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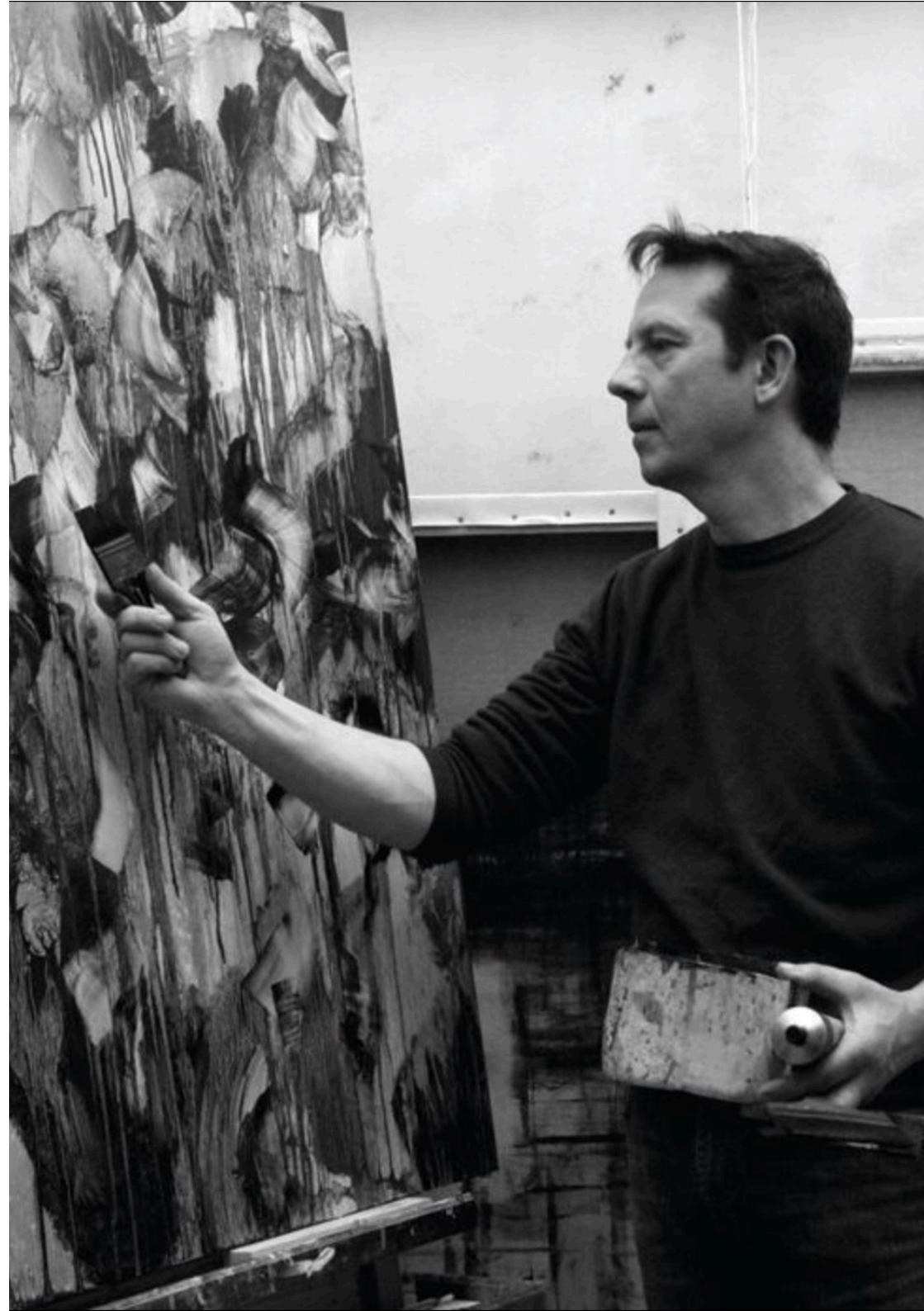
AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL KESSLING

Paul Kessling is a British artist whose oil paintings blend abstraction and landscape, capturing the interplay of light, colour, and movement in richly layered compositions. Here, he reflects on the influences of Constable, Paolozzi, and his time painting in Ireland, as well as the spontaneity and precision that drives his creative process behind his Skywriting series.

DM We recently talked about Constable's open-air oil sketches of the early 1800s, and you mentioned how struck you were by their vitality and Constable's gutsy application of paint, especially compared to his more polished studio work. Do you have different spheres of 'operation' as a painter, like Constable, with one mode for letting go, and another which is more bound or self-conscious?

PK When I was a student at the Royal College of Art, we were taken to see the Conservation Department at the V&A. They had these amazing Constable oil sketches on display. I remember feeling at the time that this work was much stronger than his 'finished' paintings; they were fast, urgent, immediate, and I perceived them as totally abstract, even though they were direct observations.

In my paintings I start with a field of moving paint, working fast, everything changing, moving, dissolving: hunting for structure by way of letting go. As everything slowly dries that process does become more analytical, and I suppose it is more self-conscious, even though I'm aiming at objectivity. Having said that, I'm realising that objectivity changes as you change and sometimes you have to trust your instincts, probably the best benchmark you have.





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DM I like the idea of intelligent eyes. So this work is not landscape painting which is overly preoccupied with the physical; the paintings are more concerned with a point in time, an experience, or event which has its own imagined self-serving contours, shafts of light, and other details only tangentially referencing a real world. Is that what is happening in your painting, Waterville?

PK In 2012 I spent a month at the Cill Rialaig Project in Southern Ireland, which is located in a group of famine houses perched on top of a cliff overlooking the Atlantic that have been renovated and turned into artists' studios. I went there to paint seascapes for a show I had planned later in the year; I was hoping for, and got, some intense storms and wild weather. It was a turning point for me; I'd taken heaps of materials, and I worked very hard, getting up at six and painting right through into the night. I worked and worked, even using photographs when the full force of Atlantic storms made it impossible to go out, yet nothing seemed to come right. Eventually I abandoned colour and brush completely and started to get some results. In that happy moment I set up my board and painted Waterville, a stripe painting using the colours and tones of the Iveragh peninsula. It's the only stripe painting I made there, and it has truth to that moment: it's quite exact about those winter colours and the washed-out Atlantic light.

DM In your latest paintings, there seems to be an almost baroque-like exuberance, and as a viewer it feels like you are letting us share remotely your pleasure in pushing paint into ever more exotic, sensual, and lyrical shapes just for the pure delight of mark making. Can we read your paintings in this way?

PK I really hope you can. About five years ago I did a lot of life-painting, making quick marks and working fast, and now much of that technique has come into this process. It's experimental and risky. It can quite quickly go wrong. The moving of paint and the manipulation of shape, structure, tone, and the continuous search for some combination of marks and colour that work, is by its very nature an exuberant and animated process. I think this comes out in the finished work. It's been a long road to get to this way of

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DM Artistic instincts, too, can be quite mercurial, so I am interested in how your aesthetics have changed, how the art held in your mind as the kind you want to make or the kind you value has moved on over the years.

PK One of the earliest exhibitions to really grab me was Eduardo Paolozzi's exhibition *Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons from Nahuatl* at the Museum of Mankind in Piccadilly. I was a sculpture student at Wimbledon School of Art and working mainly in clay. I loved the exhibition as it threw together all sorts of different objects, many displayed in museum cases which gave them a voodoo-like feel--totally unlike anything I had ever seen. I can still picture that exhibition and its imagery has stayed with me, good art endures.

DM Is that why you went on to study at the Royal College of Art?

PK It was one of the reasons. Paolozzi taught in the Ceramics Department there; I was working in clay so I applied. He was very interested in obsession as the source for making art: 'the petrol that fuels the engine'. I was fascinated by Hoa Haka Nanai'a, the Easter Island statue now in the British Museum. Paolozzi encouraged me to pursue my interest in Easter Island, and I managed to get enough money together with an Royal College of Art Travel Scholarship to spend time on Easter Island studying the statues, drawing, and painting outdoors. So this was in one way the beginning of looking at



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things more consciously than I previously had, also it was the point that I started painting.

DM How instrumental was Paolozzi in those early years?

PK He was a great tutor, he was a real artist doing international commissions and fully committed to his work. He had spent time in Paris after he left the RA and had known Giacometti, Brancusi, and Picasso--a direct connection to artists I greatly admired. What was particularly important to me was his idea that anything and everything can influence your work, that inspiration comes from literature, music, packaging--anything that takes your eye, ear, or imagination. I think that is what he gave to me.

DM And how do you physically translate 'anything and everything' onto canvas?

PK Perhaps you don't, but you try. Making marks is everything in painting, the process of 'how' into 'what'. How Velasquez makes lace out of flicking lead white onto a canvas or how Miro paints on sandpaper to make a universal background space in a painting--these, the actual mechanics of painting, are important, but maybe not as important as 'what' you are really seeing and 'how' it affects you.

DM To go back a little bit further in time, what were your very early artistic influences and interests growing up?

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PK My father, now a retired doctor, loves painting. Some of my earliest memories are of us both looking at paintings in the National Gallery. His great love is Rembrandt, though Leonardo, Velasquez, Rubens, Goya, and Bosch are all up there along with a huge range of modern painters, foremost being Picasso. It's only now that I realize what a great and unusual art education this was.

DM Did he encourage you to be a painter?

PK He was a Polish refugee, having escaped as a six-year old from Warsaw with his mother. The war had affected him deeply and this meant I grew up with a consciousness of the Second World War, especially its psychological effects. I think he encouraged me to value the making of art. And too, my Grandfather was imprisoned in a Russian Gulag in Siberia for part of the war and he often talked about how lucky I was to live in a time of relative peace outside the gaze of Stalin.

DM But painting wasn't the first path you chose into the art world.

PK Sculpture was my way of separating myself from my father's influence. It took me quite a while to figure out I was a painter, though I still think I'm a sculptor who paints. As a student at Wimbledon School of Art, studying for a sculpture degree, I remember the tutors trying to create very separate identities for the different departments. Sculptors were supposed to be macho and have a disdain for painting, or see it as a mere tool in the process of making sculpture. Painters were idle, too intellectual, and not quite at the same level!

DM How did you react to that?

PK Well, I found myself a working space right next to the Painting Department and also the Theatre Department where I later discovered Peter Doig worked. I got on very well with the Painting and Theatre students, but strangely, I now quite like the idea of having a disdain for painting-- it stops me getting too precious about my work.

DM I remember you saying that you thought sculptors made excellent painters because they are always thinking three-dimensionally, and I see this in your series of stripe paintings, like Atalanta, a totem-like structure of single stripes of glowing colour. Do you still turn to sculpture and sculptors for inspiration now?

PK Yes, but for different things. I am very interested in Carl Andre; his accuracy and ability to crystallize an object or idea is inspiring. One thing artists are very good at is having a nose for the



truth--what works and what doesn't--and that's what Andre is very good at, nailing the truth. His Preface to Stripe Painting for Frank Stella is a great example: 'Art excludes the unnecessary'. In terms of aesthetics I don't know if I really understand what that means but it feels right.

DM Do you think your paintings reveal some truth?

PK No, that isn't how I think about it, more that if they work they are true or have some truth about them. These paintings are all titled with references to what I'm reading, listening to or thinking about, and I think that comes in to the work if only obliquely. So, perhaps true to what was in my head at that moment.

DM And your stripe paintings, where did the idea for them originate?

PK They are quite simple paintings, in a fundamental way. They came about as a means of recording colour and tone; I found that if I'd been out walking or cycling and seen colours or textures that I wanted to remember I would just lay them down in the studio in a series of stripes. That is pretty close to what they are, a physical record, a colour-tone-light structure in paint.

DM Sometimes there is a moment when painting or looking at a painting where the image pops, or you experience it more intensely, emotionally. We've all had that feeling of walking into a gallery or room in a museum and within a moment your eye instantly catches the painting that 'works'. I get that when I look at Elbe, one of your recent paintings.

PK Connection, I think you are talking about how a painting can just grab you. So many elements come into play with painting. It's multi-layered and personal but essentially I think it works outside your conscious mind and you just intuitively know.

DM In pieces like Phaeochrome II and Skywriting you seem to play with the veneer of reality; the paint and shapes vacillate--the almost recognizable fades languorously into another more ethereal, dissolving

world. How did you get to this style?

PK There is a large element of chance in these paintings. I have an idea to start with and then the process takes over completely. Quite often I'll end up somewhere I couldn't have imagined and that is where painting comes into its own, which makes it so radically different from photography. I don't step back too much when I'm working, so I can engage right there and look for a solution. These paintings are all about surface, like the living surface of water in the sea. There are a lot of different areas of paint mixing and moving, colours running over and through each other, shape relationships in flux, forming and revealing the layers, the history—in short, this is skywriting.

DM Yet still, in many ways I think of you as being very much part of the British landscape, or skyscape, tradition, and that even your abstract paintings, like Rain with Blossom, can still be read in that light. Would you agree?

PK Yes, I see what you mean. In many ways even the most abstract are related to landscape in their use of colour and especially light, but they don't come just from a landscape tradition. I think that everything we see as human beings is read as landscape, by which I mean that our eyes are hard-wired to the horizon and to reading pattern and detail at a level that is subconscious. I'm sure this is linked to survival. Seeing is fantastically complex; our eyes have intelligence and the ability to work beyond, or outside thought. You can see it in Francis Bacon who uses completely abstract shapes and marks within the framework of a figure to really mess with your mind's eye, forcing you to re-engage with the figure in a new way. I felt that there was no way in conventional objective painting or landscapes to really get across the feeling of being in the world, of moving through patches of light, or the feeling of the here and now. These paintings play with that idea: glimpsing details through a forest of colour, stepping into shadow and out into sunlight, movement, change, fluidity. The painting you mention, Rain with Blossom, was both a departure and a starting point for me, a departure from objective painting and the first in the Skywriting series.

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painting, and I am revelling in being here and seeing where it can go.

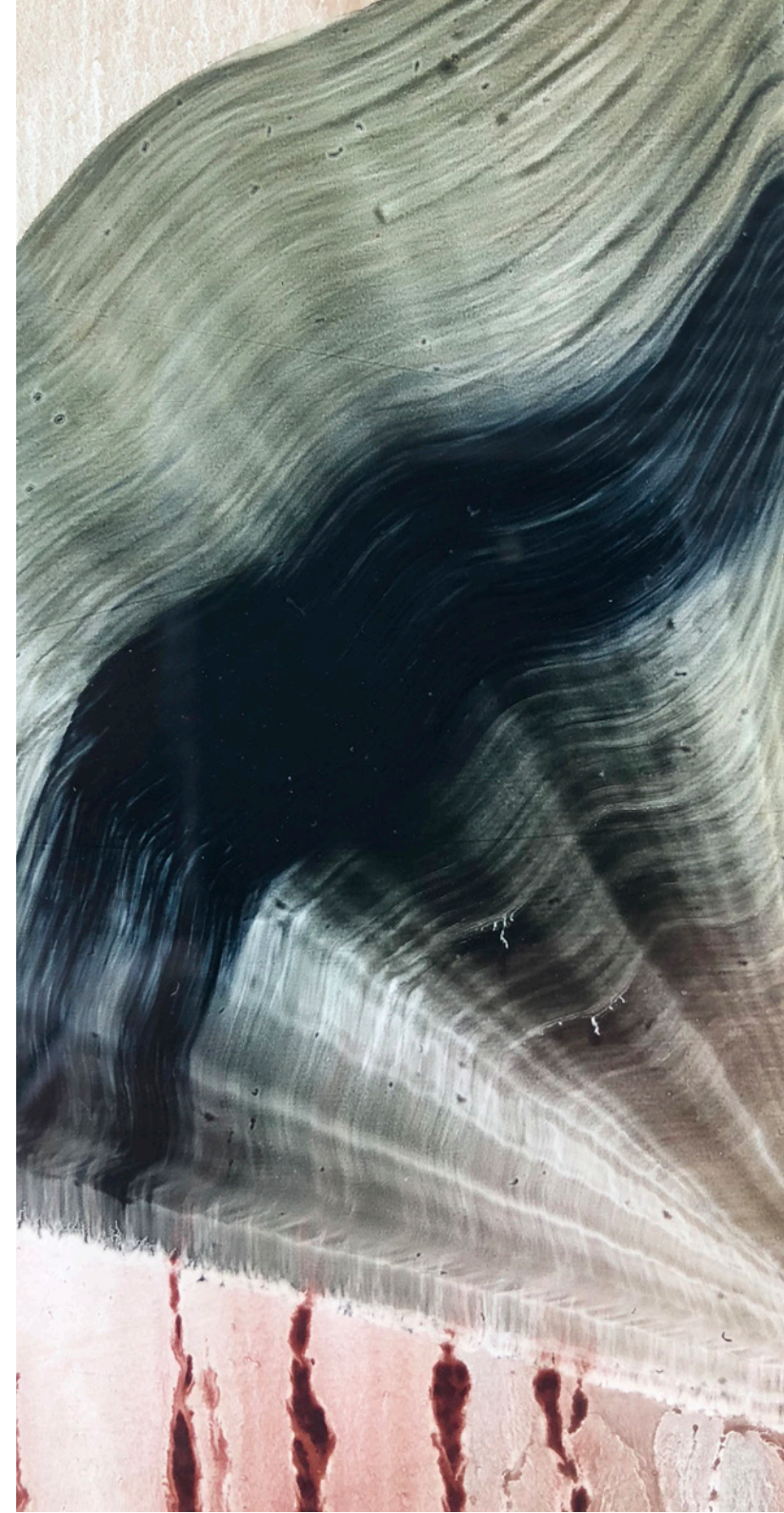
DM You seem much more comfortable with high colours now in your palette—has that been a long journey too?

PK It has taken me some time to bring rich colour into my work. I think it's because I mainly work tonally, thinking about structure. Quite often if I want to work out a shape-idea I'll do it in monochrome. Colour also plays with tone and there are certain colours that are very difficult, for me, those are the greens, especially the area where some greens become blues. I used a very pale blue-green in my painting *Atlas* which I saw in a Paul Klee painting at the recent Tate exhibition. I was held by this colour because it just resonated; I couldn't get it out of my mind, and so I used it in this painting to give me a high note and to get it out of my system. I was thinking about the ancient Greek sculpture called the Farnese Atlas, where Atlas is holding the world on his back; my shapes had something of the qualities of a Geopolitical map arrayed above and around a sphere.

DM Yes, I can see that. So that makes you a cartographer of sorts, or perhaps more poetically, an alchemist map maker taking raw material and transforming it into rich new worlds. And they are intense and luxuriant worlds, and yet, tender.

PK I quite like 'tender', it implies care for, and in the work that is true. Alchemy is also right, that is essentially the 'magic' of painting, and I certainly feel like a real alchemist when I grind my own pigments to make precisely the paint I need. An alchemist map maker? Well, maybe, but one with his feet firmly on the ground.

*This interview with Paul Kessling was hosted by David Martin in 2014.
David Martin is an art writer and a senior editor on the Oxford English Dictionary.*





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