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Art Transplant: *British Artists in New York*

by **Irving Sandler**

For more than a century Britain's Government Art Collection has provided major government buildings, both in the United Kingdom and abroad, with art from its growing collection, now containing some 11,500 works and still growing.

The **Art Transplant: British Artists in New York** show at the British Consul-General's Residence in New York City is a novel extension of this program. Mei-Ling Harris and Caroline Hansberry have mounted a thematic exhibition of the works of British artists who have lived and worked for lengthy periods of time in New York City. The show consists of 31 paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints and photographs on loan from the Government Art Collection and many private collectors, the participating artists, and their galleries.

It is immediately apparent that there is no shared style. The figurative paintings range from the specific realism of Rackstraw Downes to the neo-expressionism of Malcolm Morley and Cecily Brown. Within abstraction, the abstract expressionism of John Walker is poles apart from the neo-impressionism of Andrew Forge. Also included are sculptors as diverse as Anthony Caro, renowned for his abstract metal constructions, and Rachel Whiteread, who casts remades of existing objects and their negative spaces. Judy Pfaff's room- and atrium-size environments have little in common with Ellen Harvey's "graffiti," miniature pictures painted on city walls, except that both appear in public places.

Indeed, as an ensemble, the work in *Art Transplant* accurately reflects the state of art today – that is, one of total pluralism. Unlike past decades, when one or two artistic "isms" commanded relatively more art-world attention than others, today each tendency receives more or less equal attention, although certain artists individually stand out. The pluralist condition is also international, or more accurately, transnational. As never before, artists have been moving from country to country, often creating their works in the venues where their shows take place.

Why have the artists in *Art Transplant* come to New York – and stayed? I decided to ask a number of them in order to create a composite picture of their motives. Of course, I kept in mind that they are of different generations. The reasons they gave are varied, but they fall into four general categories: personal circumstances; the general appeal of American art; the particular attraction of the New York art world; and the allure of New York City.

Some of the artists came to America because of family considerations (Samira Abbassy, Richard Deacon, Sarah Morris, Judy Pfaff, Dudley Reed, Tricia Wright). Others came because they had been awarded a scholarship (Angela Gill) or fellowship (Keith Milow, Graham Nickson, Richard Smith), in order to study (Rackstraw Downes, Carl Fudge), or to teach (Garth Evans, Stephen Farthing).

Many of the participants came to the United States because they were captivated by the post-World War II American art they had seen in British museums and galleries (although Stephen Farthing and Stephen Sumner preferred 19th-century American painting). Andrew Forge was excited by the sense of "freedom" and by "the openness, energy and sense of adventure" of American painting. He wanted to know how it had come about that so many painters in New York, notably the Abstract Expressionists, had broken out of the existing categories into which European painters were locked. He came to the United States to find out. So did William Tucker and John Walker who, like Forge, were seduced by the Abstract Expressionist paintings they saw in England in the late 1950's.

Compared to British art, American art struck Rackstraw Downes as tougher and more direct; Graham Nickson as more "plain spoken"; Richard Smith as more ambitious; Carl Fudge as fresher; Garth Evans as more vital and challenging; Judy Pfaff as more powerful; and David Remfry as more "forceful" and "fearless."

All of the artists in *Art Transplant* were attracted by the "enormous energy and optimism of the New York art world," as Jane Benson commented. Moreover, as Tom Bell put it, the art world was larger and more open than in London. Andrew Forge also liked the "openness" of the art scene and added that he found "liberating" the "confrontational character of art discourse." He said that Americans looked more "generously" at art. David Remfry agreed but found the art scene in New York "edgier" – in the best sense of that word. For John Walker, the companionship he found with artists of his generation in New York was a major reason that he remained. He also spoke of the generosity of his associates. So did Keith Milow and Ellen Harvey, who added that the support of fellow artists was critical. Milow, Trevor Winkfield and Stephen Farthing commented that teaching and sales in New York facilitated their continuation as artists.

Most of the artists in the show found New York exciting. Stephen Farthing and Ellen Harvey were attracted by the cosmopolitanism of the city. Harvey added that artists came from all over the world – and became New Yorkers. David Remfry commented, "I feel more alive here. It's overnutritious." Bill Jacklin liked the contradictory and multiple nature of New York and added that its outer reality fitted his inner reality. The United States also provided Jacklin with new subjects, as it did Rackstraw Downes and Patrick Hughes. Hughes found New York's "go-getting" attitudes to his liking as well. Adam McEwen said that its "pace" fostered his work. Andrew Forge was taken with the novelty and strangeness of the city, and Jane Benson with "the shock to her system." Tom Bell had wanted to be in the center of international art. American culture had been influencing the rest of the world, and he wanted to understand it from within.

When I asked the artists what living and working in New York contributed to their work, their responses ranged from the general to the specific. For example, in Britain, Forge had found himself in the middle of an argument concerning abstraction versus figuration. He would not take sides, largely because he thought that the issue was wrongly phrased. He found in America a synthesis that he could believe in. For Angela Gill, place did not matter in her work. She felt that her work was very personal and that she could make it anywhere.

I imagined that most of the participants in *Art Transplant* would be more favorably inclined toward the United States than Great Britain, otherwise they would not have decided to live here or stay for lengthy periods of time. However, with one or two exceptions, all retained positive feelings for Britain and visited often. Bill Jacklin said simply, "England is my home." Related comments were made by Jessica Craig-Martin ("I have a lot of England in me still"); Richard Smith ("I never lost the Britishness of myself"); Garth Evans ("It is impossible to escape my British roots"). Tom Bell said simply that his formative years were spent in London and that his art was a reflection of his life, or, as Graham Nickson put it, "the history of my experience," a history that continues, since he retains close friendships with British artists and follows their work closely, as do most of the other artists in the *Art Transplant* show.

I asked, how are British and American art different? They responded "When?" It depended on when they matured as artists. They pointed out that both British and American art had changed from decade to decade – in England, particularly in the last decade – and furthermore that art had become increasingly international. Garth Evans, as an older artist, said that his generation of British artists had an "unself-conscious" familiarity with tradition and an "undeclarative way of expressing themselves." Keith Milow spoke fondly of the "quiet integrity of the best of British art, which was the mark of its Britishness." Both Patrick Hughes and David Remfry found the "eccentricity" of many British artists appealing. As Hughes put it, "They follow their noses." As a younger artist, Carl Fudge said that his art "hovers" in the space between the analytical nature of much British art and a Pop sensibility identified with America but which now seems British as well.

Although recent art has become increasingly multi-national, the cross-fertilization that distinguishes it is by no means new. Of the artists in *Art Transplant*, one of the most senior, Anthony Caro, best exemplifies the transnationality of art. Inspired by the welded constructions of the American David Smith in the early 1960's, Caro created an original body of sculpture that in turn influenced scores of young British and American metal workers. Malcolm Morley was equally influential, both as an innovator of photorealism in the middle 1960's and in the 1970's, as a pioneer of new-expressionism. Most of the notorious "Young British Artists" were former students of Michael Craig-Martin, who himself was educated at Yale University's School of Art. As Jessica Craig-Martin summed it up, "the cross-pollination makes both New York and London livelier." The works on view at the British Consulate Residence are striking proof of that interaction.



Tricia Wright

National Geographic, 2001
Acrylic on Canvas 38 x 52 in