David Inshaw’s much-admired pastoral landscapes are rich in mystery and emotional power, suggestive of stories and meanings unfolding over time. At the same time, he is known for his figure painting, which he approaches with obvious relish and a sense of celebration, conveying the distinct individuality of his models and imbuing his images of them with a human warmth and empathy that are unmatched. This combination has made him one of the most prominent and beloved figures in twenty-first-century British art.

This book offers full-color reproductions of more than one hundred of Inshaw’s paintings, along with insightful commentary and analysis by longtime Spectator art critic Andrew Lambirth. It will reward Inshaw’s many fans even as it is sure to draw new ones into his fold.

Andrew Lambirth writes for the Spectator on art and art criticism.
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INTRODUCTION

An Enduring Appeal

David Inshaw paints pastoral images, more often than not imbued with a sense of mystery and emotional depth familiar from the early twentieth-century visions of Paul Nash, but rare in the landscape painting of today. He also paints figures, nude or clothed, with an evident relish and sense of celebration. His appreciation of the individuality of his models is manifest in these paintings, a human warmth and breadth of understanding that recalls Stanley Spencer, but with a new wit and impishness. Inshaw is very much his own man.

The garden historian Jane Brown has written: ‘On a certain kind of day, the English landscape takes on a David Inshaw look: it demands a summery brushiness of trees and usually comes with the clean, clear skies and long shadows of late afternoon.’ (Country Living, Feb 1988). Roger Scruton, in England: An Elegy (2000), identifies the legend of England, the quintessence of place, as reappearing in Tippett’s Midsummer Marriage, the landscape poetry of Ted Hughes and the paintings of David Inshaw. These are high accolades.

‘No Man of Sense ever supposes that copying from Nature is the Art of Painting. If Art is no more than this, it is no better than any other Manual Labour: anybody may do it, and the fool will often do it best as it is a work of no Mind.’ So said William Blake, an uncompromising theoretician if ever there was one. Although Inshaw takes nature as his starting point, he is far from a slavish copier of it: he translates and transforms, and at his most successful, he transfigures. This book is an account of how he reached that eminence.

For David Inshaw, ideas mature slowly. His nature is in opposition to the instant gratification of today’s society, the nanosecond attention span and the constant surfing of too many choices. He works in an age-old tradition of art based on private experience and the particular character of the English landscape, which tends to focus on the scale of natural events and relationships between individuals. He has said: ‘I try to make my paintings have the lyrical qualities of music and poetry.’

Inshaw’s friend, the poet Simon Rae, comments: ‘In painting after painting he evokes a world both recollected and projected, of intimation and provocative possibility rather than forthright exposition.’ He identifies Inshaw’s subjects as elusive moments of intense importance, and recognizes the sexual component – ‘the empathetic but unblinking curiosity’ shared with Inshaw’s hero, Stanley Spencer. Inshaw paints the female nude with frank enthusiasm and unfeigned delight. As he says: ‘I’ve always thought some kind of sensuality is necessary in painting.’

Memories and incidents are translated into the painting. ‘I’m always looking for symbols, images. I do tend to compose pictures based on experiences. Not just one experience
I tend to incorporate lots but put them all in their right place. Each painting has a story and they’re composed to take you around the painting. You can look at a painting any way you want but they are composed in a way to lead you into the story. Anyone looking at the painting can invent their own stories or try and figure out my stories. I inshaw collects images of all sorts – photographic, drawn, on film or video – and puts them together in his mind with music, the ambient sounds of a particular place and the souvenirs of events he has accumulated, in order for them to strike resonance from each other before they settle down to form a painting.

The sheer hard slog of painting should never be underestimated, whether it be Ben Nicholson patiently shaving away layers of board with countless fresh razorblades to make one of his immaculate reliefs, or David Inshaw adding increments of carefully modulated paint to a long-considered image. The technique, the craft of making, is very important to this kind of art, and has to be learnt. It is not just a question of being able to draw well, though this serves as a firm foundation for any further more painterly development, it is the clear necessity of thoroughly mastering a formal approach to picture-making, just as the surgeon must learn his particular business before we are entrusted to his knife.

Of course, without imagination and vision, technique would be an empty drum and Inshaw has mastered technique not once but twice in his career so far. His early style, meticulously executed with small brushes, intricate and almost jewelled in its effects, served him well for a decade before he began to find it too constricting. We change, we grow older, we mature. He sought a new freedom for his imagination which required a fundamental change of style, a loosening and broadening of the brushstroke without a concomitant loss of intensity. His later style still has the quality of embedded imagery, the subject completely at one with the technique, that distinguished the early work, but the facture of the paint is different. His later paintings have more air in them, the surface texture is more open, the strokes and gestures he employs to evoke his subject are broader and more relaxed. But the relaxation is more apparent than actual, and formal unity remains. Only the means to this end have changed.

Quite often Inshaw’s work is spoken of as being mystical. He states: ‘Mystical is not a word I would use because I don’t really know what it means. People talk about the landscape around Wiltshire being mystical but to me the mysticism, if there is any, lies in the reality of the place. The spirit of place comes from you – you imbue a place with importance. In Wiltshire, you can see the history of the landscape. When you look at it you can see traces of the past. I was drawn to the chalk nature of this landscape. I grew up in Kent on chalk downs so my early experiences were all based on that kind of landscape – the colours, the shapes, the vegetation, the birds, so I feel drawn to it.’

This is the landscape of white chalk figures and the Avebury stone circle, and these are subjects and motifs which appear and reappear in Inshaw’s work. He loves Silbury Hill, for instance, the man-made flat-topped mound on the Bath Road outside Marlborough, and even went inside it when it was last shored up against collapse. ‘I find Silbury Hill fascinating because it’s the same as it always was and yet it’s always changing. And the fact that men made it. They must have made it for a reason though we don’t know their purpose. It’s an anachronism in the landscape. But the scale of it is extraordinary.’

All these historical sites and landmarks have their own personal resonances for Inshaw. He has walked the Marlborough Downs with friends and lovers and witnessed these places in the varying light of dawn, dusk or midday, and with the emotional overlay of the variously charged moment. Every painting he makes of this landscape will be imbued with memories which serve to make it an intensely felt image, though its autobiographical nature need never be known to the viewer. Inshaw likes Thomas Hardy’s phrase ‘the beauty of associations is far superior to the beauty of aspect’.

Inshaw paints the beauty of aspect, but he brings to it an enriching beauty of association.
Biggin Hill Landscape
1960 – Oil on board, 55 x 63 cms

Still Life
1960 – Oil on board, 92 x 98 cms
subject (once he had recognized what was to be his subject) carried out through detailed
drawing. The drawing fed the painting in a way simply not possible with photography. Lucie-
Smith quoted Inshaw: ‘With photographs, you actually miss a lot. When you spend a whole
day drawing in a particular place, you get all the events that happen there.’

During this period, Inshaw made a whole series of ambitious and highly detailed
drawings which are finished works in their own right. (Four were bought for the Arts Council
Collection by Jeremy Rees and exhibited in 1974 in a show called An Element of Landscape.
All four were made in 1974, two of Bridehead House in Dorset, two of a woman sitting in a
garden.) This group of Seventies drawings marks a high point in Inshaw’s graphic work,
and was intended to be essentially celebratory in tenor. Inshaw described drawing, in an
interview taped for the Arts Council exhibition, in the following way. ‘One sits for hours and
hours just drawing very small areas and perhaps getting bored, but I don’t. I think this is just
time that you are drawing out, and working time to suit your needs, and then suddenly you
would have an idea and you put it in and things will happen very quickly.’

Inshaw talking more generally about his ideas of art explained: ‘I see painting as a
celebration, in a sense, not of what’s there at the moment, but maybe later, as a celebration of
my imagination. I can find the ideal in what exists. And I usually find the ideal in what exists
by association rather than through it just being beautiful. I can find beautiful landscapes
almost anywhere. Last night I was driving from Aylesbury and I came through the Vale of
the White Horse. It was beautiful, but it did not hold a fascination for me because I had no
association with it, and nothing had happened to me there and I did not know anybody
there. Whereas the countryside around here, which is very much more bleak, I’m drawn to
it because it has very strong associations with certain people. I find that creates the beauty.’

Speaking in a 1974 BBC film about his work, entitled Private Landscapes, Inshaw described
the genesis of the painting Presentiment, begun that year but continuing to change and evolve
until 1978. He likened it to a diary of events that had happened in that year. Specifically he
recalled: ‘The sky and the landscape in the distance and the elm tree in the centre came
from just an instant when I was driving to London one late wet summer afternoon and there
was a thunderstorm near Marlborough. And I just saw the light on top of an elm tree – bright
sunlight and black sky behind it.’ The painting, which takes it’s title from an Emily Dickinson
poem, is set in a dark and maze-like topiary garden. The kind of enclosed landscape or
outdoors room that the very particular setting of The Badminton Game might have led into,
continued to develop over five years. The women in the painting are Gillian Pollard and Clare
Crick. Gillian was one of the Badminton Game players. The painting was also a homage to the
elm which was in the process of dying out through the depredations of Dutch elm disease.

Inshaw’s life was on the point of major change, and he had been approached by various
commercial galleries in London with a view to being represented by them. (His paintings
were already priced in four figures, but his output was slow, numbering perhaps two or three
large paintings a year.) He was on the threshold of his professional career, and of being able
to last – and much to his surprise – to earn his living as a painter rather than as a teacher.

For ten years he had taught painting and printmaking at Bristol, which meant working

The Badminton Game
1972 – Oil on canvas, 132 x 192 cm
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1975–1983
Ruralist
The Cricket Game
1976 – Oil on canvas, 69 x 140 cm
The Orchard
1977 – Oil on canvas, 122 x 183 cm

Apple Tree in Coombe Valley
1976 – Pencil on paper, 28 x 38 cm

Apple Tree in Coombe Valley
1976 – Pencil on paper, 28 x 38 cm