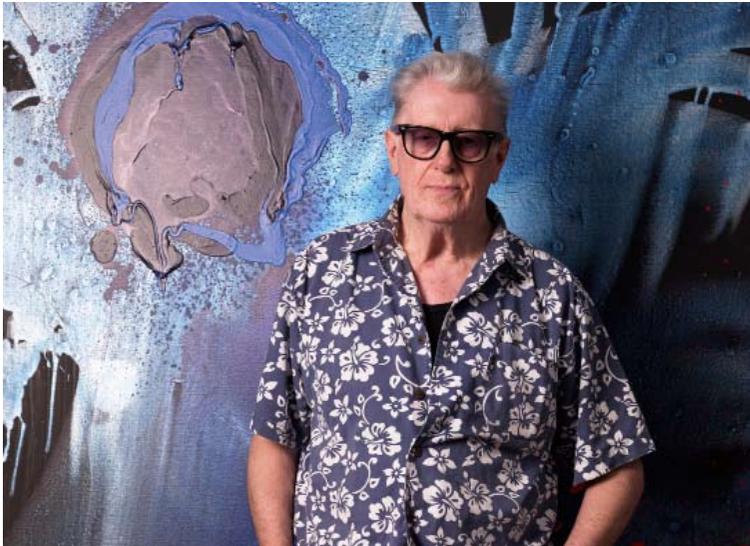


Four fellow Academicians and friends of the celebrated abstract painter John Hoyland RA (1934-2011) pay tribute to the artist who was also Professor of Painting at the RA Schools

John Hoyland: A painter's painter



John Hoyland in his studio with one of his paintings in 2009

IAN RITCHIE RA

'I paint, therefore I am' could be the epitaph for John Hoyland, a truly great painter. When John invited me to write the essay for his last show at Beaux Arts in 2011 I wrote, 'I live with some of John Hoyland's paintings. They are fugitive images that evoke worlds other than the physical ones that we have been taught exist. They imitate nothing and I cannot walk past them without looking. They are deep. When I look, I feel that I am privately interviewing John, not with questions and words or through conversation, but soul to soul – a language of the spirit. There appears to be no difference in his life in colour and his paintings.'

His latest paintings reveal a defiant journey between his imagination and skill as a painter, with physical pain wracking his body. The tension is palpable. John had rawness and he mastered and expressed this at the highest levels of poetry in his paintings. Facing heart surgery and death, John met the devil head on. The challenge of the infinite – the void – at the centre of many of his late works is his confrontation with eternity, with emptiness.

He was a painter's painter, an audacious warrior whose colours will resonate forever. He recalled his heroes from history and his contemporaries. Among his recent paintings are eulogies to Van Gogh, and fellow Academicians Terry Frost and Patrick Caulfield, and some yet unseen which he carefully secreted away.

John was free of the media and fashion. He was his own man. We enjoyed challenging each

other's boundaries and he was flying, in his final years, into the metaphysical domain. 'Colour is like love, it chooses you,' he said to me. How true.

Our last conversation on art was about Rothko, with whom he is often associated. He was anticipating an imminent interview on the subject, as he was one of the few artists still alive who had known him. He said that they had got it all wrong about

Rothko. He was not a minimalist. His paintings were incredibly complex and rich. He was not 'dark' in his youth, but joyful and colourful.

John's legacy is the power and value of imagination and his work will inspire others for generations to come. A bright star has exploded and left a black hole. John said, 'I want the RA to be a sanctuary – no marketing or selling – but a feeding place to recharge oneself, and to feel good about contributing to debate and conversation about art, and to go home contented. It is missing.'

A retrospective of John's work at the RA would be both fitting and wonderful, and would capture his sentiments about the vitality and importance of art at the RA.

MICK MOON RA

In paying tribute to John Hoyland, I can do no better than to start with the painter's own observation about his work: 'Paintings are not to be reasoned with, they are not to be understood, they are to be recognised. They are the equivalent of nature and not an illustration.'

Not for John the strangling conceptualism, the 'issue-based', the 'site-specific' and all the other 'agendas' that the curators seek to impose on painting – those interpretations that John found so wearisome and which brought forth a deep sigh of resignation.

For John, painting had to be imbued with deep feeling and emotional weight; celebratory, soulful painting; painting that tells of what it is to be alive, seeing and surrounded by a world

full of wonder and enchantment; painting that can evoke the sublime terror of beauty. That he achieved such a range and scale of emotive power is the true legacy of his work.

As with the work, so with the man. He was a warm, big-hearted soul, generous with his time and support for fellow artists; loyal to his friends, whom he valued for their differences to him as well as their affinities. He will be missed most by his own generation of painters. He was a sounding board for the activity of painting, and many of the arguments and crosscurrents of artistic thinking intersected through him. Painting was not a game – he was deadly serious.

It was a privilege to have been his friend for some 50 years. And I've not even touched on the mordant and hilarious wit.

MAURICE COCKRILL RA

John Hoyland was an iconic figure who dominated the field of British abstract painting from the 1960s onward, unswayed by swinging London or Pop art, resolutely persevering in his investigation of abstraction with impressive integrity, producing paintings of astonishing originality. His productivity was relentless, forming paintings of startling beauty and passion. They have an ability to move, exhilarate and delight the viewer with the intensity of their clanging, vibrant colour and expertise, culminating in the haunting works of his seventh decade. He had immense wit and talent, a giant – with his passing a giant-sized hole has appeared in the cultural firmament, an emptiness that we will forever view both with joy and deep regret.

IVOR ABRAHAMS RA

We have lost a very great, powerful painter. It is a sadness that the wonderful work we have seen year on year will be no more. John was my friend for a very long time, and his keen wit and acute observations have always been a joy and a pleasure. I believe he could have been a great comedian, but what a loss to painting that would have been! He was forthright in his opinions and a strong-minded individual, sometimes brash but immensely kind and generous. John was always his own man in all things. We should honour and respect his achievements with a Royal Academy retrospective.



See *RAMagazine* blog for a slideshow of paintings by John Hoyland and a tribute by Sir Anthony Caro RA