

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Burne-Jones Talking. His Conversations 1895-1898 Preserved by His Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke by Mary Lago; Kjarval. A Painter of Iceland by Adalsteinn Ingolfsson and Matthias Johannessen

Review by: Louis A. Muinzer

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own feelings and emotions in much the same way Egon Schiele exhibits in some of his work. Wedge does not seem fully prepared to open up to his audience. I couldn't imagine him doing a 'Self-Portrait Masturbating' as Schiele did. Wedge's masturbation seems more confined to the art world itself.

Fergus Delargy's work was housed in two rooms which divided his work neatly into two categories. In one room were a series of drawings and in the other, three dimensional painted works and relief paintings. The drawings were garish in colour, like Wedge's, and shared the odd image; these works were reminiscent of Kandinsky, using semi-abstract references. The most entertaining work, the relief pieces, reminded me of school playgrounds where the pupils have been encouraged to build brightly coloured models and paint monsters on the walls. The room worked on this fun level especially as the relief pieces looked like the pop up pictures in children's books. No doubt Delargy is familiar with the recent relief work of Frank Stella. It would be a mistake though to view this show too seriously. I feel it is best viewed in a light hearted way.

Audrey Mullins' show probably contained fewer historical references than the other two painting shows, though her handling of paint and approach to imagery was certainly in the eclectic style which is present today. Use of colour can be a personal thing but I did not feel that her colours related to her imagery well. This imagery consisted of familiar objects, ice cream cones, rainbows, buckets, spades and hearts which were freely arranged on the canvasses. It appeared that Mullins was more in control of her stylistic devices than either Wedge or Delargy; to what extent this will be an advantage remains to be seen.

Finally some observations in general about the MA shows. As I walked around the exhibition, I constantly had the sensation of being in some rarified atmosphere which made me feel as though I was in a temple where the gods were oblivious to the outside world. The faith of the worshippers was avant-gardeism. Art College education seems to have reached a point where it can teach nothing lest it infringes on the self-expression of the student. While self-expression is very laudable, the effect such a limited approach has on the student must be considered. Until third level art education starts placing more emphasis on philosophy & theoretical issues, it is unlikely that students will produce work which doesn't strongly resemble a mish-mash of contemporary art. These six artists are now going to find themselves in the rough and tumble of the outside world. Certainly some at least will survive, the only real obstacle being the introduction of a Ph.D in Fine Art. A Ph.D. in a non-academic subject? Within the 'Poly' anything can happen.

Brian J. Kennedy

BOOKS

BURNE-JONES TALKING. HIS CONVERSATIONS 1895-1898 PRESERVED BY HIS STUDIO ASSISTANT THOMAS ROOKE. Edited by Mary Lago. Published by John Murray, London, 1982. £12.50.

KJARVAL. A PAINTER OF ICELAND. By Adalsteinn Ingolfsson and Matthias Johannessen. Published by Iceland Review, P.O. Box 93, 121 Reykjavik, Iceland, 1981. \$29.50.

A Victorian English Pre-Raphaelite and a contemporary Icelandic expressionist may seem strange companions in a single review, but the pairing is far from fortuitous. Besides presenting valid, if differing, alternatives to visual realism, Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) and Johannes S. Kjarval (1885-1972) were both masters of what surely must be mankind's oldest art—the art of conversation. As painters, Burne-Jones and Kjarval might well agree that one picture is worth a thousand words, but the two of them loved the odd thousand words nonetheless and could handle them as dextrously as they handled their brushes. Now, for our pleasure and edification, their living voices have been brought within earshot by the two welcome books under review.

As its subtitle indicates, BURNE-JONES TALKING is a record of the painter's personal conversation as set down by his assistant Thomas Rooke and edited by Professor Mary Lago, who has provided introduction, bridge passages, bibliography, some illustrations and some extremely helpful notes—a worthy edition prepared by a dedicated and knowledgeable scholar. Although Rooke's record only presented his master's talk in the final years of their association, its contents are both rich and remarkable, and they have the feel of real talk. Typically, the scene is the studio, with Burne-Jones chatting at ease with his assistant over the work at hand. I can't rightly say what I expected Burne-Jones to be like before reading this book, but I certainly did not expect that painter of Arthurian, medieval and other remote scenes to remind me of Bernard Shaw! Irish he was not and English he was; still, Burne-Jones was anything but an Eminent Victorian or a Pillar of the Establishment. He was a wry and penetrating observer of his society, forthright, even devastating, in some of his observations, but never vitriolic. Although he may call his fellow Englishmen "born pirates" and "damned hypocrites" (page 61) and accuse them of being more likely to abandon their political and religious persuasions than their frock coats (page 37), his natural kindness and sympathetic nature are never far from his lips. Characterizing the Empire as a material one that can't "last forever", and that will "have to go someday" like all of its kind, he adds his own affirmative response to his

society: "But a material empire makes no appeal to my mind. The English achievements that I'm proud of are of a very different sort. I love the immaterial." (Page 73)

The last quotation offers a good introduction to the most frequent concern of Burne-Jones' studio-talk: the art and artists of the immaterial empire to which he had dedicated his life. The book contains much interesting talk about Rossetti, Burne-Jones' mentor, and William Morris, his close friend and collaborator, along with stimulating comments about the work or personality of a variety of other artists—Holman Hunt, Millais, Beardsley, et al. Also of interest are his unfavourable reactions to Impressionism, the movement that was rendering him and his kindred spirits unfashionable.—"What's in their minds?" he asks Rooke. "What do they do, those Impressionists?" "They try to overlook minutiae and think of breadth and atmosphere," replies the assistant, but the master is not impressed:

"They do make atmosphere but they don't make anything else. They don't make beauty, they don't make design, they don't make idea, they don't make anything else but atmosphere and I don't think that's enough—I don't think it's very much." (Page 122)

Like so much in these conversations, that passage tells us a great deal about the art of Burne-Jones himself. Whether by implication, as here, or by direct comment upon his own ideals and practices, the artist speaks strikingly of his art. His talk builds up a clearly defined figure of a painter who perfected his carefully finished images through a slow, continuing process of analysis and labour—if, indeed, the images actually were perfected, for his studio contained many an unfinished canvas. "Slowly built up texture" (page 85) enabled him to point his works in the direction of final completion; in that process, his dominant concern was for the total harmony of the picture, rather than for the piecemeal colouring of specific areas. The heart of this technique, one learns, was the creative distancing of his eye from the canvas and his dedication to the overall pattern scanned by that eye. This focus of attention is sometimes stated clearly in Burne-Jones' comments on the paintings of others, for instance in those criticisms of works by an unnamed woman artist:

"Then there's that tiresome thing about them that's always happening to the inexperienced, that a little way off you can't make out the shape of anything—it's all a hopeless confusion, though close to it's all elaborately drawn and finished."

"There's a fig tree in one picture, with every leaf perfectly drawn and shaded, and of a most beautiful colour, and yet at a little way off the whole tree is not of a good colour . . ." (Both quotations, page 149)

But while he gave special care to the way-off effectiveness of his own canvases, Burne-Jones, the keen admirer of Van Eyck's Arnolfini painting in the National

Gallery, loved clarity of finish too; actually his ideal painting was an impossible dream:

"... the kind of painting I should like [he told Rooke] would be what would look lovely under a magnifying glass and yet cover an acre in extent and be quite right on that scale too—and that's what I never do—do I?" (Page 150)

Whether he does or not, such a comment tells us how we should look at Burne-Jones' paintings—as a tension of finished detail and overall patterning with the latter controlling the success of the work. Indeed, this book will send me right back to Burne-Jones' paintings, to look at them with clearer eyes.

On the tone and "meaning" of Burne-Jones' paintings, the conversations are less illuminating than on their craftsmanship. Sincerity, a rejection of "bad sentiment" and a respect for "spiritual merit" (page 135), a pervasive dedication to beauty, as opposed to ugliness, in art and a strong responsiveness to Christianity and medievalism are all spoken of here, as is his determination to occupy his own niche as a creative artist:

"I'm a great believer in pegging away. It's what I have kept it in mind to do and by keeping on I've forced people to take Romance for granted as far as I'm concerned." (Page 63)

But the meaning and special poetry of Burne-Jones' unique visual "Romance" is not to be taken for granted by those who would know him well. One wishes he had discussed his individual paintings with Rooke in some depth. However, one can respect the reticence of an artist in such matters and also appreciate the difficulty that even an articulate man like Burne-Jones might have in "expressing" his paintings verbally. Besides, Rooke tells us that Burne-Jones did not communicate all of himself to a given friend: *"... a certain reserve was maintained by the gaps that were left in the communications to each one. The fulness of disclosure on one side of a subject was made up for by complete silence on another."* (Page 20) But if Burne-Jones does not "tell all" in these admirable conversations, he sends us out to talk with those curious paintings for ourselves. The work of a decent, dedicated even lovable artist, they have a lot to talk about.

Mary Lago's edition of the Rooke/Burne-Jones conversations will, of course, merely serve to increase our interest in an artist already accessible to us in English art books. The Kjarval volume, however, stands in an entirely different class, for it is the only book on the Icelandic painter available to us in English. It contains forty-eight pages of colour reproductions and a number of black-and-white illustrations, together with a short, knowledgeable critical introduction by Adalsteinn Ingolfsson and a marvellous sample of the painter's talk: "Conversations with Kjarval" by the poet/newspaperman Matthias

Johannesson. Thus, this very attractively produced book offers a broad-based introduction to Kjarval as man and artist.

But why should we bother with Kjarval? Few English-speakers will know of his paintings; indeed, only one museum in our language area, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, owns a collection of his work. It would be interesting to know how many British and Irish art historians and critics even recognize his name. So why should we care? The answer is one I have given in another issue of CIRCA: neither art history nor art criticism should be bigotted and blinkered; neither can afford to limit its attention to the art produced in a few culturally fashionable countries—as if the rest of mankind lacked eyes and souls and paintbrushes. Instead of dwelling endlessly on hackneyed "classics" that "need no introduction", they should go off to places like Iceland, Peru and Northern Ireland in search of creative people whose talents are ignored by the "trendy" critics.



Burne-Jones self caricature.

As for Kjarval, the individual artist, rather than an emblem of the Invisible Artist in our world, I can only say this: a long while ago, I wandered about in a museum in Reykjavik trying to survey Icelandic art. I came to the conclusion that Icelandic painting was divided into two groups of works: the paintings of Johannes S. Kjarval and the paintings of everybody else. I am now ashamed of myself for that facile judgement, for I know that Kjarval was not the only interesting painter on that fabulous island in the north. Still, ever since that day, I have been on the prowl for Kjarval publications and even probably entertained somewhere in the back of my mind the wild hope that someday a Kjarval book might appear in English. Well, here it is at last.

Having read this new book and taken the first of many looks at its pictures, I can

confirm what my personal experience in Iceland suggested to me during that visit: Kjarval is Iceland's national artist; his painting resonates in the Icelandic psyche in a very special way. His popularity can be suggested by the fact that when a 70th birthday exhibition of his work was held in Reykjavik in 1955, an eighth of the entire Icelandic nation turned up; ten years later, a Kjarval exhibition even topped that, for about a seventh of the population dropped by. (25,000 and 30,000 people, respectively, in a population of around 200,000). I wonder, in fact, if any modern painter in the world means as much to his own people as Kjarval means to his. Certainly, anyone interested in probing the possible character and art of an Artist for the People in our community—or any other community—could do no better than to begin with an imaginative study of Kjarval and his Iceland.

Because of the importance I attach to this artist, I shall not attempt to summarize his work or his "magic" in a few paragraphs of the present review: Kjarval is a glorious man and he deserves a full celebration when CIRCAsances permit. For those who will avail themselves of it, KJARVAL. A PAINTER OF ICELAND will provide a first look at the painter the Icelanders themselves would most like us to know. Adalsteinn Ingolfsson's critical introduction provides an informative survey of Kjarval's life and art and places the Icelanders in European perspective; one of the few artists he compares with Kjarval, incidentally, is Jack B. Yeats. It is a necessarily short but extremely stimulating essay that whets the reader's appetite for a longer and more detailed exploration. Adalsteinn Ingolfsson has also selected the paintings that are so attractively reproduced here; they are certainly varied and together suggest Kjarval's striking stylistic variety. The viewer, however, should not be so drawn to the paintings that he/she overlooks the reproductions of Kjarval's drawings, notably perhaps the 1927 series of portrait sketches, which are deservedly praised in the introduction. The definitive Kjarvals, though, are undoubtedly the landscape paintings of his strange and unforgettable beautiful country. I hope that the illustrations in this book will suggest the impact Kjarval's work had on me many years ago in Iceland; if they break the ice and get the lava flowing, they will perform an admirable service.

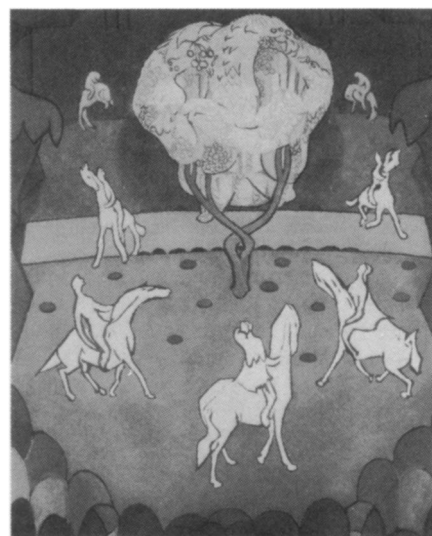
For me personally, however, the highpoint of the Kjarval book is not the illustrations, but the section called "Conversations with Kjarval", shared in and written down by Matthias Johannessen; the translated text is drawn from a book of these conversations, and they are incomparable. We may see Kjarval's paintings in Icelandic museums and homes, if we have sense enough to go there, but we shall never hear the like of Kjarval's voice anywhere. I thoroughly enjoyed the excellent conversation of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, but I am utterly hooked on Kjarval, a man of our time, not Victoria's, an artist who, in a crazy way, speaks for us all. Burne-Jones

talked privately with Rooke to be understood. Kjarval, one suspects, sometimes talked publicly to be *misunderstood*: some of his behaviour may have been due partly to "insecurity" at first and may later have become a "defence mechanism". (Page 11) And yet there must have been something in his heart and brain that wanted to leap over the verbal fences behind which he stood. Or let me put it this way. Sir Edward is a Shaw character and Kjarval is right out of Samuel Beckett: if a painter were to wander on stage to pass the time with Didi and Gogo as they waited for Godot, that painter probably would have been Johannes S. Kjarval. His best talk has a dizzy, uncanny, elliptical quality that I can only call Irish. Maybe he is Irish in some curious way known only to himself, for his real name is Johannes Sveinsson, and he named himself Kjarval after "an Irish king known to him from a classical saga". (Page 8).

As befits an "Irish king" from Iceland, Kjarval's talk is charged with poetry; it is profound, habit-forming and cockeyed. I have said that Beckett might have created Kjarval, but his actual style has something of the quality found in the fiction of Jack Yeats—as pungent in its way as his paintings. And here is the most fascinating point of all: Kjarval's ambling verbiage takes us far more deeply into his art than the rational conversation of Burne-Jones does into his.

I shall not attempt to explore Kjarval's talk here, but I must give the reader a good mouthful of it to chew over on his own. A notable example to Kjarval's stream of consciousness, style and oblique wisdom was triggered by a question Johannessen asked him about poetry, which the painter clearly loved, and his art: "Which have you got most talent for, poetry or painting?" And the old master replied as follows:

"The little bit of poetry I turn out is inspired from painting. When I come home, I feel I have something left to express, and I also have some fun in me, even if nature contains ice and people allow it to set the course. Just think of the athletes. A person like myself is exempted from that, for I can't swim into a school of whales and put a bridle or an outboard motor on them. People don't play enough with whales, but art involves that kind of thing. Those fellows' stuff is much too cheap, far too serious. They should get into communion with other beings. Just think how much more entertaining life would be if they put bridles on whales; that happens in art. When people had to travel back in the good, old days, they rode whales—and there was playfulness in it . . . Putting bridles and buoys on whales should become a sport for some athletes, and then they could catch fish for their dinner, too. Why always retreat back to the ways of primitive man? It's terrible. People who do should look out; the ice might melt, and where would they be, then?" (Page 22)



Kjarval, Icelandic artists around the tree of wisdom.

Burne-Jones would not have said it quite that way, but he too had wisdom and humanity and a playful streak, and I think he would agree. At bottom, the trouble with art is really quite simple: "People don't play enough with whales". Thanks to the publishers, Iceland Review, for bringing us the joy of this man. To them up there, Kjarval may be Iceland's best loved painter, but to us down here he is simply the most Irish foreigner who ever lived.

Louis A. Muinzer

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