £725) and *Five Autumn Leaves* (£825) were shown. The 2019 annual show, 'Plantae' was held at the Mall Galleries, and featured *Twisted Kale* and *Bearded Iris* (which sold at the private view, see Plate 48).[1]

Stylistically Cook has developed a way of working that involves his own version of the traditional method of scaling up, using a grid system of squares, dating back to the Renaissance (and specifically to Albrecht Dürer). He has also made use of scanning and tracing techniques as a means of scaling his images onto the canvas and of scrupulously adjusting the image to create the most effective composition and context (or absence of context) for that image. Backgrounds are often reimagined as a setting for the subject, or simply minimalised as secondary to the subject. The underpainting is achieved through thin layers of acrylic paint, creating a key for establishing tones that is quick drying. The image is then worked up in oil paint, over the acrylic base. Dependent on size and subject, areas are worked up to an immediate finish, or thinly blocked in, to be overpainted when dry. Cook returns to the inspiration of the likes of Albrecht Dürer and Johannes Vermeer and is drawn to Hans Holbein, Jan van Eyck and the Dutch still life masters and also to John Everett Millais and others of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Cook also admires certain figurative elements of the work of Lucian Freud and Euan Uglow—offering his own solutions to common dilemmas of visual representation—but is also attracted to an eclectic mix of painters and illustrators including, Stanley Spencer, Eric Ravilious, Georgia O'Keefe, Tristram Hillier, David Inshaw, Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac, Walter Crane and John Tenniel. We explore these connections in the following two chapters on the historical context of Cook's painting.

While Cook is also partly impressed by those American (and English) Photorealists, such as Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, Chuck Close, Charles Bell, Audrey Flack, John Salt, John Baeder, and others, who evolved out of Pop Art in the 1960s and 1970s and later, their aims fall short of what Cook is attempting in his own work. Certain examples of Cook's own painting, in the period from the late-1990s into the new millennium, came closest to emulating this approach (see Plate 3, *Size Nines* and Plate 4, *Tease*, for

example). However, Cook was not content with producing shiny highly finished surfaces or with this way of working and questioned the approach. While the work of the Photorealists may be defined by the use of photography, to gather information; the use of a mechanical (or semi-mechanical) means to transfer the information to canvas; and the technical ability to make the work appear 'photographic', Cook works from both prepared studies and photographs (as, for example, did Francis Bacon for very different end results), but is (like Bacon) not attempting to make the work take on a photo- or hyper-realism for its own sake. Rather, any photographic resemblance is a product of the artist's obsessive attention to detail (something Bacon had let go of in making his own visual and emotional expression). Cook's subjects take on an archetypical and timeless character as a result of the rigour of the method applied by him. He looks as hard at his subjects as ever Piero della Francesca, or Piero's modern equivalent Euan Uglow, did and finds his own way of fine-tuning his canvases that has little to do with photorealism or machine finish, but rather employs choices to do with the celebration of the medium he is using (typically that of oil paint), to convey his own enhanced images from his own direct, as well as photographically derived, interpretation of nature. When I put it to Cook that while there were superficial resemblances to the work of certain Photorealists, that such an appreciation falls short of what he is trying to do now, Cook responded:[2]

> …yes. I am drawn to some of those, in certain respects—you mention Chuck Close and Richard Estes—but also feel I am trying for something a bit different myself. Plus One Gallery, in Fulham, specialises in hyper realistic art and I'd confess to having been quite attracted to what some of the artists that show there are doing, at least, in my earlier work…

In recent years his work has taken a turn to emphasise the isolation of the subject itself, eschewing such elements as the ephemeral effects of environment and specific setting for a more timeless and contextless presentation—indeed, the presentation of the archetypical from the unidealized form of a subject of nature, the miraculous from the mundane. We will return to this theme in our concluding chapters after first pausing to reflect on the historical context for Cook's painting in our next two chapters.

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Notes

1) The Society of Botanical Artists, *Plantae*, exhibition catalogue, 2019, including illustrations of Cook's work on pp. 24-25
2) See Appendix, 'Stephen Miller in conversation with Stephen Cook' (Friday, November 25, 2022)

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CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: AFFINITIES WITH THE AIMS AND METHODS OF THE GREAT ARTISTS

For figurative artists in the twenty-first century the act of 'looking' is the same as it ever was. Since the Italian Renaissance, when artists first combined the use of oil paint with Brunelleschi's invention of linear perspective and set about representing natural forms in space as convincingly as possible, verisimilitude became a prime motivation for figurative artists, until the onset of photography gave them cause to reassess that aim.

The German painter and engraver Albrecht Dürer (born 1471) was eager to master the sophistications of Renaissance Venice and Florence in a northern European context. He visited Venice in 1494 where he was deeply impressed by the painting of Giovanni Bellini, who he considered the finest of that older generation of practitioners in Venice. On his return to Germany he opened his own workshop in Nuremberg and increasingly integrated what he had learned in Italy into northern European practice. Dürer's self portrait of 1500, when he was 29, makes use of oil paint to convey unprecedented realism (see Plate 13, *Self-portrait*, 1500). He returned to Italy in 1505 and subsequently also visited the Netherlands before returning to Germany for good. Cook shares the enthusiasm for Dürer's love of detail. In a conversation we discussed Dürer's ultra-fine engravings and the watercolour painting *The Large Piece of Turf* (1503, see Plate 11), in the context of Cook's general approach to fine detail and particularly in the context of his botanical work.[1]

> It's the fine detail I think in their work, I wouldn't say I'm necessarily influenced by them [talking of Dürer and Holbein], it's just those people I'm drawn to, simply because I just find their handling of paint and their fine detail exquisite…

Hans Holbein the Younger (ca. 1497-1543), referred to by the art historian Ernst Gombrich as the greatest German painter of his generation,[2] was of that generation of German artists that followed the likes of Dürer, Grünewald and Cranach (the Elder), all born between 1470 and about 1480 and producing their mature work by the time Holbein was starting out on his own account in Basle, Switzerland. Born in Augsburg, a German merchant city with close trading relations with Italy, Holbein had quickly absorbed the knowledge that Dürer and the previous generation had taken pains to master, not least in the application of oil paint. His work is celebrated for its precise detail and the knack in his portraits (by all accounts) of capturing a convincing likeness. He outshone his own family of artists, which included his father Hans Holbein (the Elder), his uncle Sigmund and elder brother Ambrosius, who died before reaching maturity as an artist. Shortly after beginning his own independent work Holbein travelled to northern Italy (in about 1517) and later to France, in 1524. He quickly rose to prominence and was sought after for portrait commissions by his humanist circle of friends, associates and wider circle of followers. The only branch of painting to survive the Reformation in Protestant areas of Europe was that of portrait painting. Those Protestant regions had objected to Church commissions as a sign of 'Popish idolatry'.[3] An alternative outlet for artistic design was in book illustration and Holbein took full advantage of this in his design of woodcuts, including the famous allegorical *Dance of Death* (published 1538), designed by Holbein but cut by a specialist cutter. His first major portrait was of the Dutch humanist scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam (1523). Due to the iconoclastic riots of 1526 Holbein was obliged to leave Basle, by way of the Netherlands, with a letter of introduction from Erasmus to seek work in England. He immediately achieved great success, painting a portrait of Sir Thomas More in 1527 and a life-size group portrait of More's family (now lost). He returned to Basle a year later but soon returned to England after settling his affairs with his family. He spent most of the final decade of his life in England, at first under the patronage of Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell and later (by the mid-1530s) in the official service of King Henry, as Court Painter.[4] He died in London of plague in 1543. It is estimated that during the last 10 years of his life Holbein executed some 150 portraits, life-size and miniature, of royalty and nobility—from German merchants, working in London, to portraits of

Jane Seymour (1536) and Anne of Cleves (1539), to King Henry himself. In such portraits Holbein showed a fascination for recording plants, animals and decorative items in very fine detail, an aspect of his painting that Cook is particularly in tune with.

The double portrait of Jean de Dinteville (the French Ambassador to the court of King Henry VIII) and Georges de Selve (the Bishop of Lavaur), known as *The Ambassadors* (1533), in London's National Gallery (see Plate 23), is famous for the anamorphic distortion, which from an oblique viewing point, close to the picture plane from the side, is revealed as a human skull. In conversations with me Cook confided that he is especially struck by this painting and has made several studies of the human skull in his own studio, none more arresting than *Plantagenet* (2012, see Plate 24). The skull, representing that of King Richard III (the last king of the Plantagenet dynasty), appears above the badge of a white boar (Richard's personal device), set against a black background. The full focus of our attention is directed to the image of the skull, otherwise isolated from context, which functions as a *memento mori*, a stark reminder that (whatever our perceived standing) we share the commonality that we are fated to die. The badge and the painting's title, lend the clues we require to unlock the narrative and identity of the image. Cook says he was struck by a photo in the broadsheets when King Richard's remains were unearthed in a car park in Leicester, in August 2012. The painting connects back to Cook's abiding appreciation of Holbein's work. In discussing the close detail to be found in the work of both Holbein and Dürer, Cook noted:[5]

> I'm perhaps much more aligned to that than I am to painters like Rembrandt and Velázquez, who would paint in a much more painterly way, which I envy. I find it much harder to paint that way, I can't really do that, not like Rembrandt…

Rembrandt van Rijn, was a generation younger than the likes of Frans Hals and Rubens and seven years younger than Velázquez. He was born in 1606 in a 'golden age' of Dutch painting spanning the seventeenth century. Unlike his countryman, Vermeer, his work includes a wide range of style and subject, from portraits (and notably self-portraits) to landscapes, and from religious, historical and allegorical scenes to genre scenes. In his

commentary on the portraiture of Frans Hals and Rembrandt, Gombrich makes the telling observation that while Hals gives us 'something like a convincing snapshot Rembrandt always seems to show us the whole person'.[6] He compares Rembrandt to Shakespeare in describing their, 'almost uncanny knowledge' of what the Greeks called the 'workings of the soul'.[7]

Rembrandt was struck by the realism of both Dürer and Caravaggio, but also came under the influence of Rubens, almost 30 years his senior, the most influential artist of the Flemish Baroque period, against whom he would have inevitably measured himself. In Rembrandt we see what has been referred to as the heroic pathos of Rubens, transformed to powerful realism (c.f. Rembrandt's *The Descent from the Cross*, 1634, with Rubens painting of the same subject, some 20 years earlier). In his painting that became known as *The Night Watch*, of 1642, Rembrandt reinvented the idea of the group portrait as part of his effort to achieve the 'ultimate liveliness' in his work. The most obvious aspect of Rembrandt's late style is that the brushwork tends to be both looser and broader. The 'mysterious quality' of Rembrandt's later work is that the intensity of observation and the painterly execution seem only to have grown, compared with his earlier work.[8] But whereas the brushwork is livelier, the figures in Rembrandt's later works are also characterised by a remarkable stillness. It has been noted that his paintings of this later period show a strong understanding of significant detail, but that these impressions were made with an extraordinary freedom and economy. Samuel van Hoogstraten (a pupil of Rembrandt), in his 1678 treatise on painting, advised painters not to waste their time on detail in paintings intended to be hung high on a wall, 'for the distance and the thickness of the air will cause many things, that are in reality not assimilated to seem to blend'.[9] Van Hoogstraten claimed that a rough sketch, 'can often create such a great impression on beholders that they can see more than is actually there'.[10] Gombrich talks at length of this phenomenon in Part III of his *Art & Illusion* (see Bibliography), titled 'The Beholder's Share'.[11]

> All representation relies to some extent on what we have called 'guided projection'. When we say that the blots and brushstrokes of the impressionist landscapes 'suddenly come to life', we mean we have been led to project a landscape into these dabs of pigment.