Transcendental Meditations
Sweet Contemplations

Charles Saumarez Smith reflects on two recent, very thoughtful shows at the Royal Academy

Over the past couple of months, I have been enjoying Mariko Mori's exhibition at 6 Burlington Gardens, the building that the Royal Academy owns due north of its original building, in what was the old 18th-century garden of Burlington House, opposite Abercrombie & Fitch and Cecconi's. Of course, you have to be in the right frame of mind for it. It's not an exhibition to zip round lightly. You have to take in its calm, contemplative effect, the deliberate attempt to reproduce the idea of the cosmic, to get the visitor to slow down and think about time and space. I particularly enjoyed an evening when Mariko herself performed a routine whereby she walked slowly down the stairs dressed, as usual, in ceremonial white and cut a necklace of pearls distributing a single pearl each to the spectators; and I like the new-age Stonehenge, where the pillars are like plastic teeth and turn slowly to magenta or peppermint green.

On the other side of the campus in Burlington House, we have been able to mount a thoughtful exhibition on Constable, Gainsborough and Turner drawn from the incomparable wealth of our own collections. At the heart of the exhibition are three major works by which each of the artists wanted to be remembered by their peers. The first is Thomas Gainsborough's great Romantic Landscape, which he did late in his life and asked his daughter to donate to the Royal Academy in his memory. It demonstrates the way in which his view of landscape was influenced at least as much by his knowledge of the landscape tradition of Rubens and Dutch artists as it was by his own sketching expeditions out in the Suffolk countryside. He wanted to demonstrate that his vision of an idealised landscape could produce works of art that were at least the equal of portrait painting, which he always regarded as a necessary form of drudgery, and to the idea of history painting, which was being so vigorously promoted by Sir Joshua Reynolds in his Discourses.

JMW Turner was acknowledged as a rising star of the Royal Academy from the moment when he entered the Royal Academy Schools, aged 14. But the Royal Academy did not encourage drawing from nature, so he went instead to study landscape with a doctor called Thomas Monro, who specialised in diseases of the mind and was an enthusiastic amateur artist. During the 1790s Turner went on sketching tours in the north of England and Wales. In 1799, he was elected as an Associate of the Royal Academy, aged only 24, and became a full Academician on 12 February 1802. He presented as his diploma work Dolbadern Castle, a highly romanticised view of the fragmentary remains of a medieval castle perched on a hillside on the way to Snowdon. Like Gainsborough, Turner does not show it as pure landscape, but gives it a symbolic meaning by including two soldiers in the foreground together with a prisoner.

Constable was constantly rejected as an Academician and had to endure the humiliation year after year of not being elected. His landscapes were regarded as too mundane, too rooted in the ordinary

domestic surroundings of the Stour valley on the borders between Suffolk and Essex. He was interested in the depiction of the quotidian without the need to invest it with symbolic meaning. His diploma work shows nothing more than rain clouds scudding across the Vale of Dedham, with the tower of Dedham church lit up in the distant sunshine, while a local farmboy opens the lock gate with a crowbar to let a boat pass by.

But even if Constable is the most ostensibly realistic of the three painters, it is still possible to see the extent to which his large paintings were pictorially composed by comparison to his landscape studies which were presented to the Royal Academy by his second daughter, Isabel, on her death in 1888. These are much more rough and less composed, vivid in their depiction of light and cloud effects, mood paintings, done purely for the pleasures of observation and pictorial record. By their standards, Constable's big landscapes, which were submitted to the annual exhibition, were classically composed, looking back just as much to Gainsborough and Rubens as they were to those summers spent in the fields near Flatford Mill.

I wonder what the three artists would have made of Mariko Mori. Gainsborough would almost certainly have understood her drawings, which are made from scenes at dawn in the island of Okinawa. They are attempts at interpreting the sensations of early daylight. The sun is viewed by all the artists as having magic properties. I think that all of them would have acknowledged that Mori is not looking at landscape just for its own sake, but for an idea of spiritual transcendence.

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