

The Art of BRUCE STUART



Text by Daniel C. Dempster

Understanding Bruce Stuart

by Daniel Dempster

‘**W**hen I look at my paintings I get a very peaceful feeling. Although you can’t judge me from just one of my paintings, I think that, overall, you can see my intentions and that I am still discovering myself through my brush.’

Pat Calnan, in her *Royal Gazette* review of Bruce Stuart’s most recent one-man show, ‘Moving On’, at the Windjammer Gallery, talks of Stuart’s development: ‘This collection . . . represents a significant progression for an artist whose reputation was perhaps too firmly rooted in his proficient technical draughtsmanship. Now there are signs of a new sensitivity which is adding dimension and a stronger emotional impact to his paintings. This growth is reflected in a shift of emphasis of subject matter, a richer palette of colours, a tentative introduction of figurative painting and a corresponding gradual loosening of style. Working exclusively in acrylics, some of his paintings are now considerably larger in size, which in itself signifies a changing concept by the artist.’

Bruce Stuart’s work has shifted into a higher gear as he has become more aware of his eye, his mind, and Bermuda. The paintings in this book represent a cross-section of work from 1981 to 1991. In this selection of Stuart’s work you will feel the brightness and heat of the sun. You will be drawn through gates, speculate about what lies beyond doorways, feel the open space of rural Bermuda, visit charming ruins, and examine the islands’ back yards in an entirely new light. For indeed it is the light that draws us in — Bermuda’s light, Bruce Stuart’s light.

If you’ve ever spent a winter in a northern city, you will have felt a strange disorientation upon emerging from a building or the subway into the weak morning light of an overcast day. Everything appears flat and vague. It isn’t until you think about it that you realize you are missing the shadows and highlights that normally define your environment. It is disturbing. The

relief one feels when the sun does emerge is palpable. People move more decisively and cheerfully as the world takes on added dimension.

This sense of light and shadow is part of life in Bermuda, and this dramatic quality has provided material for artists in Bermuda for nearly four centuries. The light and environment of Bermuda have attracted some of the world's most famous artists, among them Gleizes, Demuth, Pleissner, O'Keeffe, Bush, Vorhees, Homer and Senat.

Bermuda's light is very strong, even in winter. During late summer it is so bright that it blasts colours into submission — sometimes it is difficult to open one's eyes. In the late autumn and winter, the skies are prone to rapid change. But during the spring and early summer months, the light is gracious. The colours and shadows are rinsed clean and appear full-blooded in the early morning and late afternoon light. Shadows are sharp and noticeably coloured, clearly defined shapes anchoring other shapes in context. It is this contrast that makes Bermuda so fascinating to the artist.

The clean, simple lines of Bermudian architecture cast and receive shadows brilliantly. The distinctive Bermuda roof, the jalousie blinds and shutters, the eyebrow decorations and window ledges, the paned windows and shuttered doorways, the old stairs, the plastered and painted walls, all combine to form a uniquely graphic portrait of Bermuda.

'I have always had a love of and appreciation for Bermuda architecture, with its charming features and harmonious relationship with the surrounding landscape,' said Stuart. In his book *Bermuda Story*, Hudson Strode wrote, 'Bermuda architecture is unique in itself. It is the houses that give the place its particular flavour. At their best they are both distinctive and charming.' This is still true of the older homes.

'The old homes which were made of the indigenous limestone that is cut out of the ground have an amazing quality that makes them appear almost soft. When painted white, the Bermuda house has almost a wedding-cake icing quality, dazzling in the sunlight. Some houses I have painted for their stately charm and others for their refined decay,' said Stuart.

Bruce Stuart uses architectural detail to nail down a scene. But as his work progresses, he finds it less and less necessary

to describe the obvious; he leans more towards the style of composition found in Andrew Wyeth's *Kuerner's Hill*, in which fence posts in the lower portion of the painting anchor the mass of the hill.

Distinct differences in style, technique and attention to detail have marked his work since 1989. Certain earlier pieces, particularly from 1983, that have been specifically chosen for this book show intuitive leaps that signal the way ahead. 'The year 1989 was one of change. I went through a great deal. The experiences forced my spirit through me and out of me. It found its way out through my eye and my painting.'

Stuart's recent subject matter is more original. Full-frontal studies of Bermuda's architecture have largely gone by the wayside, except for specific commissions. His eye has become more discerning. His choice of viewpoint has become such that some of his most interesting paintings are oblique or off-centre views of his subjects. The viewer is drawn into the paintings with ease and shares the painter's experience. Stuart's work teaches us how to see.

Have you ever paid attention to the way a shadow falls on the side of a building or the changing colour of a shadow as the sun sets? Have you ever noticed the qualities of bleached, chipped paint and cement on an old ruin? Have you ever observed how, in strong light, the colours of one object will be reflected onto a neighbouring object?

We have all seen the dramatic patterns that window shutters and electrical cables can cast on outside walls, but have we really given our attention to them? Even ruins have a definite charm: the shadows are more complex, as are the structures themselves — chipped and faded layers of paint and exposed limestone next to cracking plaster, peeling paint on a yawning doorway that no longer supports its door. (It is particularly in Stuart's paintings of ruins that one notices the flora that exists so close to us.)

Bruce Stuart's involvement with the Masterworks Foundation as a trustee has given him the opportunity to study many artists' perceptions of Bermuda and Bermuda light closely: 'Studying the work of the Impressionists has helped me to step back and look again at Bermuda. Ambrose Webster shocked me with his bold colours. His treatment caused me to look more into colour to tell the story, rather than paint a straight photograph

of reality. Colour lends softness. My thing is colour; it fires me up. I used to be fascinated solely with the sharp graphics of the architecture and shadow of Bermuda. There is so much more! I had to retrain my mind to see what was there, not what I was taught to see was there.'

In his sophomore year at Gardner-Webb College, in North Carolina, Stuart met artist-in-residence Hal Bryant. 'Mr. Bryant did a series of realistic acrylic paintings on the old South which were brilliant. He was very much influenced by [American naturalistic painter] Andrew Wyeth. We were shown slides of Wyeth's work, but I didn't know much more about him.' Reading *Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth: Kuerners and Olsons* in 1983 made further impact: 'Discovering Wyeth was a turning point in my work. I began to see beauty in the commonplace, to really open my eyes and see. His philosophies intrigued me. People ask me, "Aren't you worried that you will run out of things to paint?" It used to concern me. Wyeth's ideas set me free to paint the same subjects as many times as I want. I know that I will never run out of material now. As I change, I see the same scene in new and different ways.'

Stuart's sense of place is powerful: 'Even though I don't put people in most of my paintings, I do try to impart a sense of presence. To see traces of human activity is to portray mystery. I want my viewers to ask questions.' Wyeth, in an interview with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said, 'It [the work] would be like a mirror, an ancient mirror, with reflections and images still spiritually within it, because I think a person permeates a spot, and that lost presence keeps an area alive. It pulsates because of that.'

'I love painting small pieces and trying to create a sense of wonder when they are viewed,' said Stuart. 'It is the adventure of discovery I'm trying to recreate. I try to add to my painting little details that only become apparent to the owner after the work has been a few weeks on the wall.'

'I once read an article in *Architectural Digest* about miniature paintings, and what stood out the most was how the writer described the paintings as being "jewel-like", that one could pick a painting up and hold it in one's hands to study the many facets of its character. In painting small it helps to introduce an intimate relationship because I want to draw the viewer into

closer contact with my world, even though the work can be enjoyed from a distance. I like to present the questions "What's going on? Where is this leading me?", so that the viewer has to investigate and find some answers.'

There is detail in Bruce Stuart's painting which at first glance may not be observed. The viewer may be conscious of the pleasant feeling of space and light in general, but at some point the viewer will stop and look closely at the work and begin to read it.

'With my "found" objects, the fun is in the surprise. I like taking the ordinary, common things or places that one takes for granted every day and turning them into something of note. It is an elevation of the commonplace. In drawing attention to the common object, the place where it resides comes to notice, too. I want to cause people to look at their surroundings and see what's there. It is my hope that they will appreciate their environment more because of it.'

In a Bruce Stuart painting, we may discover blocks of wood overgrown with Spanish moss and nailed to the side of a tree that once led to a tree fort; a ladder on its side on the ground, leaning against a wall, leading us to wonder what is around the corner; a closed doorway that has irregular planks so that we can glimpse the space beyond through the top boards; the length of string that is used in addition to the length of wood holding a jalousie blind steady; the dark interior of a farm building or wreck that we can see through to a window on the other side and glimpse beyond; the grooves in the cement path that an old cedar gate has worn over the years; a gate left ajar; a window that has been left up to circulate air through the house. Once we notice such things, we begin to see even more detail in the painting. We are soon led to study the cracked plaster and weathered wood, the textures we take for granted.

'I like drawing attention to worn posts with rust stains running down weathered wood, or the worn part of a path where so many feet have passed as to not allow grass to grow again,' said Stuart. 'Or perhaps showing the old, dry limestone walls that have withstood the test of time, turning those wonderful shades of blue-grey, and the rich ferns and mosses and other varieties of plants that have grown into their nooks and crannies. The contrast of textures adds such grace and elegance to these wonderful old walls.'

Once we have grasped the wealth of detail in a painting, we will look even closer to examine the layering, the weaving of brush strokes, the many colours that make up what appears to be the single colour of a surface, and we will ask, 'How was that done?'

If you look closely at Stuart's later works, you will notice more attention paid to colour in shadow, reflected light and texture. The attention to light and shadow is more understanding. The reflected light helps to anchor objects in relation to each other, with shadows and highlights that have colour. It seems that black has been eliminated from Stuart's palette altogether.

'Painting the unusual is challenging in that it forces me to create new textures and methods to reinforce the illusion of the image,' said Stuart.

Where does Bruce Stuart find his motivation and interest? 'I've already talked about Wyeth. In fact, the whole Wyeth family fascinates me. N.C. Wyeth's illustrations for children's books are masterpieces of colour, and Jamie Wyeth's individuality of watercolour is cheerfully different from his father's and grandfather's work.'

Stuart cited the art of Canadian wildlife artist Robert Bateman as an inspiration for his technique of detail with acrylics: 'I'd seen a film about Bateman, and I'd read three of his books. The thing that inspired me was simply the fact that he paints with acrylics. The man has such control, painting very difficult effects like mists and clouds. The detail in his work is incredible. In using acrylics the artist does not have the luxury of control one might have if using oils — it can't be worked. I paint with many undercoats, building up depth by using the translucency of thinned acrylic. Each layer dries very quickly.

'Bateman's use of colour is amazing. He uses colour that you wouldn't think possible, such as turquoise in a rock (*Black Bear*, 1980). But when you sit back and look at the piece, it works. I use Bateman as a guide to what's possible. I don't know how he achieves a particular effect, but seeing that he has done it means that it is possible to do.

'I'm also fascinated by the work of Maxfield Parrish, who had a phenomenal graphic sense and a meticulous technique of glazing. Many of us, in our fast-paced world, opt for the easy way out. Maxfield Parrish would paint and glaze a layer, then let

it dry — for weeks. His work took ages to finish, but the depth and transparency of his painting is astounding. I am fascinated with Parrish's figures. The girls dance even though they are still. The sense of line in his figures is absolutely beautiful.'

Stuart also finds example in the life and work of Camille Pissaro, the 'father' of French Impressionism: 'Pissaro was willing to listen to his friends. He was never afraid of new ideas or new techniques. He learned from them and at the same time was a haven to them.' Pissaro alone exhibited in all of the Impressionists' shows, the rest of the group constantly squabbled, formed alliances and sometimes broke away. Biographer Raymond Cogniat wrote, '...one can never find the slightest hint of discouragement in Pissaro's paintings. His art is serious without being sad; it reflects a serene equanimity, as if nothing mattered to him but the art of painting.'

Though impressed with Pissaro and his work, Stuart is mindful of his own feelings. He remarked in a 1983 interview, 'I sometimes want to get a lonely feeling in my paintings, but I do not want to get the feeling of being totally alone. Solitude is one thing and being cut right off is another.'

There is a subtle conscience that permeates Bruce Stuart's work, in addition to his fresh, positive style: 'In my rural paintings I am trying to capture a feeling of space, or of a time when there was more space. In Bermuda, we are losing precious land to development. It's dangerous to our wildlife, who need these environments to survive. So what I try to do in my paintings is to give one a sense of remembering, especially memories of when they were young, and a feeling of nostalgia for having run through *that* field or over *that* hill. It gives me pleasure when I create that reminiscence for my viewers.

'I want to create a sense of space and light no matter how big or small the painting is. I hope that by painting these scenes I will call attention to the need to conserve and protect Bermuda for future generations.'