

JAMES FISHER

*I came here a stranger  
as a stranger I depart*



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## *In the spirit of the original*

Time pays dividends. James Fisher inflects the flat frontal plane of his paintings with an intimate sense of space. Awareness of that territory is not obvious to a casual glance. To a casual glance, these paintings may seem unyielding of emotion, bashful about coming forward from behind deadpan exteriors undifferentiated by paint strokes, and private about what they are 'about'.

Yet Fisher is a painter who knows better than to be hurried. An adherent to the magic in mixing raw materials with invention to create a parallel world, he loathes the idea that the conjuror should ever explain his tricks. He is conscious that 'art' has acquired over millennia its transfixing ability to transform experience with the orchestration of numerous plottings and decisions, attempts and changes, victories and defeats. Reality is a fabrication that interweaves with the world of imagined phenomena, and both acquire their meaning from that relativity.

These canvases offer the viewer a place for the imagination and the senses to probe and inhabit without feeling daunted or unequal. Both faculties are engaged. They follow on naturally from the initial encounter with a painted area just big enough to occupy an adult's field of vision. That person becomes equipped with the mental compass of relative place and context between the reality of the painted surface and the reality of the gallery itself. What the artist offers is a potent threshold over which it is impossible to tip. The space he provides is so concentrated that a foot in two worlds is the only viable position.

How long that posture is maintained is a decision left to the onlooker. The viewer matters; in that person's absence, do these images exist? The paintings are not easily consumed. Their scale is generous: their dimensions are more often found in an expressively abstract image or a figurative composition that has decided to do more than represent and thus needs elbow room to be rhetorical or tricky. Fisher does not make those kinds of pictures. Leave his work too soon and both the mind and the senses are left with a nagging feeling of an opportunity passed over.

In fact, how Fisher defines what he does is an argument against painting as commodity. That it is born from effort, from hard work, is one of the first sensations with which the human faculties are confronted.

It is deliberate, but the definition of his practice does not lie in 'hard graft', 'honest toil' (though the paintings display both). Conscious that that is not the impression conveyed, Fisher is demure about its proper significance. The biggest error that can be made in 'reading' the sparsely populated, variegated and nearly tormented coloured grounds (in which shape lies on the edge of disbanding – or of becoming) is to conclude that nothing is happening. They are captioned – titled – the way illustrations are in a book. But rather than defining an event, the language of those titles is poetic and whimsical. It cultivates an atmosphere that is almost as air-drawn as the colour silhouettes patterning the picture surface that focus into figures.

Symbiosis exists between title and image. Although the first urge is to look at paintings rather than to read them, no immediately identifiable topic comes forward because moments of suspension encapsulate his subjects. A woman dressed for warmth carries a chain saw away from a densely braided, sinuous and twisting screen that must be tree trunks in a coppice, and the title is *You Won't Hear My Step*. The viewer works at this proposition clothed in latency and may conclude that meaning is acquired less from the details of that scene than from the physical evidence of the surface. The graphic directness of the descriptive line; the traces of continual adjustments and the downward track-like marks that have moved as remorselessly as a glacial flow to eradicate local topography; colour climatically suffused with memory; the speckled, worn away plane that ebbs and advances like an unevenly patched and weathered wall where illuminated colour by turns resists, holds the line and then breaks down.

For how the painting feels may turn out to be as important as what the surface depicts. Put in other words, sensation is equally Fisher's subject as story: from both unfolds narrative, and although they are different modes, they set out to resolve in the same place. An analogy that seems appropriate to these paintings is with two paths that converge on the same destination after travelling some distance through separate landscapes.

Indeed, increasingly apparent from the spectator's point of view is Fisher's interest in superimposing one system upon another – fiction with thought; the organic with the fabricated; steely straight and hard with naturally soft and fibrous; abstract with representation; illusion with tactile reality; poetry with prose. Place any one above another and the

mind perceives more than the eye takes in: not a mental moiré pattern (as Fisher is more subtle) but a sensation that is still unsettling, like the just-off dissonance of a guitarist's alternative tuning or the after-effect of an engrossing and disconcerting dream.

This strategy is not intent on obstruction, either visual or imagined. Peter Doig, whose work bears comparison with Fisher's, baffles an eye which can never get a clear view of what may be going on. While he gives himself similar space to invent rather than portray, Fisher is less direct and has no need to inject frustration into the process of looking. Sharpening the viewer's attention means complicating the gaze rather than confusing it, suspending the familiar or known and laying tracks towards information rather than spelling it out. These paintings are not what the viewer expects from figuration – a conclusion, maybe. Instead, intimating a way forward to historiography, they place creativity at that person's disposal.

What Fisher proposes comes close to a meditation on representation in painting. The ethereal figures, their stains and traces, are there for a reason, inspired by two sources in another medium. Both were written, one in German, the other in English; painting, although transnational, has different language barriers. Both are word-based, but are communicated in contrasting forms and intervals. The first is *Die Winterreise* (1827), the cycle of songs for a male voice and piano. Schubert reset 24 poems by Wilhelm Müller in an order he chose for a coherent musical allegory, one about the journey of the heart from love to dissolution and despair. The second is the account by the poet, John Clare, written to the childhood love to whom he imagined he was married, of his return on foot in 1841 to his native Cambridgeshire fenland after escaping from the asylum in Epping to which he had been committed.

Found in both works is the theme of lost or unrequited love for which the history of art has numerous models for the painter. Some observers argue that British art has historically been dependent on the written idea to the disadvantage of the visual creativity of its artists. Few storylines in visual art or music have pleased the consumer more; Millais' *Ophelia* regularly ranks among twenty-first century Britons' best-loved art works.

Fisher is rethinking that relationship between text and image. There are precedents for that, too, enough to intimidate each fresh contender. What distinguishes Fisher's approach is his conviction that painting's language

has preserved the elasticity to take on new forms, ideas, avowals and denials. In the spirit of Clare's own writing, at odds with the diction and even the vocabulary of his times, he attempts to combine physical and linguistic textures. Moreover, his desire is to interleave with the sensual delicacy of a floral fabric several first-persons across that mental threshold of the picture plane.

He starts with his reluctance to appropriate another's story. More than illustration can achieve, these images proceed by painting the spaces perceived between words. Fisher's choice of Schubert is important for at least two reasons. The first is generic, in that the closest analogy with the making of these paintings seems to be musical. Whereas a recital repeats (a form of illustration), these paintings are closer to performances, where a spectral story forms in the harmony improvised by a soloist. Phrasing a standard jazz melody, for instance (and Fisher likes jazz), one player will insert a figure into the space his playing permits, one that another musician hears and responds to with a new tonal variation. The inherited structure is untouched, but the perspective is re-imagined. From that angle the same tune blooms with different foliage.

The second reason lies in the genius of technique and composition. In *Die Winterreise*, Schubert elevates the pianist to a role equal to that of the singer. The piano expresses the shifting moods of the jilted lover with tremolos, glittering clusters or syncopated rhythms. It voices one plane, the singer another in the shallow space their sounds occupy together. Fisher delves into similar intervals and lets the experience inform his choices of tone, medium, line, facture, form.

It is tempting to analyse further the significance ground into the layers of these images. Fisher builds up the intense space of the picture plane to its worn and abraded appearance by working the obdurate material again and again with comparable incorrigibility. From being painted on with hard chalk priming, bronze dust in a wax medium and glaze upon oil-based glaze, the canvas is untacked from the stretcher and laid flat in the intervals between each layer to be smoothed by circular motions of fine sandpaper lubricated turpentine and reduced just short of its weave by the methodical application of the sharp edge of a Stanley knife. With each stage colour gets blunted, becomes more estranged from its chromatic identity. Less corporeal and coated with a different sheen, it takes on an end-of-the-day melancholy.

At the same time, Fisher increases his knowledge. He knows these squares of cloth well: every inch is worked, their bounds have been beaten. In a material sense, these are all-over paintings, where planes abut and colours combine in the eye and on the surface. A product of his close nurturing of line, colour and form is that layers meld to elaborate on tones rubbed down and sanded into a fusion: a distinctive purple corroborates with orangey ground and a cobalt blue merges with a yellow-golden hue. Fisher conjures glows with a watercolour delicacy from oil and acrylic, instilling what may be a Clare-like muddle into his media's identities. The colours in *I Quaked Like the Ague* (in which Fisher imagines Clare's own dream of being reunited with his lover) converge like neighbours in a crisis: human kindness transubstantiated.

This artist talks about his 'palimpsest' paintings. Citing manuscript is itself interesting as a metaphor for a certain type of painting; it is an even more indicative reference when assigned to process. Schubert's sketches and multiple drafts reveal the effortful genesis of the song cycle over several years and successive discoveries of new verses by Müller, which he proceeded to order and re-organise with a methodology strongly shaped by Schubert's changing moods.

And, on reflection, 'palimpsest' relates to Fisher's own search for his voice as a painter. The last of those first-person experiences, it seems to be folded, sort of mutely, with the rest into the evidence of these surfaces. In the ten years since he graduated from the RCA, Fisher has himself acquired and accreted layers of painterly awareness, pursuing gesture, pace and rhythm for several years in non-figurative images organised around the mechanical and organic polarities of mathematics, pattern and natural growth. In Rome in 2001 came the shock of early Renaissance frescoes. In them was embodied painting's mesmerising alchemy, that unproven belief Fisher had harboured throughout his formal education. Perched high on a church wall was evidence of the simple strength of communication that survives even to the point of dissolution.

Painting reveals what is seen, and what is not.

*Martin Holman* October 2008

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A collage artwork featuring a portrait of a man with a beard, a floral pattern, and a green circular object. The portrait is on the left, the floral pattern is in the center, and the green circular object is on the right. The background is a textured, brownish-gold color.

*Fremd bin ich eingezogen,  
Der Mai war mir gewogen  
Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe,  
Die Mutter gar von Eh', –  
Nun ist die Welt so trübe,  
Der Weg gehüllt in Schnee.*

*Wilhelm Müller – Gute Nacht from Winterreise*

## *I came here a stranger, as a stranger I depart*

My recent paintings were made in response to two different texts: Wilhelm Müller's libretto for Schubert's *Winterreise* song cycle, and an account written by John Clare describing his escape from an asylum in Epping Forest and his four-day walk home to the fenland of North Cambridgeshire.

The two pieces of writing have several connecting characteristics and neither can be fully appreciated in isolation. *Winterreise* is experienced as a synthesis of the libretto, written in 1824, and Schubert's impassioned, brooding music, published in 1827. The full impact of John Clare's narrative cannot really be understood without knowing the biographical backdrop: Clare's bucolic childhood, his political prose and botanical studies, and his poetry.

Each text is an account of a journey, but their correlation runs deeper. Both are made as a result of the anxiety and heightened emotion brought about by unrequited love. Clare's story is written for Mary Joyce, his childhood sweetheart, who, he mistakenly believed had become his wife. Mary had died in a house fire a few years before the piece was written and Clare had married another woman, Patty Turner in 1820. Clare's account (written with an accompanying letter to Mary a few days after his escape, from notes made during the journey) describes the adversity of the walk from Essex to Glinton. Without a map or money Clare orientated himself by lying down at night facing north, so that when he awoke he knew which way to continue. His breakout can be seen as a striving for home both literally, but perhaps more importantly, metaphorically. Clare associated Mary Joyce and physical autonomy – the objective of his escape bid – with his childhood and origins.

Reduced to begging for bread and beer and eating grass by the

roadside he arrived in Cambridgeshire, emaciated, footsore and hallucinating. It was Patty who took him home to Helpstone and eventually committed him to another asylum.

*Winterreise* is also a journey disturbed by unreciprocated passion, though the protagonist in this case is travelling away from the object of his nostalgia. Whilst Clare's account is a blend of misinterpretation, half-remembering and hallucination, it is a written recollection rooted in the fact of a real journey, physically walked, and includes obsessive and mundane detail. *Winterreise* is entirely the product of the imagination and is more broadly drawn. The narrative is imparted through the addled eyes of the infatuated hero, his lurching emotions and reeling sense of time. We are not told exactly what has taken place, simply that where once there was a relationship – '...With many a bunch of flowers', there is now dissolution. As the protagonist staggers out of the village where his lover lived, the emotional situation, the elements and his past memories conspire to destabilize and reduce him.

The effect of this narrative on its audience is achieved through the synthesis of the libretto with Schubert's music. Throughout the setting of Müller's poems we are led through shifts of emotion and time, which affect our relationship both to the protagonist and to what we hear in the music. Through his use of cadence and dynamics, the composer is able to evoke the footfalls of the narrator as he reacts to the developing emotional climate. The natural environment, birds and weather are conjured by similar means, describing and contextualising our protagonist's predicament. Schubert orchestrates the arc of the narrative so that the audience is pitched alongside the narrator from one song in the cycle to the next. Schubert uses a phrase structure borrowed from

Austrian folk music called antecedent-consequent to evoke memories of earlier sequences and events in the imagination. The distinct songs merge to become a disquieting compound force.

The combination of information offered by these texts and their contexts are intertwined with the audience's experiences to create a new narrative, unique to each individual. The paintings I have made in response to the texts are not therefore illustrations of, or accompaniments to the texts, but rather interpretations of an active audience's experience of them. When, for example I experience *Winterreise*, I 'read' the narrative of the melancholic protagonist in Müller's poems. I read this narrative through the setting by Schubert, his tonal weather and elements; his rhythmical footfall. I am led to wonder what Schubert intended in the setting, where he placed himself in the narrative. What did he make of Müller and his poems? Does his music suggest empathy with the protagonist?

Furthermore, I am diverted by the various different interpretations of the song cycle. I have heard several recordings and performances of *Winterreise*, each noticeably different from the last. Some singers vigorously drive the proceedings along, perhaps in an attempt to illuminate the contrast between passages of delicate nostalgia and terrifying presentiment. These are undoubted inherent attributes of the cycle but other performers allow Schubert's composition to cascade in a more inevitable manner, lending *Winterreise* an altogether different complexion.

In attempting to make visual equivalents of the experience of *Winterreise* or Clare's account, I have thought about the multi-layered construction of these narratives. As a piece of music, Schubert's cycle is

comprised of layers which are designed to elicit a particular effect. The resulting narrative is lucid and precise. Schubert often employs varied strophic forms within the confines of a song to reinforce the emotional transformation Müller's protagonist undergoes whilst singing it.

*Her Image Will Also Melt Away* and *Beyond Ice and Night and Fear* are two paintings made as a response to a particular song in the *Winterreise* cycle, *Rückblick*. *Rückblick* seems to encapsulate the shifting meter, emotion and narrative time of *Winterreise* in microcosm. The song is constructed with two narrative time lines which are reflected in Schubert's setting. The first is in the present – the wanderer is leaving the village, his feet burning beneath him as he walks through snow. He imagines the elements to be hostile towards him – that even the crows are seeing him off by throwing ice at his head. Schubert's opening phrases are, despite being annotated *nicht zu geschwind*, a fiercely blustering squall.

A second narrative phase is introduced, in which the protagonist reminisces on a time when he held more joyful sentiments at the same scene. Crows are replaced by larks and nightingales; ice and snow by clear streams; stones by the glowing maiden's eyes. Schubert changes the key – and the weather – giving his music a meandering, nostalgic theme. We are then shunted abruptly back to the present and by Schubert back to a G minor key.

To echo this in my painting, the present tense of *Rückblick* appears as disruptive vegetation and a snow-pinked sky in *Beyond Ice and Night and Fear*. We are confronted by two figures preoccupied with the elements around them. In *Her Image Will Also Melt Away* the nostalgic phase of *Rückblick* is presented with a warmer tinge to the weather. The same



*These paths are stopt – the rude philistines thrall  
Is laid upon them & destroyed them all  
Each little tyrant with his little sign  
Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine  
On paths to freedom & to childhood dear  
A board sticks up to notice 'no road here'  
& on the tree with ivy over hung  
The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung  
As tho the very birds should learn to know  
When they go there they must no further go*

*John Clare – The Mores from The Shepherd's Calendar, 1827*

figures, pictured at a different time, have a more demonstrative rapport. The vegetation in this case is less obtrusive.

*Her Image Will Also Melt Away* and *Beyond Ice and Night and Fear* were carefully assembled to take account of the multilayered construction of *Winterreise* and *Rückblick*. Just as we hear Müller's words through Schubert's setting, or a leitmotif carry one strophe to another, we see in these paintings pattern through image and motif through translucent surface. Reoccurring ornamentation is also deployed among these paintings, with slight variations, as a visual antecedent-consequent.

*I Quaked Like the Ague* and *Wide Awake Hat* were made with John Clare's narrative in mind. They are from a series of paintings that feature Mary Joyce, holding Clare, in the form of an imagined animal, in her arms. A sense of what is 'real' in John Clare's account wavers between mundane fact, fantasy, misremembering and hallucination. The narrative is difficult to grasp firmly and slips readily from comprehension. A series of spectral encounters are related and Clare's movement through the landscape seems in turn, unearthly and painfully visceral.

Accordingly, *I Quaked Like the Ague* and *Wide Awake Hat* have been realised in paint as ethereal figures in a transient landscape. This was achieved by delicate accumulation of stains and traces of powdered pigment. As in the *Winterreise* paintings, the layering of a palimpsest is called to mind. *I Quaked Like the Ague* and *Wide Awake Hat*, however, exercise a palimpsest's suggestion of ongoing readjustment more evidently through the vaporous quality of their imagery. For me, this is an attempt to portray Clare's uncertainty, the strangeness to him of what is beyond his known horizons.

If there is a fictive territory somewhere between *Winterreise* and

Clare's *Journey Out of Essex*, I feel that this may also be the imaginative region my paintings need to inhabit. It is a place that seems constantly just out of reach and forever on the horizon. Gladly, in attempting to arrive there I frequently remain as mystified as when I departed.

*James Fisher* August 2008



*I Live in Fear* 2007  
oil on linen, 96.5 × 101.5cm  
The Jerwood Collection, London



*Record of a Living Being* 2007  
oil on linen, 96.5 × 101.5cm



*Lindenbloom* 2008  
oil on linen, 71 × 66.5cm  
Private collection, Dublin

## JAMES FISHER

- 1972        born UK  
1992–5     University of Brighton  
1995–7     Royal College of Art, London

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2005        *The Wanderer* Rochester City Art Gallery, Rochester  
              *and other recollections* Eagle Gallery, London  
2008        *I came here a stranger* Eagle Gallery, London  
              *as a stranger I depart* Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2003        *20 x 5* Eagle Gallery, London  
2004        Rose Pavilion Interior (with muf architecture/art)  
              5ème Biennale d'Art Contemporain, Enghien-les-Bains, France  
2005        *Conscious Fiction* Eagle Gallery, London  
              *Ex Roma* APT Gallery, London  
              *Fokelore* APT Gallery, London  
2006        *Cartoon, Collage and the Decorative Motif* Eagle Gallery, London  
              Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden  
              *Disrupted Narratives* Eagle Gallery, London  
              *The Worcester Pilgrim Project* Worcester Cathedral  
2007        *From Elsewhere* Campden Gallery, Chipping Camden  
              *Cities and Eyes* Aldeburgh Music 2007 – Peter Pears Gallery, Aldeburgh  
              *Enchanted* Eagle Gallery, London  
              *Baroque* Eagle Gallery, London  
2008        *Exchange* Paul Kane Gallery, Dublin

### Awards

- 2002–6     Acme Live/Work Programme, Sugar House Studios, London  
2001        Abbey Scholarship in Painting, The British School in Rome  
1996        Artist in Residence, The University of Calgary, Canada  
1995        Travel Award, East Sussex County Council

### Collections

The Jerwood Collection, London

### Publications

- Encountering St Ippolyts* – EMH Arts/Eagle Gallery, London, 2005  
*The Invisible City* – EMH Arts, London, 2007, ISBN 978-0-9554046-3-4

### Selected Bibliography

- The Independent*, 4 November 2003 – Sue Hubbard: *20 x 5 Drawings*  
*Galleries Magazine*, January 2005 – Corinna Lotz: *Conscious Fiction*  
*The Independent*, 17 January 2005 – Sue Hubbard: *Conscious Fiction*  
*Printmaking Today*, Winter 2006 – Emma Hill: *In Pilgrims' Footsteps*  
*The Irish Times*, 9 April 2008 – Aidan Dunne

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#### Texts

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p18 Wilhelm Müller *Poems from the Posthumous*

*Papers of a Travelling Horn Player*

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