

IMPRESSIONS

EUAN HENG

Rosemary Adam

EUAN HENG, *Worker*, 1986–87, oil on canvas, 122 x 122cm, courtesy 70 Arden Street

In his essay on 'British Drawings' (1947), Michael Ayrton summed up the 'main streams or characteristics of the British genius, the poetic, the satiric, the mystical, the romantic and the preoccupation with linear rhythms, which are the bones and basis of our art, and have been so for a thousand years'.¹ These characteristics may certainly be found in the art of Euan Heng, a Scottish expatriate artist now working in Australia. Heng grew up near Glasgow, and spent some years in the Merchant Navy before commencing his studies at the Dundee College of Art. Since 1982 he has been living in the Latrobe Valley in Gippsland, Victoria. This setting, with its coal mine

and power stations, has provided the dominant theme for his recent art.

Heng has inherited much from the visionary artists William Blake, Samuel Palmer and Sir Stanley Spencer, and — to a lesser extent — Marc Chagall and Max Beckmann. He has stylistic and iconographic links with Mark Gertler, Spencer and Edward Burra, figurative artists active in Britain between the two world wars, and with the Vorticists William Roberts and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. His work also owes formal allegiance to Pablo Picasso and Fernand Léger, and he shares with the latter and Burra an egalitarian concern for the individual in a mechanized society. Beneath this may be discerned the

influence of David Bomberg's teachings and the writings of the Marxist critic and painter, John Berger. Lately, he has shown an affinity with John Brack, both in his urban subject-matter and sense of 'existential angst'.

Searching for appropriate symbols to express his reaction to what must have seemed an antipodean wasteland, Heng first experimented with mythological and biblical subjects such as *Ferryman* (1981–82)² and *Babel (Morwell version)* (1983). The complexity and intricacy of these works after Bruegel led to their being abandoned in favour of more direct and personal imagery. In *Char man* (1983), for instance, the smooth

painting style is retained, but the forms are much larger and more angular, recalling German expressionist art of *Die Brücke* group. In other works, various couples enact rituals of courtship and marriage, desire and frustration, against a backdrop of factory chimneys, toylike houses, dead trees and a mountain range.

Heng explored new ideas in pastel drawings which led to the monumental series of *Jeeralang still-lives* (1985). A still life or *nature-morte* is usually an arrangement of

ment, he is also its victim. Heng had in mind Spencer's *Christ carrying the cross* (1920, Tate Gallery), in which may be seen two workmen carrying ladders.

The Worker's stance is heroic, larger than life, but a conflict is prefigured by the hollow, grey-blue pipes as opposed to the solid yellow bars and sides of the ladder. Symbolically, yellow and blue can stand for intellectual power (Blake's 'Mental Flight') and religious feeling, though the admixture of black and the gaping mouths

and the related paintings, Heng revisited Britain. This further contact with his artistic roots no doubt strengthened his resolve to find the right style for his new paintings. Early in 1987 he began making the oil series. The transformation from pastel to painting is interesting: in *Char fall* (1987) the angular shapes of the figure, profile and hands are more rounded, giving an almost oriental calm to a violent subject. Heng treats colours and clothing expressionistically, but presses garments and bodies flat in accord

EUAN HENG, *I was looking back to sea*, 1987, oil on canvas, diptych, each panel 122 x 152cm, National Gallery of Victoria

inanimate objects on a tabletop or ledge. Here, coalheaps, girders, hoppers and pipes are tumbled like building blocks on the landscape table. Sometimes, as in Léger's work, the tubular pipe forms have a semblance of life and growth: versatile symbols for industry as opposed to farming, they suggest a barren harvest.

The setting established, Heng's cast of characters reappears. First comes the *Worker* (1986–87), shouldering his ladder. Like the earlier *Char man*, he bears a family resemblance to Léger's *Mechanic* (1920, Ottawa, National Gallery of Art). The Worker's mood is more sombre; though he seems to be in control of his environ-

of the pipes suggest 'material thoughts and the mechanistic intellect' as well as destructive, devouring force.³ The Worker is in danger of succumbing to these negative influences.

This interpretation is confirmed by a series of oil-pastel drawings begun in 1986 and introducing a further development of the theme. *Char fall* (1986), for instance, finds the Worker in an awkward predicament as, no longer in control, he falls onto the heap of pipes. The sharply angular body twists as it falls, arms outstretched to form a right-angle, while torso and legs describe an arc linking the two hands.

Between making the *Char fall* studies

with the laws of the picture plane. This passion for shipshape neatness informs all his works.

In *March Friday falling* (1987), Heng took as a starting point Léger's *Acrobat and his partner* (1948, Tate Gallery). The effect of this seven-feet high canvas on the viewer is both claustrophobic and dazzling. In its sonorous colour harmonies — purple, cerise, vermilion, yellow, turquoise, black, grey, and white — and floating, inverted forms, the painting recalls Chagall's *Falling angel* (1923–47, Basel) and Blake's *Simoniacal Pope* (circa 1824–27, Tate Gallery; an illustration to Dante's *Inferno*). The cartoon style of drawing, though, is closer to Burra.

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EUAN HENG, *Char fall*, 1987, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 152.5cm, courtesy 70 Arden Street



EUAN HENG, *March Friday falling*, 1987, oil on canvas, 213 x 152.5cm, courtesy 70 Arden Street

March Friday falling seems to represent a state of mind rather than an actual event. One is reminded of the biblical Fall, falling in love or from grace, and the proverb 'Pride comes before a fall'. If *March Friday falling* is a dream of falling, then its pendant *Only strangers travel* shows the moment of impact and (presumably) death. Here chaos and shipwreck-like entanglement ensue as man and objects finally hit the pipes.

Continuing this train of thought, Heng had long been planning to paint a *Last Judgement* or a *Resurrection* (after Stanley Spencer). The diptych *I was looking back to sea* (1987) is both a finale and a new beginning. In the study, *Turning back for shelter*, the hero reappears, crawling like a beast on all fours across a desert of pipes. He looks back over his left shoulder at an upturned bathtub. The image Heng superstitiously refused to paint, however, was that of a coffin.

In *I was looking back to sea*, the bathtub

is transformed into a beached paddleboat with a knotted rope trailing from its prow. This boat is identical in shape to one of the open graves seen in Spencer's *Resurrection, Cookham* (1924–26, Tate Gallery), though here a man is shown climbing out. Heng's title quotes the reprise of a popular song he previously used as a name for one of his student works:

I was looking back / to see if she was looking back /
to see if I was looking / at her.

By changing the word 'see' to 'sea', he refers to his seafaring days and to a homesickness only the expatriate can know.

The fallen man crawls across the pipes stretching harsh and grey to the horizon. There is not much room for optimism here, despite the atmospheric blue sky which for the first time opens out the picture space. Suddenly, looking back, he sees the toy boat of his childhood games. The vessel's bright red and blue paintwork is a

hopeful sign, like Tolkien's 'joyful turn' the end of a fairytale. True freedom found, not in physical escape (symbolize by the rope), but in a rebirth of the spirit. To this the knot provides a coda: an ancient symbol for binding and connection, it also signifies a person's individuality, and his name, or signature.⁴ For Euan Heng, the vehicle is the art of painting.

¹ W.J. Turner (ed.), *Aspects of British Art*, Introduction by Michael Ayrton, London, Collins, 1947, p. 58.

² Collection of Stuart Purves.

³ See J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd ed trans. Jack Sage, Foreword by Herbert Read, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985, pp. 54, 222 and 29. My interpretation combines an aspect of the symbolism of the mouth with that of the cylinder.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 275. There is also some connection between the symbolism of the knot and 'the enigma of the Hanged Man in the tarot pack' — see pp. 172–73.

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