

Ian Whittlesea

Accompanying this heroically scaled work is a much smaller single painting that simply says 'The Sandwalk'. After returning from his five-year voyage Darwin moved to Kent and never willingly travelled anywhere again. Instead he began a voluminous correspondence, and allowed the world to come to him through letters. In a small wood next to his house he laid out an oval track known as 'The Sandwalk' and each day would walk slowly round and round it whilst thinking, as if in unconscious mimicry of his earlier circumnavigation. The story of Darwin's retreat from the world has a melancholy aspect typical of Whittlesea's work. Cézanne's journey around Mont Sainte-Victoire was ended by his death, caused by a cold caught whilst out painting the mountain once more. Each painting describes a journey that must end, just as the 'oblivion' of reading ends and we are returned once more to our surroundings. For all their concentration on the almost invisible traces of their own construction, Whittlesea's works can perhaps be related more to epitaphs or funerary inscriptions than to the tradition

of painting. They have the sombre presence of a memorial – a memorial to the time the artist spends making them, as well as to the lives and places they describe.

Simon Morley

Image overleaf shows work in progress on 'Circumnavigation – Charles Darwin', 2001-2003, acrylic on canvas, eight panels each 122 x 122cm and 'The Sandwalk – Charles Darwin', 2002, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 56cm

'Mont Sainte-Victoire – Paul Cézanne', 2000-2003, acrylic on canvas, detail



Ian Whittlesea

There is a series of photographs from the 1890s that show Paul Cézanne in the blazing Provencale sun dressed in a shabby paint-spattered suit and battered hat hard at work in front of what he called the 'motif'. These photographs, as well as several of the actual views of the artist's beloved mountain, are some of the associations provoked in looking at and reflecting on Ian Whittlesea's four part painting 'Mont Sainte-Victoire – Paul Cézanne' which lists all of the sub-titles given to Cézanne's images of that famous mountain. There is a curious vagueness to these titles which, given by the artist's dealer or by later curators and art historians, struggle to anchor the visual image – 'Road at the Foot of the Mountain', 'View from the South-West', 'View from Les Lauves'. Rather than describing the image, they appear to describe Cézanne's journey around the base of the mountain, locating him in space as he spends over twenty years painting a single object.

I said these photographs came to mind on 'looking' at Whittlesea's work, but

really I should say on 'reading' them, because the most obvious thing about these paintings is that they substitute words for pictures. For in a typical painting by Whittlesea we are confronted by short rows of neatly painted white letters in a modified Helvetica font that are set against unobtrusively coloured flatly-painted grounds. To say that his works are visually austere seems almost an understatement – not even the font is especially striking-looking being as it is a kind of 'everyman' of typography.

In figurative painting we perceive a surface made up of represented objects and concepts, but in written language it is the opposite – one reaches the designated objects or concepts through words that stand in for them. In reading a text one constructs meaning automatically from the string of words, but in 'reading' a figurative painting one engages from the outset in a process of destruction and construction. Can it be said that Whittlesea's paintings assert the supremacy of words as carriers of information over images? Perhaps. But

'Mont Sainte-Victoire – Paul Cézanne', 2000-2003, acrylic on canvas, detail



Ian Whittlesea

they also suggest that the primary role of words is to act as transparent vessels for the carrying of this information. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains 'The wonderful thing about language is that it promotes its own oblivion. ...[M]y eyes follow the line on the paper, and from the moment I am caught up in their meaning, I lose sight of them. The paper, the letters on it, my eyes and the body are there only as the minimum setting of some invisible operation. Expression fades before what is expressed, and this is why its mediating role may pass unnoticed.' Whittlesea certainly plays with this tendency, one that in fact was only established in Western Europe in the fifteenth century with the invention of printing – before that writing was often a stridently visual phenomenon and remains so in non-alphabetic cultures such as China and Japan where calligraphy still thrives.

In Whittlesea's painting the look of the text is minimally articulated. But this is not the whole story. For when we move in closer and study these letters we see that far from being mechanically produced,

they display – however discretely, however modestly – the traces of the hand, the evidence of patient labour and emotional engagement. In this sense, then, Whittlesea first seems to want to 'promote', as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the 'oblivion' of language and then to subtly reinstate its presence as a material fact, as a visual and spatial phenomenon. For the making of his paintings is clearly a wilfully time-consuming and meditative process which seems almost as important to Whittlesea as the end product. We might think of other artists who have sought to deposit in their work the methodical marking and ordering of the passage of time through repetitive inscription of letters – On Kawara, say, or Roman Opalka – both of whom are not surprisingly influences on Whittlesea. In this sense, Whittlesea's paintings are as much about the daily practice of painting as they are about any subject with which the paintings might deal.

What's really strange is that such austere pictorial minimalism actually puts in play a kind of mental maximalism. For from

such meagre resources extends an awesome discursive and associational field that permits us to depart from the here-and-now facts of the work and to set off instead towards rich realms of the imagination and memory. In Whittlesea's hands words become vessels to carry us on a long journey. They conjure up not only some of the absent locations themselves, but also a range of attendant thoughts. When we read the words on the paintings, just as the text disappears, we momentarily occupy a new space – neither the space of the gallery nor the space described by the painting, but the space of reverie.

These metaphors of reverie and the journey are central for the artist. Over the past eight years he has made an ongoing series of paintings generically called 'Studio Paintings', which show the address at which other artists or writers have worked. In part these paintings are a meditation on exile – whether the inward journey of Proust in his cork lined room, Gauguin's escape to Tahiti or the self-imposed exile of James Joyce as

he travelled around Europe. An implicit connection is drawn between the long, solitary hours necessary to produce this work and the more flamboyant exile of others. In the space of the studio, as in the 'oblivion' of reading, one is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.

In the eight part painting 'Circumnavigation – Charles Darwin' Whittlesea invites us to depart on another more geographically challenging journey, listing chronologically each place Darwin's ship 'The Beagle' anchored as it travelled around the world. This time the journey is a truly global one, and the familiarity of a place like Plymouth is quickly superseded by far more exotic locales – Good Success Bay, Port Desire, Hermit Island – before finally we return to the safe haven of England once more. The contrast between the dead-pan literalism of the texts themselves and the fantastic worlds they describe could almost be said to evoke the experience of the sublime. With a spatial economy unobtainable to images Whittlesea uses words here to literally encompass the world.

'Mont Sainte-Victoire – Paul Cézanne', 2000-2003, four panels each 152 x 152cm

