

SIMON PALMER

RECENT PAINTINGS

11 - 26 MAY 2023

PORTLAND GALLERY

IN ASSOCIATION WITH JHW FINE ART

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Front cover:

Back Lane to Bedale Slow

Heatave Summer (detail)

Watercolour with ink and gouache

20 ³/₄ x 31 ³/₄ in / 52.5 x 80.5 cm

Catalogue no.3



The Middle of March

Watercolour with ink and gouache
23 x 24 in / 58.5 x 60.5 cm
Catalogue no.9

Discovering the Universal in the Particular

Andrew Lambirth, February 2023

Simon Palmer paints the Yorkshire landscape in watercolour, bringing new vigour to the great tradition of English watercolour painting, the tradition of Turner, Constable, William Blake and Samuel Palmer, of Cotman and Girtin and Richard Parkes Bonington. He paints from observation in the field, which, with memory and imagination, combine to make a composite image in the studio. His strong, declarative work is precise and beguiling. He is expert at building rhythms through a painting, exploiting the juxtaposition of edges to ensure that space and form lock together. He is no purist. His approach is really a mixed media one, employing pen and ink with gouache to heighten the effects of his watercolour washes. Habitually he works with brushes, but occasionally a line will be stroked in with a coloured pencil for subtle emphasis.

Of course, there is landscape and there are paintings of landscape, and the subject of a painting does not exist until it emerges from the interaction between an artist and his medium. The landscape was there first, and remains (unless mankind manages to alter it beyond recognition), but the painting only comes into being through the activity of the artist and his response to what he sees. Does it much matter how we categorise the resulting work? As a new romanticism or magic realism? Maybe it's not realism at all. In many ways, realism is no more 'real' than abstraction. It too is a man-made construct, not a mirror held up to nature, but a means of communing with the world, and of communicating the world's beauties.

Palmer likes the precision and control that watercolour requires of him. His work is all about order — it is highly stylised, full of dots and stipples. The characteristic tracery of flicked paint, to be discerned in so many of his pictures, is applied with a particular well-worn brush. Palmer can judge to a nicety the marks this will make, so that the spatter can be predicted and guided. He works regular hours, from 10 in the morning until 6.30 at night, though not at weekends. He uses a combination of watercolour, ink and body colour (or gouache) on a heavily textured Arches watercolour paper. At art school, when he first used a camera — a Pentax with a wide-angle lens — he found this made the landscape look more dramatic. Similarly, these days he enjoys accentuating perspective for the same reason. He titles the work afterwards, with the help of large scale maps to check road names and places.

'I'm not a conventional watercolourist,' he says. 'My intense pen work is influenced by Graham Sutherland's monochrome etchings which were inspired by Samuel Palmer.' Using Winsor & Newton colours, he puts down a soft yellowy wash or a pinky-brown one. Into this he draws in black ink. He is entranced by deep shadows — shadow as a structural component — expressed in virtually black paint, from which he'll work through to the palest of washes. (*The Middle of March*, right, is a fine example of his expressive use of dark against light.) The sky is always painted onto white to give it the required luminosity, and white is used brilliantly for snow or the reflective water in cart tracks. Another white is the haze of wild-flower blossom on the verges of lanes.



Towards Mickley

Watercolour with ink and gouache
21 ¼ x 26 ¾ in / 54 x 67.5 cm
Catalogue no.30

Look at some of the well-judged colour combinations Palmer so eloquently deploys. One of the most characteristic is green and brown: sap green and loam brown, yellow-green, brown-green, red-brown, pale sandy green, or pale golden green. This is leavened by white and green, and then darkened again by brown and grey. You may not find scads of bright colours in Palmer's paintings, but you will find great subtlety, the sort of gradual differences and contrasts to be found in nature. Look at the tonal range of a painting such as *Towards Mickley* (left). Space and atmosphere are created through different shades of green and brown. Simon Palmer does not see the world through the eyes of a Fauvist, all neon green, yellow and red. His palette is arranged for chamber music, not grand opera. Slight changes register decidedly. 'Sometimes I'll say I won't use any yellow,' he comments, 'and it transforms the whole image. It's refreshingly different.' For all his dexterity in the application of colour within these chosen limits, he emphasises: 'I would work in monochrome, if necessary,' he says. 'Textures and tone are more important [to me] than colour.'

Simon Palmer has painted a few holiday subjects in France, Spain and Italy, a handful in Devon and Cornwall, but otherwise his subject for the last 30 years has been Yorkshire, and more specifically, Wensleydale. In 2000, he wrote of his decision not to paint the open moors. 'I opted for something more parochial: the agricultural lowland landscape on a scale I felt more confident with.' He has turned this self-limitation into a strength, finding cultivated agricultural land more stimulating than bleak moorland, and he enjoys depicting discarded rural junk in his pictures, rather like Eric Ravilious. The detritus and field-furniture left by farm workers offers a whole vocabulary of shape and texture for the formally-minded painter. And, in Palmer's case, there has always been a keen abstract designer lurking beneath the landscape painter. Sometimes there is a tightness to the technique which can be restricting, and then the images verge on the claustrophobic, the overgrown and crowded. This creates its own mood, of disquiet bordering on panic.

Palmer loves canals, bridges and railways, architectural evidence of man's presence in the landscape. In this recent body of work, the same articulation of space is performed by farm buildings, fences and gates, with the occasional wall, of dry stone construction or otherwise. Signposts are a Palmer favourite; as are gates angled open, or broken fences. He loves latticework, what he calls the 'entwined muddle' of various close-to layers of trees and fence, wall or hedge. For instance, notice the foreground melange of bent gate, fencing spars, posts and baulks of wood in *Silva Textured Boundary*, all of which is further confused by their cast shadows which wriggle over the ground in complicating patterns.

Art historically, his points of reference are mainly within the pastoral and figurative tradition. Stanley Spencer is an abiding presence and inspiration. Palmer has also been much moved by the drawings of Henry Moore and their intense feeling for line and colour. But the overriding influences are two brothers, Paul and John Nash. Ostensibly very different, they do in fact share characteristics and attitudes, and together offer a thorough investigation of landscape art, though John has for too long been overshadowed by his more overtly Modernist brother. Thankfully this is now changing (see my monograph *John Nash: Artist & Countryman*, 2019), and John's work is being properly reassessed. Palmer comments crisply:



Thorpe Road to Roomer Common
 Watercolour with ink and gouache
 29 ¾ x 24 ¼ in / 75.5 x 61.5 cm
 Catalogue no.2

'I'm inspired by most art and music that I experience, but I'm influenced only by a few, such as the Nash brothers.' The V-shape of flying birds high in the sky of *Thorpe Road to Roomer Common* or *Below High Burton* or *The Holme Harvest* is Palmer's salute to Paul Nash, echoing the birds in Nash's 1913 watercolour of *Wittenham Clumps*, now in Tullie House Museum.

Simon Palmer has made a successful career painting landscape. There are dangers to popular success, of course, namely mistrust by the high panjandrums of modern art. L.S. Lowry has long suffered this fate. Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009), commonly believed to be America's most popular artist — and thus treated with deep suspicion by the art establishment — is another case in point. Wyeth is a useful figure to look at in the present context, as he was a watercolorist (and tempera painter) of outstanding ability, whose electric, hallucinatory precision of image won him wide acclaim.

Commentators have compared Simon Palmer to Bosch and Brueghel, to Altdorfer and to Charles Sheeler, but no one to my knowledge has mentioned Andrew Wyeth. Yet there are parallels to be found, and insights to be noted. Wyeth's contemplative, classically composed landscapes are not an idealisation of rural life, more an intensification of it. They are imbued with understanding of how things are, and how they change. His painting, like Palmer's, is about the exalting effects of memory and imagination: the gift of translating the ordinary into the extraordinary and memorable. Wyeth aimed at beauty, power and emotional content, proclaiming: 'It's not the subject, it's what you carry to it that's important — what you feel about it, what you've dreamed about it.' Tenderness, violence, mortality, questioning, acceptance: all these things can play their part in the individual interpretation.

Edward Burra, master watercolourist and high priest of the sinister in landscape, the visual poet of 'something nasty in the woodshed', is another point of reference. There's often a feeling in Palmer's pictures of something about to happen: 'It's all boiling up' as one of Burra's titles has it. There is an element of that in Palmer's quiet woods and lanes, in such paintings as *Low Jervaulx*, *Long Swales Lane* and *The Turnpike*. It's rather like catching a glimpse of Pan, ancient god of wild places, and then finding his hoof prints just when you were beginning to doubt your own eyes. The true spirit of place is the undercurrent of wildness and misrule beneath the ordered cultivated acres. Unregenerate nature lurking in the wings is what brings such trenchant piquancy to the otherwise sweetly picturesque.

Palmer's paintings are also a kind of commentary (for those prepared to look) on the making of art. In the past he has even given clues to this in the titling of works: *Drawing across the ochre*, or *Struggling with a huge canvas*. (Not that he himself paints on canvas, or only infrequently, and not usually for exhibition.) In other words, his images play with the notion of their own construction, and with our modern obsession for self-awareness, though this reflexiveness is not a major component in their meaning or relevance.

It is, however, another strand in the complex weave of contemporary art. To extrapolate from there, are these works ironic in stance? I don't see Palmer's paintings as in any way a caricature of the English landscape. They might however be construed as a form of historicism, a commentary on recent romantic responses to landscape, and in particular the neo-romantic painters of the 1930s and 1940s. But that aspect of their existence too is

relatively minor. His art is, above all, a celebration of what he sees as ‘the spirituality of landscape’, and his paintings are based fundamentally on imaginative observation of the countryside around where he lives in Yorkshire.

Palmer tends to walk for exercise, to get some air into his lungs. When he goes out into the landscape in pursuit of the motif, he takes his Land Rover and drives. Many of his quick linear sketches, all he needs to fix a view in his mind, are made from behind the steering wheel. A minimal line drawing might take all of five minutes, but its vectors are enough to remind Palmer of what he wants to paint. They act as a trigger or prompt back in the studio, where it’s on with Radio 3, and down to work that’s ‘all about composition’.

Like another landscape painter of the same generation, David Tress (born 1955), Palmer loves the graphic declaration of street signs, the intervention of shape and colour they bring to a vista. Here is man’s presence in nature, directly and unapologetically present. Palmer also presents us with the backs of road signs, so we don’t even have the seductions of colour, just the greyish shape, maybe a triangle appearing among the rampant foliage. There is wit here, especially as the signs might be invented in the first place, before being inserted strategically into the design.

A key-note is intricacy: his paintings are packed with visual events, such as the filigree pattern of leafless branches against the sky, the tangle of boughs and trunks, branches like tentacles. There are also roads and buildings, but the trees are now assuming a central role, though wonderfully various in their manifestations. Look at the trunks smooth as limbs, or the trees in the field margins plumped up like pillows, all downy and feathered. In Palmer’s paintings the viewer is in among the trees, with no obvious horizon line and very little sky. The trees, great natural engines for turning water and sunlight into oxygen, have become a substitute for figures, and are imbued with individual character that is almost human.

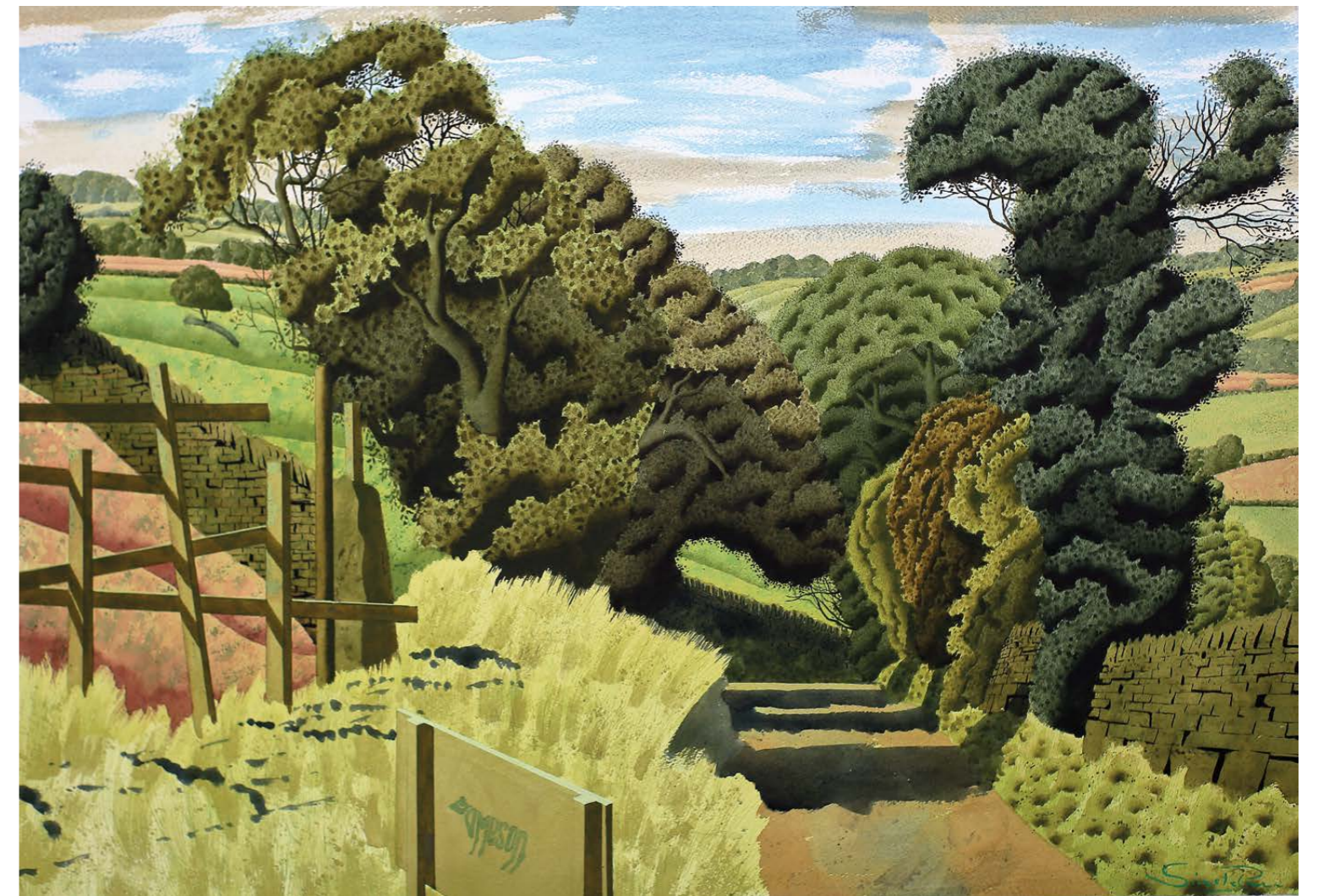
When he gave up printmaking for painting in the mid-1980s, Palmer wanted to paint pure landscape but he was persuaded by economic necessity to populate his pictures with figures and incidental detail and give them quirky titles. This is what people wanted and he had to earn his living. He took refuge in painting allegory, but has been gradually ridding his work of such references ever since. The figures were some kind of excuse or justification for what really interested him, their settings. Figures were props — stage properties but also a kind of support — before he had the confidence to dispense with them. Now that the people have departed, the staffage retired, some of the allegorical content has been happily dismissed. Palmer speaks endearingly of the learning process which has brought him finally to being a painter of pure landscape: ‘Now that I have completed my 40 years apprenticeship I have done with figures...’ No longer reliant on narratives, the mood is inevitably cranked up, intensified.

The work is not nearly as realistic or naturalistic as at first appears: we must look for an equivalent of the natural world, not a facsimile. The foliage of trees is often built up from successive bobbles, for example, much more like a mound of fruit than a leaf configuration. Or else it has the folded look of the cerebral cortex. It is also reminiscent of the exotic blooms of *Celosia Cristata*, an ornamental plant of the amaranth family, commonly known

as ‘cockscombs’ because of its fasciation or wavy ridge crest. This distinctive inflorescence seems to offer a pattern or at the very least a comparison for the structure of foliage on Palmer’s trees, particularly those in the mid-ground areas of his paintings. Look at *Above Coverham Abbey* or *High Newstead Lane* or *Roomer Summer Lane*.

There is a subfusc green filtered light in many of his paintings that is not exactly gloomy, but has a intriguing underwater or marine quality. This links up directly with the way he paints trees: not only as if they were exotic flowers, but as if they were sea-plants, or those aquatic animals we call sponges.

The patterns of the leafage also recall vermiculated decoration in architecture — that deeply-cut ornament full of shadows. Trees can even look like crusty loaves, which suggests another comparison, with Hockney’s Yorkshire landscapes and his sprays of hawthorn



Above Coverham Abbey
Watercolour with ink and gouache
23 ½ x 32 ½ in / 59.5 x 82.5 cm
Catalogue no.6

blossom like phallic baguettes. Yet whatever unexpected patterns Palmer discovers or imposes on his trees, they nevertheless always look convincingly like trees.

The linear sky drawing of bare winter branches is varied by ivy cladding, thickly quilting tree trunks and offering a spirited contrast to bare bark. In *The Last Thaw*, we are presented with a screen or frieze of trees close to the picture plane, with a distant landscape visible piecemeal between their trunks. The snow lights the landscape and the different levels of space within it. This partially hidden vista is enormously effective: intriguing, even tantalising, revealing itself slowly through different layers, while contributing to a succinct and potent image.

By contrast, in *Low Burton Wood*, the foreground curtain of trees has another tree-frieze behind it, and there's no view beyond, just a little light appearing between the trunks. Some of these paintings offer close-ups of odd corners in shallow space, others a long view over hills. Palmer's general habit is to paint on the level, the view from directly in front of a subject, but he frequently chooses a viewpoint looking up into the hills, or down and then up. Rarely does he select the high viewpoint looking down so popular with other artists.

The principal elements of *The Hallwith Road* might appear to be a wall, the trees behind it, a distant hedge, buildings and more trees, but actually they are two thin and slightly acidic green lines, which are the painting's true co-ordinates. The first is the vertical edge of the sign placed on a pole in the verge in front of the wall; the second is a matching or echoing horizontal in the same shade of green, on the extreme right of the image, just above the hedge. The rest of the composition is built around these easily missed accents, and is structured largely from dominant verticals (trees, fenceposts) and balancing horizontals (wall, hedge, roof). The abstraction that underpins all of Palmer's paintings is particularly evident in this image, and contributes substantially to its power and presence.

You won't find black silage bags, solar panels or wind turbines in these paintings, for they are the kind of things Palmer would edit out of the landscape. Besides being visually unappealing, like cars, they would make the temper of the painting too specific. Palmer aims for something broader, more atmospheric and psychological. He says that when it comes to capturing a particular mood in the countryside, he prefers to play disquiet off against serenity, rather than opt for either whole-heartedly.

However surrounded and enclosed by locality, Palmer nevertheless discovers the universal in the particular, through a triple process of observation, memory and association. This opens up his art to a breadth of response among its viewers. Especially interesting for many is the creative tension established between the ordinary yet elusive subjects (everyone thinks they know what trees look like, but how many of us have really studied them closely?) and the declarative, direct style. And his intriguing hybrid method (watercolour and gouache used in fruitful conjunction with ink drawing), which operates in a territory he himself has created between illustration and pure painting. One of the things that people praise Simon Palmer for is making them look more closely — at the world, at art. Anyone who can manage that is successful indeed.

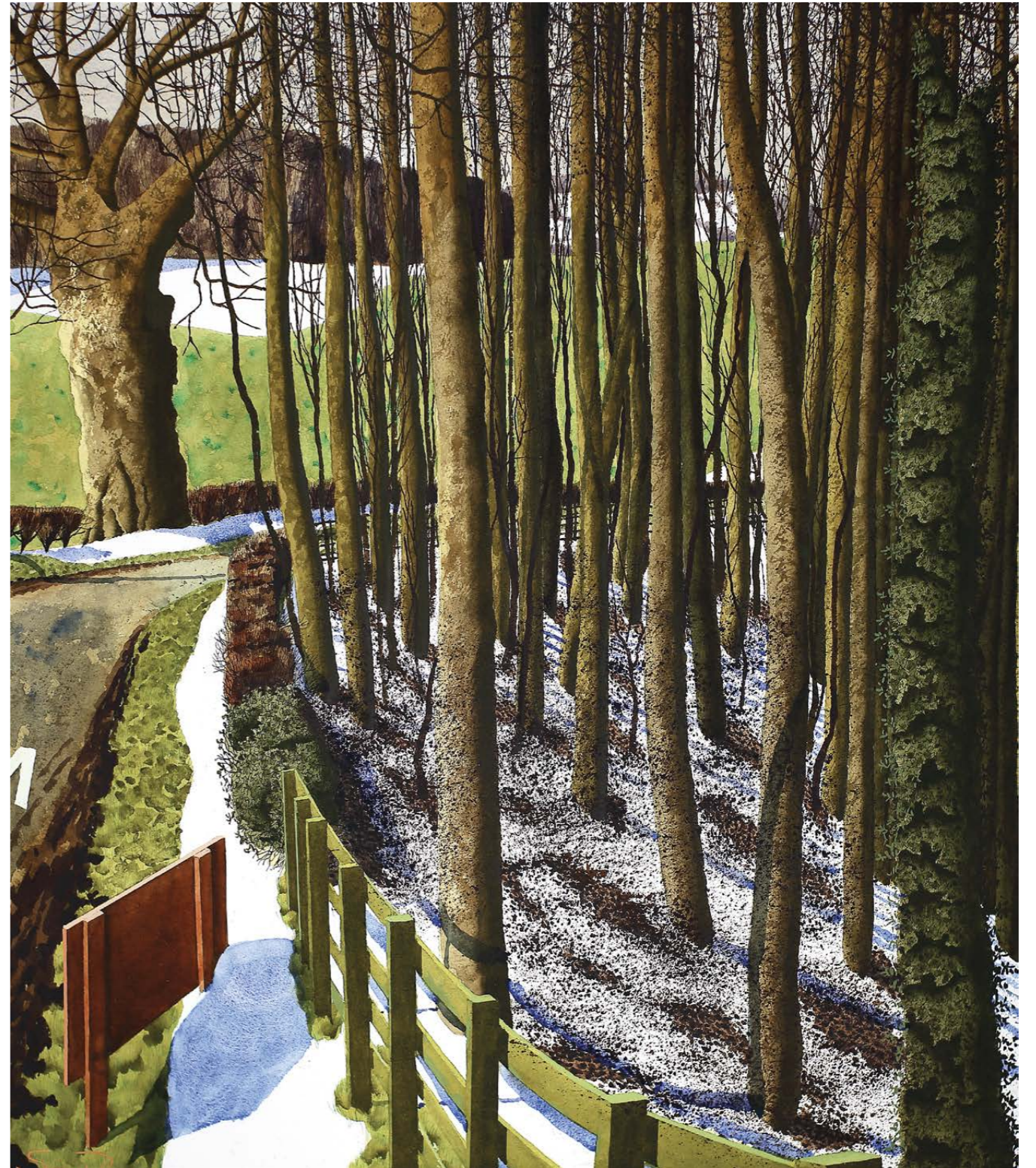
The Last Thaw

Watercolour with ink and gouache
30 ¼ x 26 ¾ in / 76.5 x 67.5 cm
Catalogue no.20



Low Jervaulx

Watercolour with ink and gouache
25 3/4 x 22 3/4 in / 65.5 x 57.5 cm
Catalogue no.1





Back Lane to Bedale Slow Heatwave Summer

Watercolour with ink and gouache
20 ¾ x 31 ¾ in / 52.5 x 80.5 cm
Catalogue no.3



Buck Bank Hill

Watercolour with ink and gouache
24 x 32 ¼ in / 60.5 x 81.5 cm
Catalogue no.10



Fallen Idol

Watercolour with ink and gouache
27 1/2 x 26 3/4 in / 69.5 x 67.5 cm
Catalogue no.4



Right: **Hambleton Spring Lane**

Watercolour with ink and gouache
29 3/4 x 24 in / 75.5 x 60.5 cm
Catalogue no.7

Kilgram from the North

Watercolour with ink and gouache
31 x 25 1/2 in / 78.5 x 64.5 cm
Catalogue no.8





The Turnpike Road

Watercolour with ink and gouache
20 x 27 1/2 in / 50.5 x 69.5 cm
Catalogue no.5



Right: From Cocked Hat Farm

Watercolour with ink and gouache
31 x 26 1/4 in / 78.5 x 66.5 cm
Catalogue no.29



The Paddock Wood

Watercolour with ink and gouache

22 ¾ x 32 ½ in / 57.5 x 82.5 cm

Catalogue no.11



The Hallwith Road

Watercolour with ink and gouache
25 ½ x 25 ¾ in / 64.5 x 65.5 cm
Catalogue no.14



Right: **Constable Burton Bridge**

Watercolour with ink and gouache
29 ¾ x 24 ¼ in / 75.5 x 61.5 cm
Catalogue no.13



The Abandoned Gardens

Watercolour with ink and gouache

23 ½ x 30 ½ in / 59.5 x 77.5 cm

Catalogue no.16



The Holme Harvest

Watercolour with ink and gouache
26 ¼ x 23 ½ in / 66.5 x 59.5 cm
Catalogue no.15



Sole Beck (Summer Dry)

Watercolour with ink and gouache
31 ¼ x 23 ½ in / 79.5 x 59.5 cm
Catalogue no.18



Braithwaite Revisited Again
Watercolour with ink and gouache
20 ½ x 33 ¾ in / 52 x 85.5 cm
Catalogue no.19

Below High Burton

Watercolour with ink and gouache
29 ½ x 24 ¼ in / 74.5 x 61.5 cm
Catalogue no.17





Sandy Flat Plantations

Watercolour with ink and gouache
29 x 24 3/4 in / 73.5 x 62.5 cm
Catalogue no.27



Right: **Low Burton Wood**

Watercolour with ink and gouache
30 1/4 x 23 1/2 in / 76.5 x 59.5 cm
Catalogue no.23

Roomer Summer Lane

Watercolour with ink and gouache

25 ¾ x 31 ¾ in / 65.5 x 80.5 cm

Catalogue no.21



Local Expectations

Watercolour with ink and gouache
25 x 25 3/4 in / 63.5 x 65.5 cm
Catalogue no.22





Silva Textured Boundary

Watercolour with ink and gouache
25 3/4 x 18 1/4 in / 65.5 x 46.5 cm
Catalogue no.24



Long Swales Lane

Watercolour with ink and gouache
30 1/4 x 20 in / 76.5 x 50.5 cm
Catalogue no.25

Horton Wood

Watercolour with ink and gouache
24 ¼ x 31 in / 61.5 x 78.5 cm
Catalogue no.26



High Newstead Lane

Watercolour with ink and gouache
20 ¾ x 27 in / 52.5 x 68.5 cm
Catalogue no.28



The Scots Pine

Watercolour with ink and gouache
29 3/4 x 24 3/4 in / 75.5 x 62.5 cm
Catalogue no.12



Simon Palmer (b.1956)

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 Portland Gallery, London
Observation of Nature (print works), Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Yorkshire
- 2021 Portland Gallery, London
- 2020 *Yorkshire Perspective (public exhibition)*, Salt Mills, Saltaire, Yorkshire
- 2019 Portland Gallery, London
- 2017 Portland Gallery, London
- 2015 Portland Gallery, London
- 2013 JHW Fine Art, London
- 2011 JHW Fine Art, London
- 2009 JHW Fine Art, London
- 2007 JHW Fine Art, London
- 2005 JHW Fine Art, London
- 2004 *Territories of the Imagination*, Mercer Art Gallery, Harrogate
- 2003 JHW Fine Art, London
- 2001 JHW Fine Art, London
- 1999 JHW Fine Art, London
- 1997 JHW Fine Art, London
- 1995 JHW Fine Art, London

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- National Trust Centenary Exhibition
British Landscape Painting in the Twentieth Century, Crane Kalman Gallery, London
- Dreamers of Landscape*, Bohun Gallery, Henley
- Art & Yorkshire: Turner to Hockney*, Mercer Art Gallery, Harrogate
- Glyndebourne Festival Opera Exhibition

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- National Trust
- The Council for the Protection of Rural England
- Historic House Hotels
- Mercer Art Gallery and the Penn Club, London
- Salt Mills Gallery, Saltaire, Yorkshire

AWARDS

- Turner / Winsor & Newton Watercolour Award, 2007

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- The Art of Simon Palmer*, by Elspeth Moncrieff (2011)
- Yorkshire Perspective*, various contributors (2020)