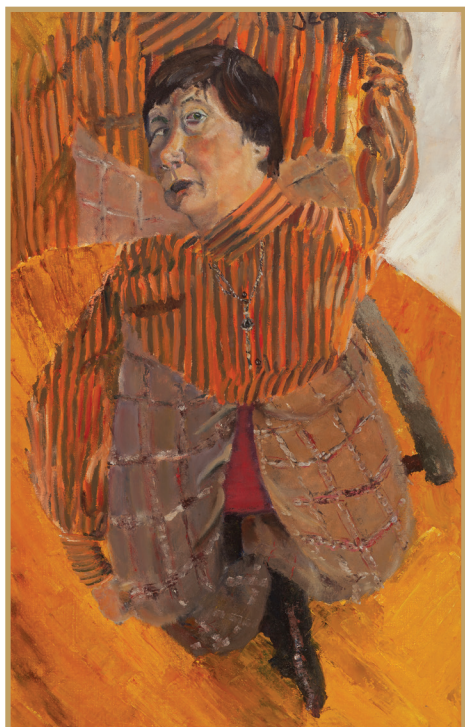


Jean Jones

A Forgotten Painter Remembered

Kari McGowan



Me – self-portrait, 1976

When she died in 2012, the artist Jean Jones had produced over 400 paintings including striking self-portraits. All reveal a subject whose penetrating gaze stops the viewer in their tracks, obliging them, for some moments, to experience the world as intensely as the painter did herself. Her 1976 portrait 'Me' shows a woman wholly immured in her surroundings, immobilised like a character from a Samuel Beckett play, yet intent on communication. It is beautifully painted in a mesh of harmonious golds, russets and siennas whose jewel is a single green eye, cradled in red shadows. The eye seems fixed upon the viewer while also staring up along the length of an arm stretched out to touch the upper edge of the canvas, partly obscuring the artist's signature.

The perspective is unsettling – today it could be a portrait of an artist taking a selfie. The carefully observed textiles of both clothing and background are matching fabrics, merging

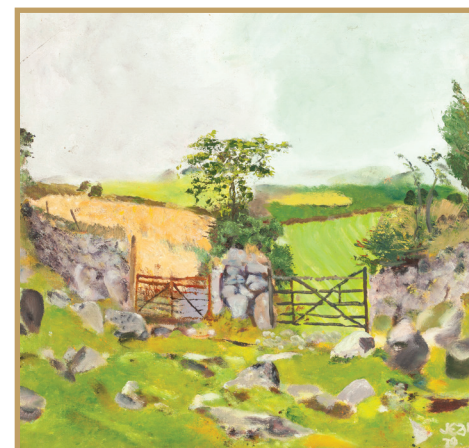
subject and background, the striped and barred patterning suggestive of restraining bands. The viewpoint is that of an observer peering down through a spyhole, while the spied upon then turns her unflinching Cyclops eye outwards upon the world.

In October 2020, at Modbury's Brownston Gallery, a team – led by Jones' grandson Nelson Jones – organised the first of two exhibitions of her work. The first was entitled 'Jean Jones, Dartmoor's Forgotten Painter' and a second, in May 2021, 'Jean Jones, A Life Uncovered'. This second exhibition was accompanied by a lecture by art historian Michael Kurtz, who discussed her work from the perspective of her very particular vision and creative context and the often severe, lifelong, mental health issues which caused her twice to be detained. The exhibition brought back into the light the life and large body of work left behind by this, up until now, almost forgotten artist.

During her early childhood, Jean (born 1927) spent August with her family near Noss Mayo in the South Hams. This holiday was to provide a period of recuperation for her father who had continued to experience the effects of severe PTSD following four years in the trenches during the First World War. The family returned again to Devon, this time to Bideford, when their London home was badly damaged during a bombing raid during the Second World War. Jones was to form a lifelong, deep emotional need for the area which as a child had represented a safe haven and which became a vital retreat when the pressures of life in Oxford academia and her inner distress became overwhelming.



Yellands Gate 1969



Farm Gates, Brisworthy 2003



Yellands from the Plym, Upriver 1970

After leaving school she spent a year at St Martin's School of Art, but under paternal pressure left to read English at Girton College, Cambridge, and was not to return to painting for many years. She met, and in 1949 married, John Jones, an Oxford academic and literary critic who went on to become Professor of Poetry. As his parents lived in rural Devon, the couple were able to spend long periods of time in the county, eventually buying their own cottage at Yellands on the southern edge of the Moor near Shaugh Prior.

Life was spent in an intense literary environment with a circle of friends which included J. R. R. Tolkien, William Golding and Iris Murdoch. During the 1960s Jones encountered the letters of Vincent van Gogh, which chronicled in extraordinary depth both the artist's working practices and painted an intimate portrait of his inner life. The letters acted as a catalyst in bringing about Jones' return to art and she took courses at the then Oxford Polytechnic and Ruskin College, studying with an intense discipline which was to characterise her approach to her work. Dartmoor-based eminent portrait and landscape painter Benedict Rubbra was one of her painting tutors during the late 1960s and is recognised as having been influential in her development as a painter. Over five decades later he instantly recalls a student with a fierce

desire to learn, open to what he was trying to teach and to establish her own style.

She soon became recognised as a painter of significance, selling work through galleries in London and Oxford during the 1970s, and in 1980 she was invited to stage a solo exhibition at Oxford's prestigious Ashmolean Museum.

Writer Iris Murdoch observed that Jones would, one day, 'be as famous as Van Gogh'. In August 2020, Harry Langham, writing in *Port Magazine*, remembering the 'great and troubled painter', reflected that,

'Jean was not content to stay in the shadows, she... wanted to claim her place amongst the Pantheon of Britain's cultural elite... Each year she would offer the Royal Academy her latest work for their summer exhibition. Each year her efforts would be rewarded with no more than a polite rejection, excepting only – for reasons about which she no doubt grumbled – her portrait of William Golding.'

This was the era when newspapers described the Nobel Prize for Science received by Dorothy Hodgkin as being awarded to a 'housewife' and 'mother of three'.

The art historian and critic David Carritt described Jones as, 'an Expressionist, albeit a most restrained, unstrident Expressionist'. To him, her work displayed, 'lyrical feelings, usually of happiness, sometimes of



Brisworthy Farm 1984

melancholy... a world of becoming, not being'. Interviewed for contemporary art platform Art Plugged, Michael Kurtz describes how Jones 'struggled with the legacies of Post Impressionism and Expressionism', describing her work as, 'very committed to the value of representation but ...also intensely emotional'.

In his May 2021 lecture, Kurtz reflected upon the 'daunting task' of talking about Jones' work as she herself was 'scornful of art theory and contemporary fashion in the art world'. She would 'celebrate the "inarticulacy" of images'. American painter Georgia O'Keeffe similarly observed that she found she 'could say things with color and shape that I couldn't say in any other way – things I had no words for'. Kurtz views the role of painting for Jones as acting, 'like the Devonshire landscape, as a non-verbal refuge from the literary pretension of Oxford'. Both the landscape and the act of painting provided Jones with opportunities to push back against her severe mental health problems – the anxiety and depression, the fits of mania, symptoms of the bipolar disorder which remained undiagnosed until she was in her fifties and which never left her.

Jones' subject matter included portraits, self-portraits, still life and the exploration of her immediate surroundings which included Primrose Hill, Oxford and Dartmoor. Painting the familiar allowed her to become ever closer to things of great personal significance. Her painting practice was a highly disciplined morning activity: she painted her landscapes outdoors, 'en plein air' during the warmer months, and focused on portrait work during the winter.

Michael Kurtz explains the two main principal theoretical considerations which informed her thinking regarding her working practice. Colour fascinated her and she was very much influenced by the writing of French art critic Charles Blanc, whose thoughts she encountered transcribed in letters written by Van Gogh. Central to Blanc's thinking was



Stone Circle, Legis Tor 1986

that in order to attain the highest degree of colour brilliance and resonance, the artist's choice of colour palette should be kept simple, limited to the three primary colours red, yellow and blue. Through the juxtaposition of complementary mixes (one selected primary used with selective placing of its complementary – a combination of the two remaining primaries), the highest visual impact could be achieved. Such restriction would also ensure a unity of colour within the painting and oblige the artist to understand how to see and use colour effectively. Jones, however, did observe that such an extremely limited palette made it difficult to express the colours of the foxgloves around her Dartmoor home.

Jones was also fascinated by theories surrounding the way in which the eye and brain perceive and interpret the world and, as Michael Kurtz explains, in letters she had expressed the view that many painters viewed their subjects without proper attention. Her approach was influenced by the writing of American psychologist J. J. Gibson, who proposed that at any given moment seeing consists of a 'point of fixation' moving outwards, from which a 'gradient of clarity' is experienced, causing the visual field to become 'progressively less determinate from the centre to the periphery'.

Benedict Rubbra remembers her appreciation of the significance of the edges and shape of the painting surface. He observes that her frequent choice of a

square format would have presented her with compositional challenges and constraints, understanding which, paradoxically, enabled her to learn to develop a greater freedom of expression. Michael Kurtz describes how Jones experimented with the orientation of her canvases in the 1980s to convey more accurately the experience of seeing, so the viewer feels 'immersed in the scene which appears to revolve around her like a field of vision'. He describes her 'cloud diagonal landscapes' which are 'particularly effective at evoking the V-shaped valleys of Dartmoor'.

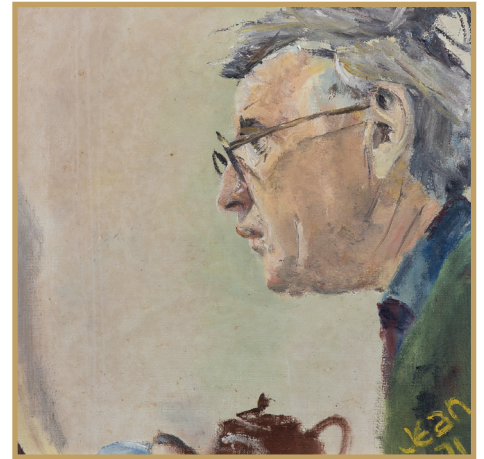
Jones continued to explore visual strategies and experiment with unconventional formats to bring her viewers closer to her way of seeing the world.

It is difficult not to respond to the intense emotional quality Kurtz identifies in her work. The 1969 painting *Yellands Gate* shows a partly opened gate 'inviting' the viewer to venture onto brightly lit open moorland. The two gates featured in *Farm Gates, Brisworthy* (2003), both standing resolutely barred and with subtly differently coloured skies and fields beyond, are suggestive of two worlds, two ways, but also a sense of exclusion. The broad brushstrokes and intense colour of Jones' joyful, *Yellands from the Plym, Upriver* (1970) express a deep love and understanding of the way Dartmoor's rivers carry the image of the sky above.

In her painting *Brisworthy Farm* (1984), one of several featuring stone circles, the stones stand firmly placed at the lower edge



Kitchen Table 2004



John with Specs 1971

of the painting as if caught entering the landscape, gaze directed into the distance. It is hard not to attribute intent and narrative to their attitude; the stones appear imbued with a sense of immanent presence that takes them beyond inert matter into a realm of emotional capacity and will. Georgia O'Keeffe wrote of people's tendency to hang their own associations on her paintings, and over-interpretation often means limitation. Paintings such as those of Jones', with her consistent style and persistent desire to explore ways of seeing and expressing what was dear to her, reward repeated viewing, giving fresh insights.

Benedict Rubbra observes that to look at her paintings is to 'feel her thoughts', perhaps the most important and humanising job the artist can do. For feeling and seeing so powerfully through the mind of another extends our understanding of both the external world and the workings of the human mind. ■

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