

A London painter we don't see enough of

Howard Rogers is one of those artists you have probably never heard of unless you happen to be one of the many students he has taught over the years at art schools around the country, or you own one of the paintings or drawings that he has shown all too rarely during his professional career. He has lived in Camberwell for 30 years and drives every day to his studio in Deptford, a long, high space with skylights and no heating or running water – so not a space for the faint-hearted. (The Turkish café across the road allows him the use of their facilities for the price of a cup of coffee.)

Although there is no biography or CV on Rogers' website – remarkable in itself – under "Exhibitions" there is a list of places (but without exhibition titles or dates) from which one can deduce a few details, such as that, aged 27, he had his first show at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford just after a young Nicholas Serota had taken over as director, and that he studied at the British School in Rome on a four-month Abbey Scholarship. In conversation however, he talks fluently and openly about his background.

Rogers was born in Stepney to Russian and Polish Jewish parents who emigrated to England in 1917. "I got the culture but not the religion," he says of his upbringing. His parents were not artistic but they were supportive of their son's artistic ambitions. He attended Walthamstow Art School for his foundation year and then went to Manchester School of Art to do a DipAD (Diploma in Art & Design). A Londoner to his core, he was unhappy in the northern city and returned to London to do a Higher DipAD at Chelsea School of Art in 1969, where the late John Hoyland was in his last year as Head of Painting.

In the 1980s Rogers had a studio in Wapping, a huge 3,000 square foot space where he began to make very large drawings. His method has almost always been to work from memory, drawing on visual experiences and sometimes



White Nights: a 100 x 75 cm, oil on canvas



Missing your kissing: a 100 x 75 cm, oil on canvas

photographs, which he would use as a reference and then discard before making a painting. At one point he made sculpture and installations, and even watercolours "on the quiet", but he returned to oil painting at the end of the 1980s. He says that he does not deny the value of consistency, it's merely that he doesn't aim for it. "As you get older," he says, "it is 'bred in the bone' and has many ways of showing itself", not least, I would suggest, in the expressionism that runs through all his work, with its themes of sexuality and morbidity.

An Abbey Scholarship at the British School at Rome in 1998 gave him the opportunity to rethink his practice. He had a live/work space at

the school and while he did not do much work there, he absorbed the art and culture of the city and rediscovered the baroque, particularly the sculpture of Bernini, on whom he had written his undergraduate thesis. Afterwards his painting became figurative and deeply personal, and for years he did not exhibit his work. After what he describes as a "disastrous" show in Dordrecht, Holland, he realised that his work had become inaccessible to others; as a result he began to paint "straight" again – meaning perhaps that he recovered his equilibrium and found a more objective means of expressing himself. Currently his studio is full of paintings of flowers – dead or dying against vividly coloured backgrounds – and still lives of piles of books – "objects with memory" – and floppy beanie babies – "little human substitutes."

Later we meet up with two of Rogers' friends, both former colleagues of his who now occupy senior positions in London art schools. We go to White Cube Bermondsey to see "Tightrope Walk: Painted Images after Abstraction", curated by the American critic Barry Schwabsky. The three men wander around together, and I overhear them intently discussing each work. I recalled what Rogers had said earlier in his studio: "I like paintings that make me feel something." And we all agreed that this show did just that.

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