**Friday Focus Talk on Anthony Whishaw’s painting *Green Landscape,* 1970.**

Anthony Whishaw was born in 1930, and is still a practicing artist today. He has tended to paint in series throughout his artistic career, with many paintings taking years to complete. However, although there have been overlaps in terms of form and themes because of this, his style has changed a lot over the years. Some paintings appear quite traditional and are done in oil on canvas in an impressionistic style, while much of his later work is very abstract and textured, and uses found objects to create reliefs and texture variation. This technique gives a very urban and industrial feel to some of his work. There is one like this on display in my hometown in Bristol at the moment. My mum went to see it and whilst she was there she bumped into the artist. This was great because through her, I was able to ask Whishaw a few of the things that I wanted to consider in my talk.

One of the reasons I was drawn to Whishaw is because of his bold and experimental attitude to art, which I think is clearly encapsulated within his painting *Green Landscape.*

I am going to concentrate on the artist’s inspirations behind this piece, by exploring the influence Abstract Expressionism and Romanticism has had on his work. I will then talk about how the formal effects of composition and painting techniques reflect the psychological state of the artist, support individual viewpoint and subjectivity, and communicate a feeling tranquility in nature and a sense of spontaneity.

I’ll start with a little background to Abstract Expressionism - this was an art movement that emerged in the early 1940s, primarily in New York – where a small group of artists introduced radical new directions in art. These artists included people like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. They broke away from accepted conventions in both technique and subject matter due to the primarily abstract nature of the work, making monumentally scaled pieces that were reflections of their individual psyches. Rothko himself once said: ‘I paint big to be intimate’. Although the scale of their work can feel overwhelming, the viewer is enveloped by their experience of confronting the paintings, which can feel like a personal and totalizing engagement with the art. Although Whishaw’s work is small in comparison, he told my mum that the painting was created during his transitional phase, and he went on to produce work that was twenty-two feet tall! However, *Green Landscape* is relatively big compared to many of the paintings in this gallery. So in Whishaw’s work this potential of being overwhelmed by the huge canvas is balanced by the energizing brightness and initial simplicity of the overall form. Instead of the image being imposed upon us, we are invited to explore it with our imagination – and so in our own time and individual ways of looking.

The colour range is cool and temperate but with a rich combination of green hues to create the impression of a healthy fertile countryside. As there is not a wide tonal range the black strip stands out and leads the eye into the painting, emphasising the bold qualities of the piece. There are quite strong contrasts between the light and dark areas, which adds to this dramatic intensity and gives balance to the composition. In this way, I think the painting is exploring the expressive potential and structuring properties of colour, something that was given preference to in Abstract Expressionism.

However instead of creating a three-dimensional effect due to this contrast of light and dark areas, the painting remains flat. This suggests Whishaw’s priority is to give the impression of experiencing reality, and conveying the feeling produced from this, rather than representing and mirroring reality itself. So it is more an image of internal creative energy, a mapping of the imagination and ways in which we see and experience nature around us, rather than an imitation of the English countryside.

In addition to being inspired by Abstract Expressionism’s emphasis on colour, Whishaw has long been influenced by Spanish artists – with Goya’s Black paintings in particular. The dominant black strip running through *Green Landscape* reminds me of the structural use of black paint within Goya’s work to create frames to the figures within his paintings, enhance the idea of movement through somber contrast, and expose individual elements to scrutiny by the viewer.

*Green Landscape* is composed roughly into horizontal thirds to add to the balance and harmony produced by the colour scheme. The thirds contain the energy of the piece by fitting the colours and shapes into a mosaic form. This is suggestive of contradictions within this piece: on one hand the painting communicates great energy, whilst on the other it suggests tranquility and even stasis due to the containment of the shapes and bold divisions of colour.

Although the composition is consciously divided into thirds, perspective is distorted, as there is no vanishing point or references of distance. However the eye is drawn towards the horizon, which creates the feeling of expansiveness and potential depth. These paradoxes and contradictions are something that Whishaw continually explores in his work. He is interested in the visual irony created through the combination of opposites (such as abstraction/figuration, surface/depth, reality/illusion), as this contributes to his aims of creating autonomous images but which are simultaneously related to an identifiable whole.

These paradoxes and tensions are also seen through the way *Green Landscape* juggles elements of Romantic landscape ideology with the cultivated English countryside. Romantic ideology perceives nature as having uncontrollable power and being unpredictably wild, as well as emphasizing the importance of the imagination, emotions and subjectivity when viewing a scene.

Whishaw creates the effect of individuality and ‘wild’ freedom within nature by turning toward abstract techniques of abandoning detailed precise forms of nature and focusing instead on the balance of colours and shapes. It is almost as though we are given a view into the painter’s own imagination. The lack of detail also allows our imagination free reign, to revisit and recreate our own special place. This reflects one of Roger Fry’s theories about modernist painting, as he advocates that ‘breaking with imitations of nature allows modernists to produce heightened emotional responses’.

The painterly style with which Whishaw has applied the colours is reminiscent of Romantic landscape paintings. The surface of the painting is raised and gravely with thick areas of splattered paint adding to the roughness of the work and giving it a raw immediacy. Romantic painters used a ‘painterly style’, where freedom of colour is privileged over sharply defined objects. These objects are depicted with bold strokes of paint, which leaves the forms slightly blurry. One of the most interesting things Whishaw told my mum was that he chose to use acrylic for this piece because as a medium it blends and blurs into the canvas – unlike oil paint, which remains very much on top of the canvas. This suggests that he was consciously applying a Romantic painterly style to his work.

Spontaneity, and emphasis on art as a process, is integral to both Abstract Expressionism and Romanticism. The medium used in *Green Landscape* is acrylic on canvas, a fast drying medium, which adds to the feelings of spontaneity and energy. It feels as if it could have been painted out of doors, directly in contact with nature. However, he did tell my mum that he normally paints from memory. Some of the colour shapes do not reach the edges of the canvas and there are several patches of raw canvas showing through which gives a sense of the painting being unfinished, which adds to this sense of immediacy, unrefined emotion, and spontaneity.

The Romantic elements of the landscape are contrasted with the idyllic ordered and inhabited world of the pastoral in Whishaw’s painting. This is because he gives us an almost aerial view of the landscape, allowing the field divisions to be the main way that the viewer identifies the work as a landscape painting. By recognizing the landscape through man’s imposed order upon it, this contains the wilder emotions. In this way, the painting depicts the Romantic definition of the ‘beautiful’ much more successfully than it conveys elements of the ‘Sublime’. So I feel Whishaw’s painting is more pastoral than it is Romantically wild. He achieves tranquility and joy in nature through celebrating its visual harmonious beauty instead of depicting feelings of excess and terror within the landscape. It is unmistakably an English Landscape!

There was a debate in 2010 about whether Whishaw’s work should be exhibited in the Tate Modern or the Tate Britain, because it couldn’t be decided whether he was a modernist or traditionalist. This was due to the tension between his relatively abstract style and the traditional subject matter that he chose to depict – such as natural English woodlands. One critic, from the Independent, thought he was trying to be ‘British’ and ‘modern’ at the same time, arguing that these identities are very hard to combine.

So during this talk I have presented to you the importance of colour, privileging the imagination, and using nature to express individual emotions – all within the wider cultural context of Abstract Expressionism and Romanticism. I think these inspirations and ideas are conveyed particularly powerfully within Whishaw’s painting because of his engaging use of colour, and bold appearance of the piece, which constantly demands us to enter into an emotional dialogue with it and lose ourselves in a comforting but invigorating green world of the imagination. It allows us to explore the internal structure of our own imagination as well as that of the artist’s.