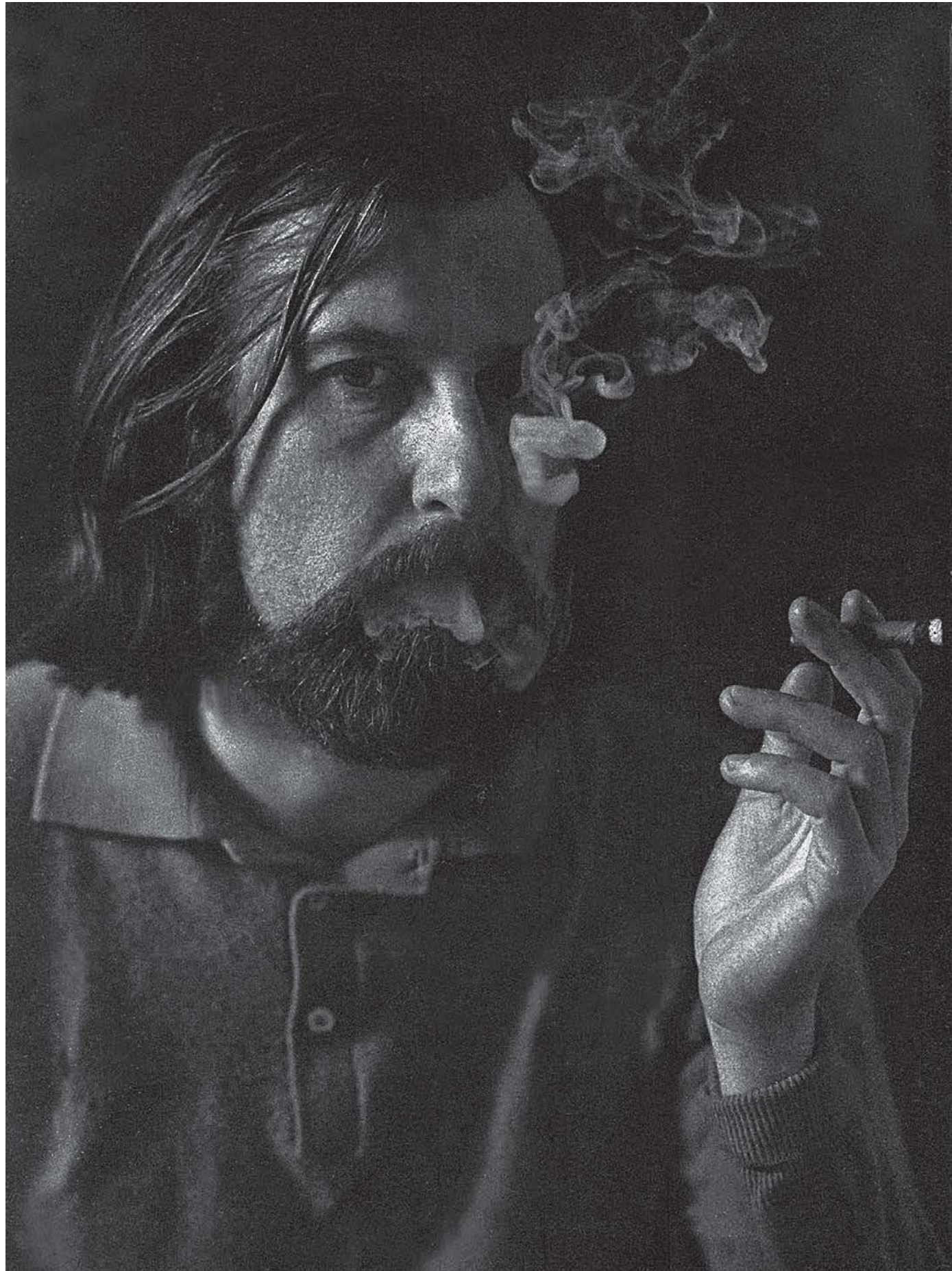


NEIL STOKOE



PAINTINGS FROM THE 60s ON



NEIL STOKOE

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Gallery

Established 1923

INTERVIEW WITH NEIL STOKOE AND MARTIN HAMMER

[MH] I want to start off talking more broadly about the exhibition because all the time you were doing this work you were teaching at Wimbledon and weren't exhibiting your work a great deal. So I suppose what's unusual for the rest of us is to encounter a body of work from the '60s and '70s that is relatively unknown.

[NS] I had my first exhibition at a gallery called Clytie Jessop Gallery in the King's Road in 1970 and there was a certain amount of success with that because the Arts Council bought one. Also the Tate nearly bought one but that fell through – I think they were more committed at that time to abstraction. Anyhow, I then didn't do what any normal person with a career in mind would have done. I didn't exhibit for 30 years, until 2002. I was finally prompted to do so by an article I read quoting the great American photographer Alfred Stieglitz. He said that it's important for an artist to get on the ladder, whatever rung he's on, so that he can at least be assessed later on. If not a great aunt down the line makes a bonfire in the garden and burns them. I thought 'oh my God, this is the call to do something'. That was the prod that actually got me going.

[MH]. What's also quite striking is that these, the earlier works, are quite different from your more recent works – the darker and more painterly works which were shown in the exhibition *All Things Must Pass* at the Piper Gallery in 2013 – although one can, of course, see some very general continuities.

[NS] The older works are very different. In fact someone remarked on that quite pointedly and asked me what went wrong. I just said my heart was lighter then.

[MH] Would it be fair to describe your work in the 1960s and 1970s as picking up on the old idea from Baudelaire of the imperative to paint the heroism of modern life? The figures and settings seem very contemporary, evoking a certain

fashionable, wealthy element in contemporary London. There's even a certain atmosphere of glamour in some of the pictures which raises the question of your own attitudes towards such subject-matter.

[NS] What I wanted to suggest is that one is not necessarily what one's surroundings are. The paintings are very concerned with domestic situations and the relationships between men and women. I'd also say that I often find people are very confused. They can be very clear in the realm of their own expertise but as human beings they are a shambles. There are aspects of shambles even in an unshambolic person and they often take place against a wonderful environment like the settings in the paintings. There's a strong contrast between the psychological state of unease, as against the clarity of the colour and the architecture that frame the figures.

The architectural setting can either be a complement of the psychological situation or it can be the antithesis. I tend to see everything as visual metaphors. I hope they work on many levels – on formal levels and also on psychological levels.

Take the spiral staircase, for instance. There's a very brightly coloured one [*Man and Woman Spiral Staircase*, 1983] and the man and woman are also turning. In a way, this external element is mirroring and echoing their inner turmoil. These paintings are not autobiographical but rather show what I've noticed about people's relationships. I therefore tend to find pictorial equivalence to that. In the same way, the window blinds or bars in other paintings have two functions – one is form, the other psychological, though they're not about traditional storytelling. Part of that was setting up a visual metaphor for the bars. They are containing and retaining. At the same time they were a good formal device for exploring certain optical illusions and after-imagery.

Perhaps one way I could describe the works is to say what I was reacting against. There are aspects of Cubism that I can identify with. However, when it goes from analytical into hermetic Cubism I emotionally lose touch with it, though I understand its importance in the history of modern representation. But I didn't feel it was the kind of space that could represent the emotional content I was interested in, and so my objection to that approach was very conscious. Having made these rejections, I also realized I wasn't a traditional painter. I was a modern painter who happened to reject certain principles of modernism. This led me to find devices where I could do certain things that would subvert or in some instances clarify the picture plane without using these cubist devices. This is why, at this particular time, most of the paintings you see are of interiors because that allows you to use artificial means to project a natural situation. So even though they're strong in colour I don't think anyone could refer to them as formalist.

[MH] Often the colours are quite flat, which counteracts the spatial quality of the architecture.

[NS] Yes, that's true. I was very interested in the theoretical writings of Hans Hoffman, in particular the idea of push and pull, where colours have this property of moving backwards and forwards. That notion subverted the idea of the flat space that Clement Greenberg was always on about. I wanted, basically, to have my cake and eat it. I want the possibility of flat space but also the ability to disrupt it whilst retaining the integrity of a shallow space in some passages. Having said that, not all the paintings have the same problem. In some I try to do exactly the opposite. There is no formula to them. Each pictorial problem has its own solution.

[MH] Some of the paintings are very static but elsewhere the figures seem to be moving through the space, so that the

interior becomes a stage set within which the figures are animated, both physically and psychologically.

[NS] I think this is a definite element, and this is the embryo of my later fascination with movement. This develops into a very strong sense of the tragedy of life and how, as Heraclitus put it, "nobody steps in the same river twice", it always flows and always changes. I didn't want it to be a formal thing, but the kind of thing you can sense in your feeling or bones. Movement is a visual metaphor for the instability of situations. Yet, at the same time, retaining a level of linear perspective gives the instability a sense of stability. So, in fact, you have a contradictory set of circumstances that should not work, but hopefully does because of the psychological charge that is set up in the mind of the spectator.

There are some people who try to disavow linear perspective and I'm not one of them. There are certain things you can't do with it but you can, at the same time, build a sense of monumentality and psychic unease which is a paradoxical situation. When it works it adds a kind of tension which you can take away after you've left the painting. The images stay in your mind because you're making visual connections with mental states.

[MH] We always look back on this period as the swinging '60s but obviously it was much more complicated than that. You certainly seem to be disassociating your own work from a climate of superficial optimism.

[NS] The swinging '60s happened in the King's Road, Carnaby Street, and Kensington High Street, and that was it. I didn't experience the swinging '60s; I was in Clapham Junction.

The year of 1963 was poignant for me because there were many personal and international things happening. I had just

got married for the first time; because of the Cuban missile crisis we were on the verge of being nuked; and it was the worst winter since 1947.

[MH] What you have been saying about your work reminds me of the quality of certain films from the period, like *Last Year at Marienbad*, which came out in 1961. There too you have the dichotomy of structured space and perspective vistas, within which figures enact their unease and instability. Were you interested in film at this time?

[NS] Well having had an art education it was almost mandatory that one attended art films. I went to see *The Seventh Samurai*, and *Last Year at Marienbad* and *The World of Apu* in the context of art cinema. I can't remember those direct influences now but I have been influenced by so much that a lot of it just becomes background noise.

Having lived in painting anonymity until the year 2000, what one finds quite annoying is when someone sees my work and assumes that I am influenced by somebody's work that they know from the 1960's, when in fact those things weren't even painted before mine!

[MH] One can see points of affinity between your work and that of your student contemporaries, people like David Hockney, Patrick Caulfield, Frank Bowling. I'm sure there's always to and fro between students and artists, but presumably there's also an element of common inspiration.

[NS] Well yes, at that time Francis Bacon, for instance, had quite a direct influence on Bowling and on me.

[MH] Many of your contemporaries seem to have found Bacon a very stimulating presence. I know he was exhibiting at the Marlborough Gallery regularly and then there was the retrospective at the Tate. Did the inspiration come before that big exhibition or was that the catalyst?

[NS] It was actually in 1955/56 that I first came across Bacon. I was at Sunderland Art College and in my lunch break I would go through all the back issues of *Studio* and I scanned an image of the heavily encrusted head he did. There were two; it was the one without the structure behind it. From that alone I thought he was a great artist. You don't develop mentally with painting; you develop whilst you're doing it. So I had a hiatus for two years when I went into national service. Then

after going to the Royal College I had to go back to where I was when I finished at Sunderland, even though my interest in Bacon had been stimulated. I started working, and the Bacon influence established itself.

[MH] Bacon was presumably an antidote to abstraction? He was figurative without being illustrative in an old fashioned way.

[NS] In the Royal College at that time there were two major factors in how students approached things. People like Peter Phillips looked to America, I tended to look to Europe, and people like Patrick Caulfield tended to look both ways. I was aware of American painting but not to the extent that they were. They were more into the ethos of, and having a reaction to, abstract expressionism/ American flat colour painting.

[MH] One thing those Pop artists and Bacon had in common was fascination with the photograph, as a point of departure for picture-making.

[NS] I did use photographic imagery but I also did an awful lot of life painting and drawing. I remember being in a class with David [Hockney] at the Royal College and Ruskin Spear came round and said "That's a nice one, David". It was the kind of drawing you almost couldn't see. He had used thin sheets of paper and a hard pencil. The impression that Spear had picked out was the faintest mark.

To be honest it was the more traditionally minded who consistently used the life room. Bacon said to me he didn't believe in life drawing, you just learnt to draw like your tutor.

[MH] Looking at your work there is certainly a rigour of draftsmanship that reflects that extensive experience of life drawing. But were you also, for instance, using architectural magazines as springboards?

[NS] Yes, but sometimes I also went and took my own photographs, and at other times it's drawing or memory. In the same way that each picture is not necessarily following on from the last one, so each picture does not necessarily come from the same resources.

It comes down partly to what one likes and dislikes. One of my favorite architects is Richard Meier who was in the tradition of Le Corbusier. I admire his contrast between clean lines and pure sense of form. Grubby architecture does not

lend itself to tackling the formal problems of colour that I was interested in. Generally the photographs I was working from were black and white, so I didn't have the obstruction of colour generating an emotional situation. If the source imagery is neutral then I can tailor it to my advantage.

However, I then work on a pictorial idea until there's a point at which I don't use any references at all and, as the painting can take three months, the last month could be changing what I've used for references anyhow. Then the painting itself will be dictating the solution. It's as if the painting has a life of its own regardless of the sources it used to get there. It then becomes a formal situation where if you've made certain decisions, usually about composition, and you can pick a situation that you know can hold certain things in it, you then allow yourself the freedom to make an awful lot of changes without destroying that initial structure.

[MH] In relation to the figures, did they also originate sometimes from photographic sources?

[NS] Yes, if you take a typical painting there may be a mixture of drawing from life. In this particular period of paintings, if they are from photographic sources then they come from five or six different sources.

[MH] One looks like an image of Helen Lessore.

[NS] It is an image of Helen Lessore.

[MH] Are others identifiable individuals as well?

[NS] They are all identifiable images but not necessarily as famous as Helen Lessore.

[MH] Does it help the viewer to know who those people are, or would that just distract one into anecdotal readings?

[NS] No, because it is the general aura that is given off from the image that matters. The painting of Lessore was made up from six or seven sources. One of those sources was my memory of Lessore herself, as I knew her quite well. That particular painting was done in a rather Bacon-ish period and was an elaboration of the two figures idea. The painting was done in 1963 and then *The New Generation* exhibition at the Whitechapel was in 1964 and I saw Hockney's painting of *The Second Marriage*. Here I found someone, although he was

more famous, in the same situation. Shall I give it up, I thought? I decided to stick with it anyhow. I realised the subject matter was the same, but the way it was painted was completely different - Hockney didn't get into doing the illusionist double portrait until much later.

[MH] Both of you were doing something that Bacon was dead set against – the idea of having a multiplicity of figures in one composition.

[NS] That was the point. I also wanted to get out of the shadow of Bacon.

[MH] Did you know Bacon personally by that time?

[NS] Well, in 1963 I was cycling to the Royal College and Bacon was coming out of Reece Mews. So I, as a rather gauche 26 year old, cycled up to him, all confusion and embarrassment, and said, "Hello Mr. Bacon, I really admire your paintings". He said, "Well I'm just going around the corner to get some chops. Come, we'll get some chops and then we'll go back and have a meal". That's how it all started. He was enormously approachable.

[MH] Presumably you never saw him working.

[NS] No. He showed me his studio. There wasn't anything in progress. He just showed me this place that looked like a tip. We talked about all sorts of things. When we went out together we didn't go out with anybody else. We'd set off after lunch, have a drink at the French pub in Soho and then maybe head over to the Tate.

[MH] On a different note, I wanted to ask you about your work in the context of Pop Art. I don't think placing it in this context would be very helpful or interesting at all, but I think that's true for a lot of British artists of that period.

[NS] Kitaj objected to it strongly. He thought he was far too intellectual and intelligent. I don't think David thought of himself as much of a Pop artist really and neither did I. The two that came close were Peter Phillips and Derek Boshier. The picture by me that the Arts Council bought [in 1970] had been featured in *Apollo* and I remember reading the article in which they lumped me with Pop Art. I didn't really care though – I was just happy to be lumped with anything that was going. I didn't care because in the end the paintings are their own

thing, I don't need to justify anything. Most of us felt this way. If something was suggested about your work, chances are it would change later down the line. I do think that people like David, Ron and Peter felt like they were on the cutting edge of English work at that time. They had subverted American abstract expressionism, which was exemplified by people like Robyn Denny. Neither Frank nor I felt anything like that. We felt really rather English.

[MH] Maybe Kitaj was responsible for that general sense of confidence that you are describing, being older and American? Maybe other artists absorbed that sense of self-belief?

[NS] As far as influences go, Kitaj was the prime mover. Kitaj, Hockney, Boshier were always having coffee in the Victoria and Albert together. They felt very much different. They were sharing what they considered to be avant-garde ideas.

[MH] The information and ideas that students at the Royal College obtained in humanities/general studies, did that have an effect, or was it something that you just felt you had to endure?

[NS] It didn't bother me in the slightest. I was interested in philosophy. I was reading Pascal at fifteen. Coming from where I came, which was the North East of England, I was a culture vulture. I loved listening to popular music and popular cinema but one thing I couldn't stand was popular art.

[MH] Aside from visual stimuli, then, were there any particular works of theory or literature that were in the air?

[NS] I know what changed me, and that was Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Part I. That sowed the seeds. My interest was in philosophy and Russian, German and French authors.

[MH] Does your interest in psychology go back to that period of reading Dostoevsky?

[NS] Well, Dostoevsky is very philosophical and psychological. As a novelist he was the epitome of that strand of novel writing. I've read everything he's ever written. I find English philosophy rather dull compared to French. I seem to look at English abstract painting much in the same way as I do English philosophy. You're involved with the means and language of philosophy, which seem to be about the language of art but are never written in the book. This is my impatience with a certain kind of abstraction, which is similar to my impatience with a certain kind of philosophy. It's about the means and the method rather than getting on with it.

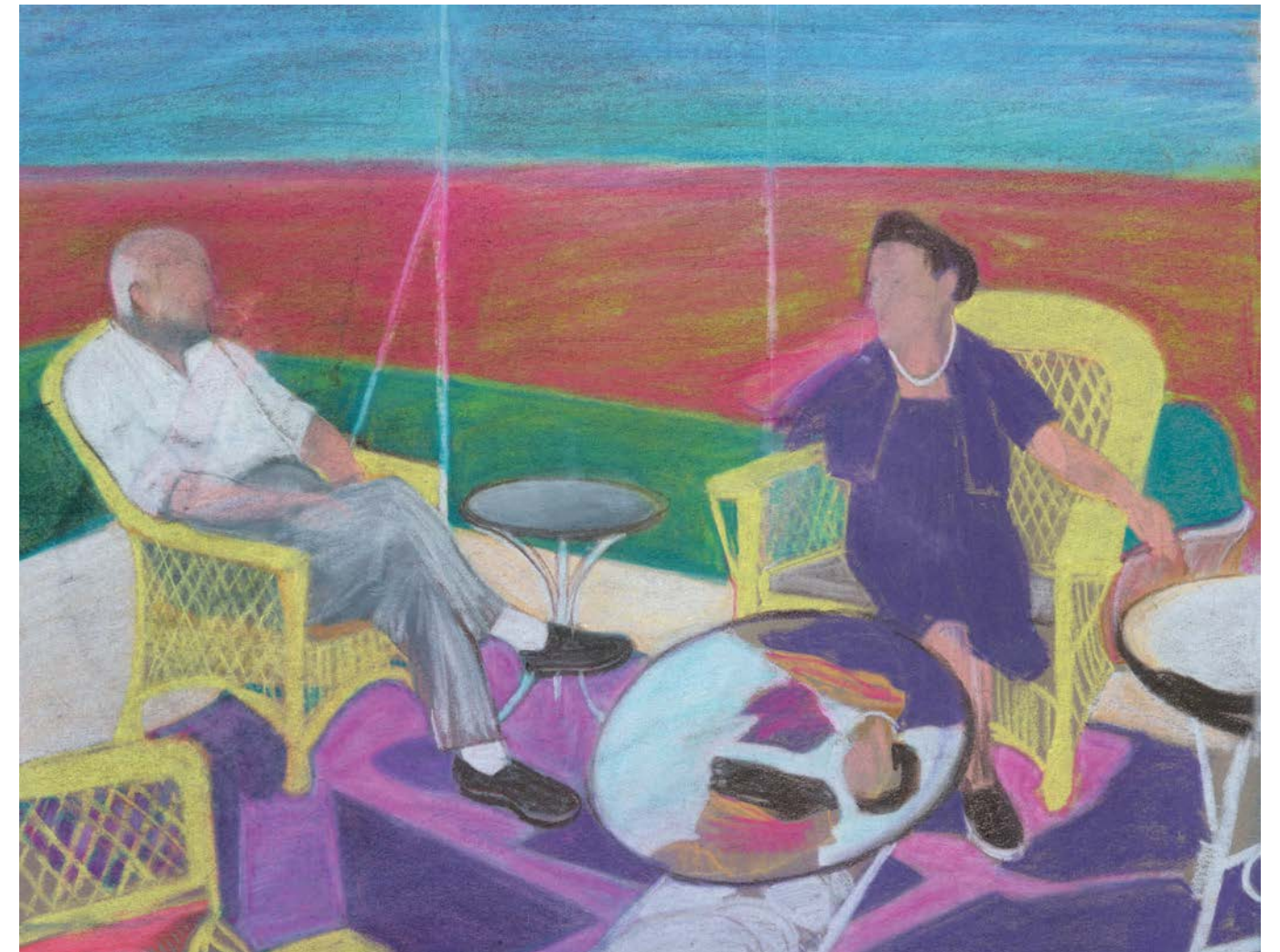
[MH] How does all this feed into the paintings? One might argue that there is a strongly existentialist dimension to the early figure paintings.

[NS] I'm never sure whether each and every one of us reads existential in the same way. I just read it in a very simple way, which is the involvement with existence.

[MH] I was wondering, I suppose, if the paintings were consciously about existentialist notions of people struggling to create meaning in their particular lives and in their personal relationships.

[NS] Yes, but then again people read all sorts of things into them that I never intended. I see the paintings as onions – you are able to take off layer after layer. If someone finds something in it, I'm not against it. I didn't have some clear intellectual program.

Martin Hammer is Professor of History of Art at the University of Kent. Books he has written include *Bacon and Sutherland* and *Francis Bacon and Nazi Propaganda*. He is currently writing a book on the early paintings of David Hockney.



TWO FIGURES IN GARDEN 1962

pastel on paper, 19 × 25 cm

SEATED MAN AND WOMAN I 1963-66

oil on canvas, 213 × 213 cm



BACK VIEW WALKING FIGURE 1968

oil on canvas, 213 × 213 cm



FIGURE WITH BLACK COUCH 1968

oil on canvas, 251.5 × 183 cm



MAN AND WOMAN II 1968-69

oil on canvas, 213 × 213 cm



FLOATING FIGURE II 1970

oil on canvas, 182.8 × 182.8 cm



**MAN AND WOMAN IN ROOM WITH
SPIRAL STAIRCASE 1970**
oil on canvas, 244 × 244 cm



TWO FIGURES IN ROOM IV 1971

oil on canvas, 243.8 × 281 cm



MAN AND WOMAN WITH GREEN COUCH V 1972

oil on canvas, 243.8 × 255.7 cm



MAN AND WOMAN IN RED ROOM 1973

oil on canvas, 210.8 × 280 cm



FRACTURED 1973

oil on canvas, 187.9 × 133.9 cm



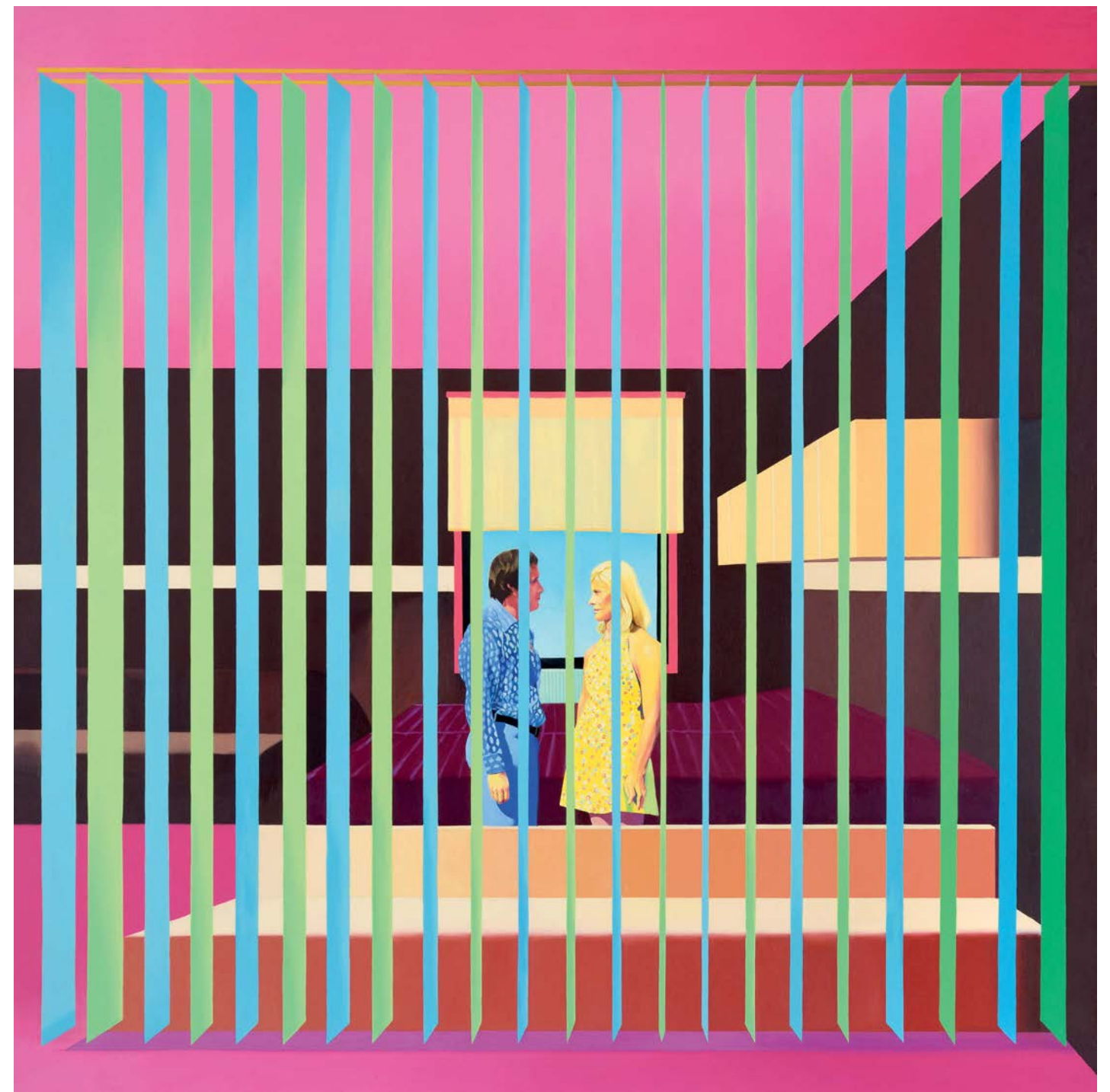
MAN AND WOMEN IN RED ROOM 1975-76

oil on canvas, 236.2 × 297.1 cm



MAN AND WOMAN BEHIND BLIND 1976 -77

oil on canvas, 213 × 213 cm



SAND DUNES WITH TWO FIGURES 1978

oil on canvas, 243.8 × 175.2 cm



WINDOWSCAPE WITH BLOSSOM TREE 1979

oil on canvas, 208.2 × 228.6 cm



AERIAL VIEW SPIRAL STAIRCASE 1980

oil on canvas, 177.5 × 177.5 cm



TWO FIGURES IN BLACK AND WHITE ROOM 1980-81

oil on canvas, 213 × 213 cm



MAN AND WOMAN IN CONSERVATORY 1981

oil on canvas, 243.8 × 180.3 cm



WALKING FIGURE 1981-82

oil on canvas, 264.1 × 203.2 cm



TWO FIGURES IN A NIGHTSCAPE 1982

oil on canvas, 187.4 × 289.5 cm

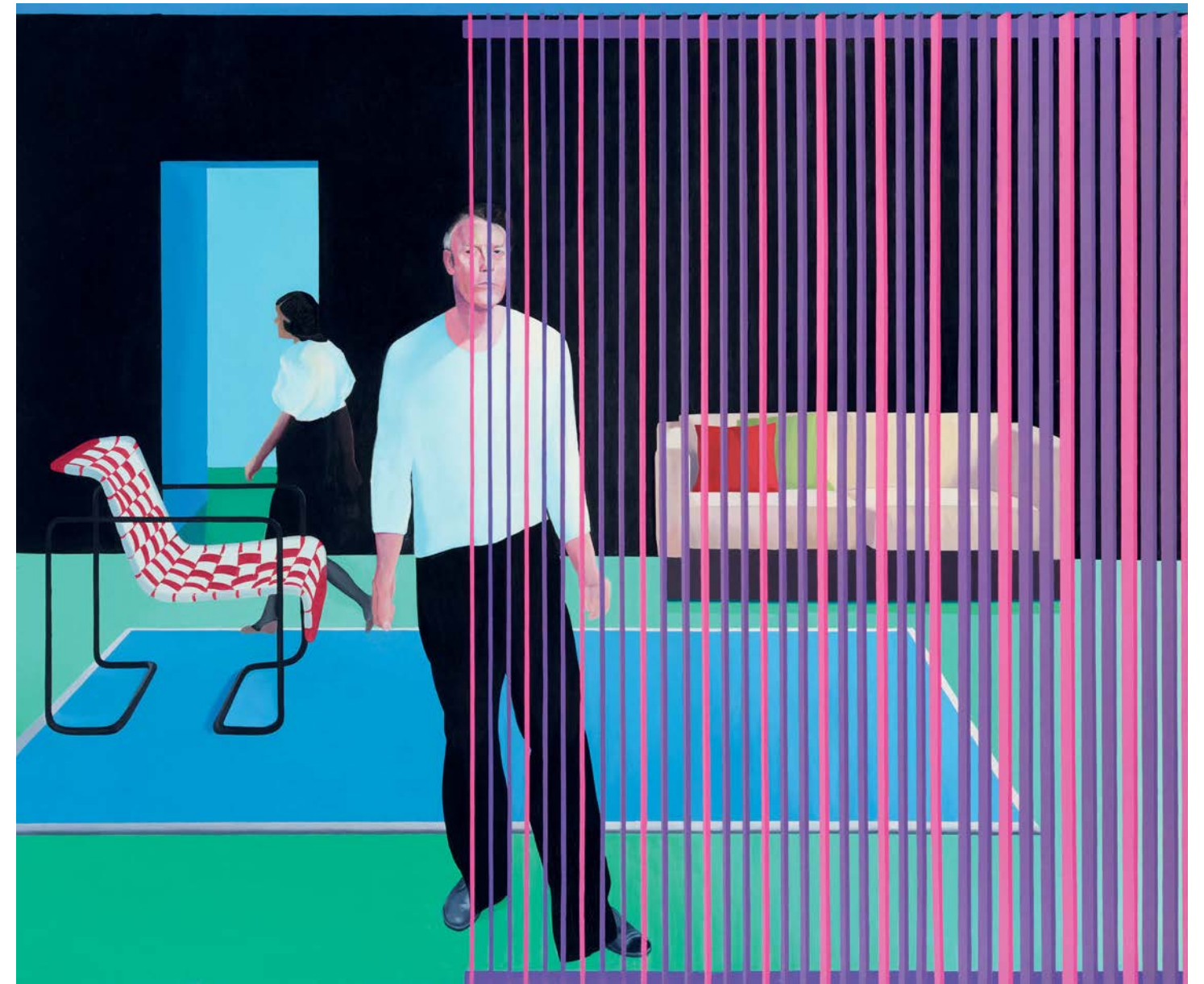


SPIRAL STAIRCASE WITH TWO FIGURES 1983

oil on canvas, 222.85 × 189.2 cm

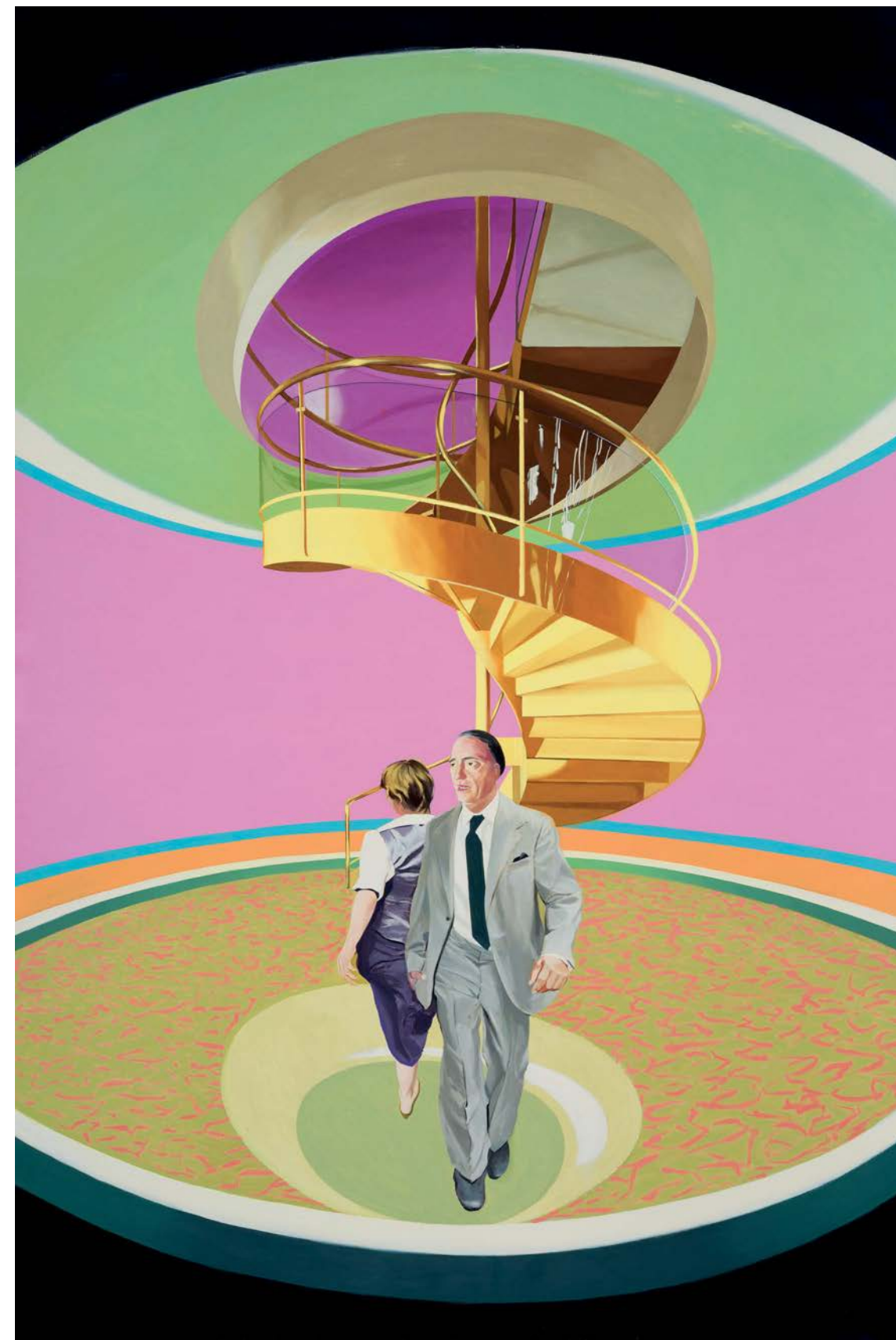


**TWO FIGURES VERTICAL BLIND RED CHAIRS
AND GREEN FLOOR 1983**
oil on canvas, 203.3 × 241 cm

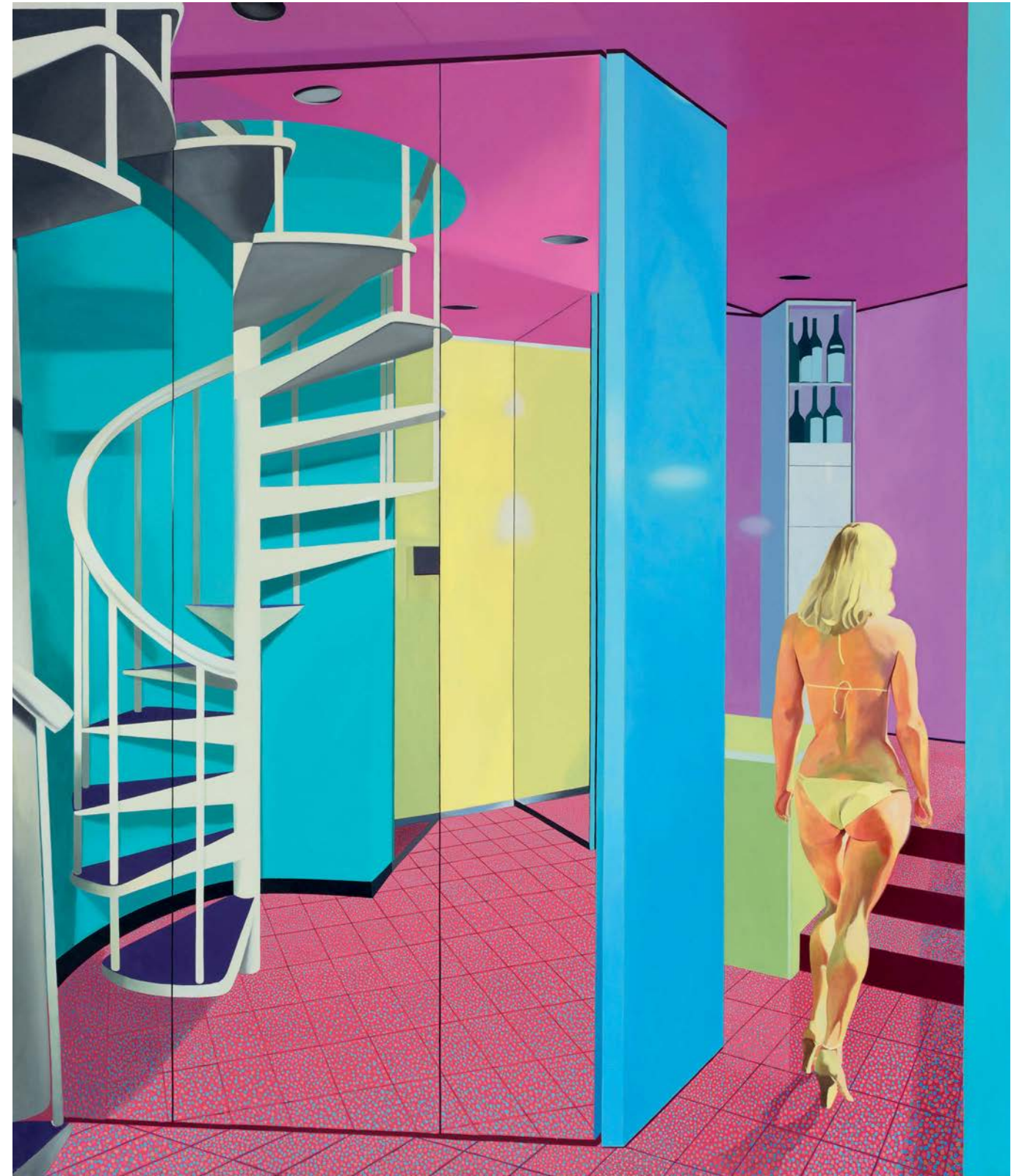


MAN AND WOMAN SPIRAL STAIRCASE 1983

oil on canvas, 266.7 × 180.3 cm



**MIRRORED OPTICAL STAIRCASE
AND WOMAN 1983**
oil on canvas, 247 × 213.3 cm



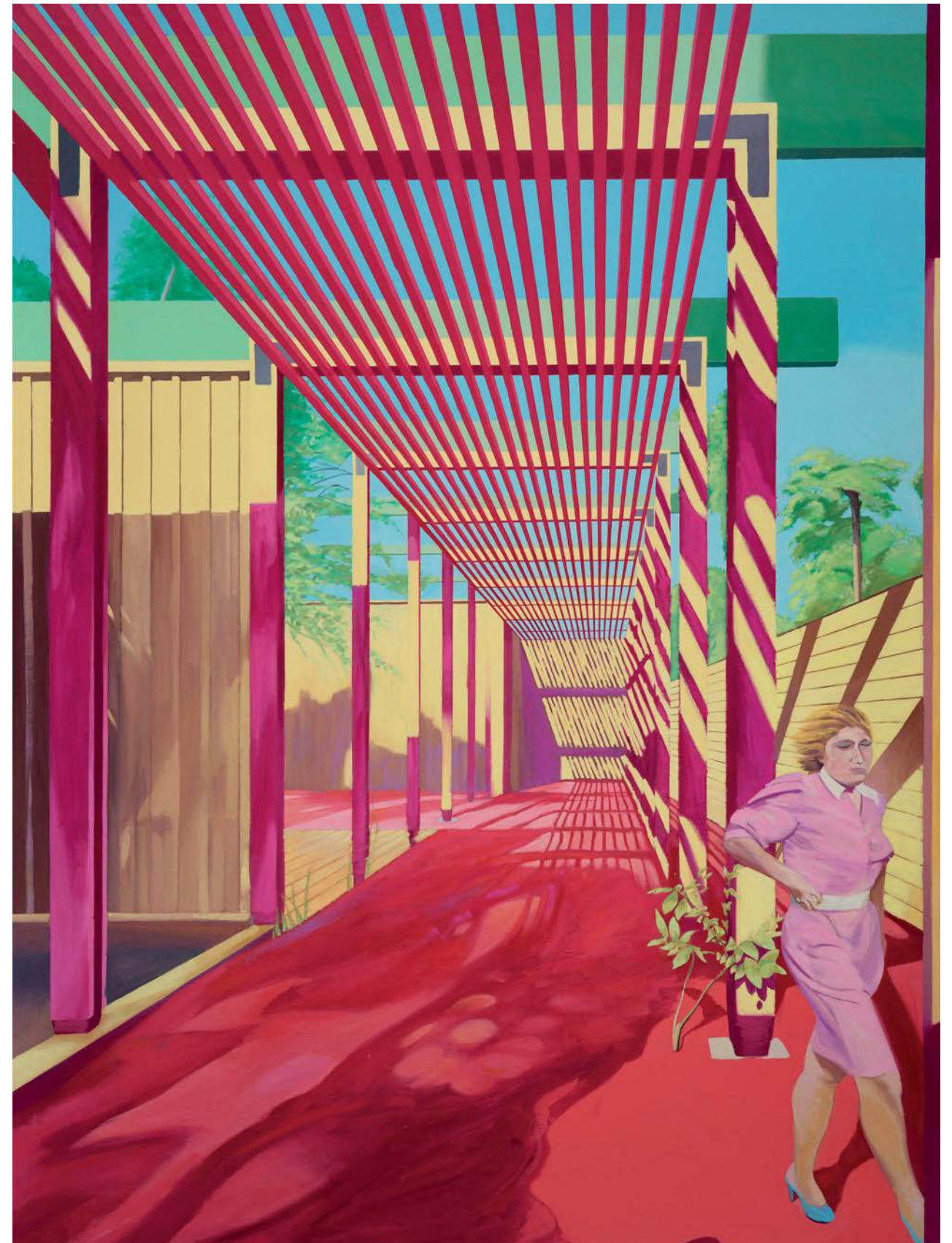
DIAGONAL STAIRCASE 1983-1985

oil on canvas, 175.5 × 205.7 cm



RED PERGOLA WITH WOMAN 1985

oil on canvas, 260.3 × 210.8 cm



NEIL STOKOE

Born 10th December 1935 in Bowburn, Co Durham. It was whilst at Durham School that Stokoe developed an early interest in art, in 1953 gaining a place at Sunderland College of Art. Upon graduating in 1957 he received a deferred place at the Royal College of Art on completion of mandatory National Service.

Having completed his National Service with the RAF he enrolled at the RCA in September 1959. That year would herald a golden age for the College and cause a sea change in British art and its international reputation. Amongst the students enrolling in 1959 were R.B Kitaj, David Hockney, Derek Boshier, Frank Bowling, Peter Philips and Allen Jones (although Jones famously only stayed for one year). In addition Pauline Boty was already a student and Patrick Caulfield would also enrol the following year. These now famous names were received by a formidable teaching staff including Prof. Carel Weight, Ruskin Spear, Ceri Richards, Mary Fedden, Robert Buhler and Donald Hamilton Fraser. However Stokoe describes his experience of those years as 'very much left to one's own devices', adding that 'very, very rarely was there direct teaching by the painting staff.' This was in direct contrast to the General Studies Department of lectures, tutorials and seminars.

The second wave of English Pop Art had yet to surface and the famous names yet to be made. During those RCA years although they were close to Hockney, Stokoe and Bowling were not part of 'the clique', or as Stokoe describes it, "the satellites around Kitaj". Impressively, Kitaj had arrived with a developed style, while everyone else as Stokoe remembers "thrashed about painting" finding their way initially within the popular European and American fashions of the time. Stokoe was not looking to America, or Modernism particularly. His own work developed later looking towards the masters, Grünewald, Rembrandt, Velázquez, Stubbs, Courbet and Titian. These masters and what he describes as the "profound experience" of first seeing images of the Egyptian statue of Prince Rahotep and his Wife Nofret would become his dominant influences. However, the contemporaneous developments within the post war art scene such as Hans Hoffman's colour theory of

'push and pull' and the Op Art of Vasarely, would synchronously inform his own development as a Modern Painter, whilst not particularly espousing Modernism. As for modern painters only his friend Francis Bacon remained a constant and enduring influence.

Stokoe first met Bacon when cycling through South Kensington in 1963. He introduced himself and Bacon invited him back to Reece Mews for lamb chops and cabbage, spending the day talking and drinking, later going on to a party at the painter Sidney Nolan's house. Their friendship progressed, in the early days often meeting weekly, mainly just the two of them, visiting museum exhibitions and commercial galleries, ranging over subjects animatedly and extensively at Reece Mews. Regular lunches and dinners, sessions at the French Pub, later sometimes with George Dyer or on occasion with other artists were an important experience in the young artist's life.

Although Stokoe would reject that he was apprehensive about exhibiting with the other RCA students, he would agree that at that time his diffident character was in dissension to the artistic (and suspected self) interests of "the clique". His own concerns at the time in painting were initially towards Matisse or Matthew Smith, later more markedly Bacon. Exhibiting never occurred to him, despite encouragement and introductions by Bacon to The Hanover and Redfern galleries. Stokoe's own view is that he "lacked that sort of ambition then" adding that he "frankly didn't see things in a career fashion". Even through the 60s and 70s while being encouraged and promoted by Ronald Alley, Keeper of The Modern Collection at The Tate Gallery, and later Nicolas Treadwell, he neglected to leverage his position.

In 1962 Stokoe had been awarded the RCA Medal for General Studies, a Continuation Scholarship followed allowing him a studio there until 1963. That year he began teaching part time at Wimbledon College of Art, later moving to their newly formed Foundation department, a position he held until retiring in 2000. At Wimbledon (and also later as visiting lecturer at Portsmouth Polytechnic) one might surmise that Stokoe's encountering of



fellow teaching staff on the brink of success such as Paula Rego, Maurice Cockrill and Jock McFadyen, likewise adept students such as Peter Doig might have encouraged an anomalous enthusiasm to exhibit, but he remained consistent in abstaining from promoting his work.

His first marriage in 1963 to Margaret Atkinson, whom he had met at the RCA ended in divorce. But his marriage in 1977 to his second wife Laura Barber, along with the birth of his sons Jack and then Kit brought a great stability and happiness to his life. In parallel to his family life these years commenced an abstruse and almost complete abeyance in exhibiting for another 25 years.

In 2002, now retired, Stokoe felt it was time to exhibit his new work, and this marked a fresh approach to painting. His new acceptance to exhibit paradoxically drew him towards a darker palette and

harder subject matter. These later paintings, often concerning mortality and the fragility of life, although very different, still compositionally chime with the earlier paintings. However, the mood has changed, the cool voyeuristic ambiguity of the early paintings now replaced by a more personal, intensified corporeality.

Stokoe's neglect in exhibiting his work over the years allows us a unique opportunity to reassess an artist's early development. 80 this year, he is still painting, still developing, but his position has never changed. The mechanics of the art world are as much a mystery to him now as they were when he left the Royal College of Art. Frustrating as this can be to those around him, it is also one of the essential traits of Neil's character; he likes to do the looking, he feels less comfortable being looked at.

NEIL STOKOE

Born in 1935 in Bowburn, County Durham. Lives and works in London.

EDUCATION

- 1963-64 Continuation Scholarship at the Royal College of Art, London
- 1959-62 Royal College of Art, London
- 1953-57 Sunderland College of Art, Tyne and Wear

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2015 The Redfern Gallery, London
- 2013 The Piper Gallery, London
- 2012 Langham Gallery, London *
- 2011 In this Vale of Tears, Langham Gallery, London
- 2004 Pilgrim Gallery, London *
- 2003 Death, Sex and Ageing, Pilgrim Gallery, London
- 2002 Out of a Clear Blue Sky, Pilgrim Gallery, London
- 1994 Summer Exhibition (invited artist), Royal Academy of Art, London *
- 1988 London Group Exhibition (invited artist), Royal College of Art, London *
- 1976-77 Art Basel with Nicholas Treadwell Gallery
- 1976 Apex Gallery, Portsmouth *
- 1970 Solo Exhibition, Clytie Jessop Gallery, London
- 1967 John Moores, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool *
- 1963 John Moores, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool *

*Denotes a group exhibition

COLLECTIONS

- Arts Council Collection, London
- The Reynolds Foundation, Menorca

This catalogue is dedicated to Laura, Jack and Kit.

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Martin Hammer
Doug Atfield
Ben Thomas
Jack Stokoe
Patrick Warner
Errol Nelson
Emily FitzRoy

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