



Ian McKeever
Paintings 1978-1990

Lower & Upper Galleries: 12 October-2 December 1990

WHITECHAPEL

Exhibition Guide



Field Series installed at Nigel Greenwood Gallery, London in 1979

Ian McKeever was born on 30 November 1946 at the seaside resort of Withernsea, East Yorkshire (now Humberside). In 1965 he moved to London to undertake a teaching course at Avery Hill College of Education, but quickly came to realise that his true vocation lay in the field of fine art. In 1970 he took a SPACE studio at St Katherine's Dock, a move which marked his first real contact with professional artists. At about this time, his earlier painted perspex reliefs gave way to more fully sculptural assemblages featuring painted wooden panels and pieces of stone and ceramic, some of which were stacked up on the floor in piles. McKeever first exhibited in a mixed show in Berlin in 1971 and was subsequently invited to teach part-time at the Slade School of Fine Art. He had his first one-man exhibition at Cardiff Arts Centre in 1971. Realising that his way of working with large landscape-based canvases having some form of relationship with pieces of stone presented numerous difficulties in the context of a gallery, McKeever made the decision to take his installations out-of-doors. He continued presenting work in this vein up until 1976 during which time he showed in galleries either the preliminary drawings or maquettes or, more rarely, the photographic record of the work on site. He moved into his Martello Street studio in the East End of London in 1974. His first two shows at Nigel Greenwood Gallery, London featured the *Sand and Sea Series* (1976-77) and the *Field Series* (1977-78), groups of pictures which for the first time incorporated the photographic documentation of their making within the pieces themselves. With *Painting for a Hole in the Ground* (1976), McKeever ceased making installations in the open air, subsequently seeking encouragement for his work from the landscape in walking trips to remote locations, including the Shetland Islands and the Faroe Islands (1979), Swedish Lapland (1985 and 1989), Greenland (1988) and Tasmania (1990). In 1980-81 he spent a year in Liverpool as a

guest of the Walker Art Gallery at Bridewell Studios, at the end of which he showed his *Islands* and *Night Flak* series. Simultaneously, he commenced work on a manuscript entitled *Black and White... or how to paint with a hammer*, a manifesto on his position as a painter. (The text was published in conjunction with McKeever's installation at Matt's Gallery, London in 1982.) In 1981 he spent six months at the Kunsthalle Nuremberg, where he met his wife Gerlinde Gabriel. At the end of this residency, during which he produced the *Deutscher Zyklus (German Cycle)*, he moved to the nearby village of Allersberg where he worked for nine months on the drawings towards the Matt's Gallery show. He returned to London in 1982, commencing work on a series of paintings entitled *Traditional Landscapes (1982-84)*, and took up the post of Senior Lecturer in Painting at Camberwell School of Arts & Crafts in 1984. From 1985-86 he produced the *Lapland Group*, the last body of work to date featuring direct references to landscape and, in 1986, *Swedish Lapland*, a tape-slide commissioned by the Whitechapel Art Gallery. In 1987 McKeever was the subject of a major exhibition of the Kunstverein Braunschweig, but in the same year was deeply affected by the death of his younger sister from cancer and gave up painting for six months. When he returned to the studio, he restricted his palette very largely to black and white and began work in earnest on *A History of Rocks (1986-88)*. At the same time, he continued work on a series of *Diptychs (1983-90)*. In 1989 McKeever returned to Germany at the invitation of the Künstlerprogramm des DAAD, West Berlin. Following exhibitions of the *Notes (1989-90)* and the *Diptychs* in West and East Berlin, he resumed working in London in 1990. He currently lives in the London Borough of Hackney with his wife and their two children.



Waterfalls installed at Arnolfini, Bristol in 1980

The current exhibition has been selected from collections throughout Europe and brings together paintings from five groups of work completed over the past twelve years. These are the *Field Series*, the *Waterfalls (1979)*, the *Traditional Landscapes*, the *Lapland Group* and the *Diptychs*. The interview which follows has been taken from an edited conversation between the artist and Paul Bonaventura for the Whitechapel Art Gallery which took place in the artist's Berlin home on Sunday 24 June 1990.

You were brought up in Withernsea on the Yorkshire coast in close proximity to some of the most beautiful landscapes in the British Isles. Were you aware of your immediate environment from an early age and might it have stimulated your avowed enthusiasm for the kinds of remote locations which have appeared subsequently in your work?

Yes, it was a very important factor. We lived on the edge of what was then little more than a village, so that 100 metres in one direction you were in a rural landscape, and 100 metres in the other, you were on the edge of the cliff overlooking the sea. The sea itself was very important to me. The peninsula near Spurn Head, where the coast juts out into the North Sea, is extremely windy. The sea there is always turbulent; it's omnipresent, you can't escape it. For anyone living nearby, that elemental presence is part of your life. In Withernsea, we had very little to entertain us and so we spent most of our time running around in the woods and the fields, or on top of the cliffs and along the beach. This period in my life marks the genesis of what I work out of. In a way, the older you get, the earlier you go back. You draw on your past; it creeps into the work.

Since coming to painting, you have concentrated on the production of close-knit series of works. On the surface at least, some of these series would appear to be more successful than others. I am thinking now about the Traditional Landscapes and the Berlin Diptychs rather than, say, the Sand and Sea Series and the Deutscher Zyklus (German Cycle). Would this perhaps be one of the reasons why you have only chosen to illustrate examples from some groups and not others in the exhibition?

Certain groups are more important than others, but that might change with time. We could have made two or three quite different exhibitions at the Whitechapel, each with a different accent. It would be inappropriate for me simply to show arbitrary works from each series because I do work very consciously within the confines of a group, and that needs to be seen first.

How do you know when it is time to cease working on a series of paintings?

When it closes itself off, when I can discern in it a degree of consolidation... One of the reasons I work in groups is that I have no understanding of what a finished painting might be. The only way in which I can make sense of completion is by establishing a body of work which collectively constitutes a way to meaning, a lexicon, which has a specific sense of identity.

So visual and intellectual developments thrown up during the making of one panel carry over into other panels which then come to constitute members of the same series.

That's right. One of the biggest problems in painting is what to leave out. Often, in the making of a piece, several possibilities present themselves. I use other panels in the same series to investigate different threads of evolution. I begin to get a sense of what I might have to say only by comprehending pieces corporately.

In the Field Series, Waterfalls, Traditional Landscapes and the Lapland Group, the manipulation of the surfaces of the pieces - by editing, cutting and tearing the photographs used, and by over-drawing and over-painting - only records one relationship with the subject, and mirrors a reaction based less on your feelings at the time of your involvement with the landscape and more on some synthesised sensation deriving from the studio encounter with its image. Is this a purposeful concern? I know that in the past, with Painting for a Hole in the Ground for example, you attempted to record the experience more immediately by working out-of-doors and by physically locating the paintings within the environments from which they were derived.



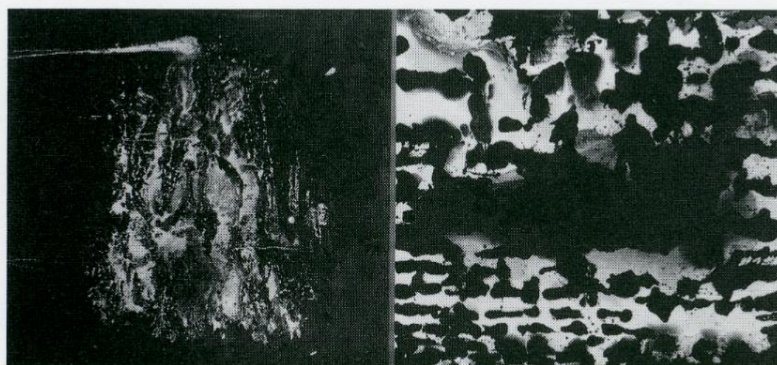
Beside the Bramble Ditch 1983
Oil and photograph on canvas, 230 × 208cms

The dichotomy between working in the landscape and working in the studio is very important. I see art as an urban activity, as a cultural activity. I return to the studio to consciously distance myself as a painter from my other activities. When I am working in the studio on something like *Beside the Bramble Ditch* (1983), I'm not really involved with an evocation of what the original experience of being in the landscape was about. I'm dealing with the much more abstract notion of what it is to make a painting. There is often a long gap between my being out in the landscape taking photographs and the active making of a piece in the studio.

What relationship are you endeavouring to establish between the activities of painting and photography? Should we regard the evident primacy of pigment on paper or canvas over light-sensitive emulsion on paper as a triumph of the imagination over the claims of authenticity?

No, I don't see things in those terms at all. I simply have these different levels of personal engagement with the world. On the one hand, I'm halfway up a mountain

with a camera, and then I'm in the studio trying to paint. The work is about bringing these different levels of experience up against one another. I don't see things hierarchically. I began working with photographs on canvas for two reasons. Firstly, because photography as documentation had always been integral to my activity, and secondly because when I decided that I couldn't get at painting without making paintings, I couldn't face having to deal with an empty canvas. It was impossible for me to imagine something onto the ground.



Trilobite 1985-88
Oil, acrylic and photograph on canvas, 220 × 466cms

From what you have told me previously, it appears that you might possibly have elected to work with subjects other than landscape...

People have made that observation repeatedly. I cannot invent images. I have to work with things that I'm familiar with; things that carry with them a degree of authenticity. Landscape fills that space, and my understanding of what landscape might be gets broader all the time.

The working method which you have adopted in the Diptychs reflects the ways in which weathering and erosion act upon the earth's surface. Whilst the undercoat on any particular panel is still wet, you pour on oil paint, using streams of water to divide up and separate the medium into flows and veils of pigment. The skin-like patches which result are blemished and tarnished and come to resemble exfoliated rock outcrops, the surfaces of which have been set in motion by the agents of exposure. Other parts of the panels feature areas which appear to have undergone intense seismic or volcanic activity. Has your relationship to landscape made itself manifest in the kinds of surfaces which you are endeavouring to create at present?

In the *Diptychs*, I have shifted away from the landscape 'out there' towards something which is much more felt, to what is, say, on the surface of my fingertips when I'm scrambling across the side of a mountain. That's the kind of contact which now interests me. I'm more concerned with that area where images come into being, or begin to get lost, just as sensations or emotions come and go and are only sensed later on. It has to do with limits of recognition, with a kind of proto-abstraction...

I'm trying to comprehend what this means in terms of the possibility of painting, but it's not *what* I'm trying to paint. The images themselves are found more in the interstices between things; for example, between the finger tips and the rock, or between a hut stacked high with video tapes and the surface of a glacier...

In the *Traditional Landscapes* and the *Lapland Group*, I was very involved with how a sense of space could be generated through gesture and mark-making, a concern which was similarly explored in the *Field Series* and *Waterfalls*. One of the big issues in twentieth century art has been the autograph, how you invest marks on a surface with your own signature. You can talk about de Kooning's marks and Vedova's marks and Baselitz's marks. In one sense, these painters use gestures as signature. The thing that I've been interested in is how *not* to own the marks which I've made; to make marks which are anonymous without their becoming synthetic. The last series which dealt with this concern was the *Lapland Group* and it was there that I came up against the realisation that it just wasn't possible! The marks always carry an autograph. Nonetheless, I'm still fascinated by how one goes beyond gesture without either 'picturing' it or being mechanical.

You may be using chance procedures in your work, such as staining and pouring, but you're still dictating the overall direction in which a canvas will develop. The kinds of techniques which you employ in the fabrication of the Diptychs might not equate with the sorts of gestures made by the hand and arm in the manipulation of the brush, but you're only eradicating the immediacy of your movements by imparting your energies elsewhere.

Of course I am, but I'm still addressing myself to the problem of the gesture. It's a question of how to subvert it, not negate it. For instance, if you look at the work of Baselitz, he achieves this by establishing a conflict between 'normal' gesture and inverted image. Gerhard Richter, on the other hand, seems to paint with gloves on. It is as if his hand has never touched the canvas. Both artists subvert the gesture without destroying it and that's important because it opens up other possibilities for understanding the space of painting. Techniques such as staining and pouring allow me the same opportunities.

You do work with the diptych format and frequently combine two or more media in one work. I presume that you subscribe to a dialectical mode of reasoning in your apprehension of the world.

I cannot see the world in any other way. Everything exists in a dialectical relationship with its neighbour. Nothing exists in isolation. I've been working so much with diptychs because they represent the smallest number of units which permit me to operate pluralistically. As soon as you go back to the single unit, you've re-entered a closed system... Most of the work which I'm drawn to gives off the sense of a greater framework. If I look at a Barnett Newman or a Clyfford Still, it's not the individual works which fascinate me. It's the sense of a group identity, of the way knowledge carries over from one painting into the next. If this didn't happen I'd have no apparatus for understanding the work.