



HOWARD ROGERS

Witness: New Paintings

19 September – 14 October 1988

Monday – Friday 9.30 am – 6 pm Saturday 9.30 am – 12.30 pm

Lanchester Gallery
Faculty of Art and Design
Coventry Polytechnic
Gosford Street Coventry



Witness

In his famous and still astonishingly relevant essay on 'The Dehumanisation of Art' written in 1925, Ortega y Gasset expressed anxiety as to how much the art of the century, a purely aesthetic art created bravely 'out of nothing', would produce that was of lasting value. He recognised, of course, that there was no going back to the old nineteenth century values with their often obsessive concern with the human condition and human emotion, but he felt that ultimately a compromise would have to be achieved that was 'content with less and achieved more', an art which, as he put it, 'would neither dehumanise nor re-travel the roads already used and abused'. Yet, 60 years on, there is not much sign of this other direction emerging. Looking at the New Art, for example, with its apparent concern for figuration, whether of horses, riders, or the human figure itself, it is hard to get beyond the feeling that these elements are anything other than pictorial devices, their purpose essentially aesthetic. And where artists are attempting to suggest a human concern, enormous problems start to set in, for very few of them have been equipped either by their training or the prevailing aesthetic atmosphere of the time to make that rapprochement between aesthetics and humanity which Ortega saw as the way to make contemporary art meet with its public again.

All of which is a very round-about way of saying that in these new paintings by Howard Rogers there is the distinct sensation of witnessing an artist who is well equipped mentally and technically to make just this kind of reconciliation. For these are paintings which, while recognisably late twentieth century in terms of their large scale, freedom of handling and understanding of form and colour, are at the same time tackling themes of a universal character – love, loss, alienation, exile – in recognisably human terms. The outcome is a body of work which possesses a mythical quality and emotional range which makes Rogers' art stand out sharply among his contemporaries.

He has, it should be said, always been interested in this mythical world, in conveying as well as the simple constitution of things, the aura of idealised spiritual significance with which the human imagination invests them. Up until now, this has been achieved in terms of the landscape, a landscape which contains clear evidence of man's imprint. Abandoned cars, aircraft, as well as human figures, inhabit a richly evoked and profoundly haunted physical world, the real and ethereal becoming indistinguishable, sharing, as they do, in man's mind, one single identity. They are qualities still apparent in these new paintings, but now the artist has managed to find a means of transferring them to a much more specific physical setting, the city (London) he was brought up and moves about in, the tower blocks and railway arches of Camberwell where he lives, and Bow where he paints. The result is a tremendous increase in power and intensity, the unexpectedness of finding that same mythical world existing in a harshly urban setting (somehow you expect it of the landscape) seeming at first almost shocking and then, after that feeling has passed, very touching and human indeed.

In some paintings this mythic feeling is overtly portrayed, as in the dancing, cavorting figures underneath the arches in *Witness I* and *Witness II*, while in others, such as *The Lovers*, *Witness III* and *Dreaming of Plenty*, the references to archetypal visual images like the Deposition from the Cross lend a feeling of profound familiarity. In yet others like *Dance Music*, *Across the Bridge* and *Towers of Silence*, those mythic eternal qualities are more intuitively conveyed. In *Across the Bridge*, for example, a wave of human figures advancing across a bridge (commuters walking across London Bridge in reality) from a chasm of skyscrapers at once suggests, but without any obvious pictorial precedent, something from the Exodus, such as the Parting of the Red Sea. And in *Dance Music* a couple dancing intimately in the shadow of a looming tower block carries distinct but inexplicable overtones of the story of Lot's Wife. The conveyor of this mood, like landscape used to be in his work, is the architecture of the city. This becomes particularly apparent in one image, *Paradise Lost*, where the only implication of human life are the lights in the tower block that looms up above the brilliantly illuminated but completely deserted railway arch. It is a simple, dramatic image, abstract and yet humming with human life.

This is not the painting of architecture as glossy high-tech material fact, an abstract art for all its appearance of realism, but rather an architecture which is lived and worked in by human beings and, by implication, imbued with all their humanity. For this reason the tower block is not seen as either beautiful or ugly, good or bad. Thus the glistening towers in *Dreams of Plenty*, viewed as they are from a grimy archway by a down-and-out in the pose of a Roman river god accompanied by his mythical dog/beast and surrounded by dustbins piled up like broken classical columns, take on an ironic quality. Dazzlingly beautiful in the morning light, the towers are also hostile symbols of the way in which modern technology has disinherited man from nature. In others, like *The Lovers*, the twin skyscrapers, brilliantly illuminated in the early-morning sun, take on the appearance of ancient Babylonian ziggurats, their soaring beauty reflecting the ecstatic figures of the nude woman and her lover at their base.

In focusing so strongly on the content and meaning of these paintings, their

extraordinary technical command should not be overlooked. Rogers is a superb draughtsman, using colour in strikingly rich and experimental ways, and handling paint with such sympathy and simplicity. These qualities provide him with an ability to simplify and abstract pictorially to huge emotional effect. *Towers of Silence* is a good example. The odd geometric shapes of the open umbrellas create a rich abstract pattern, while at the same time suggesting a great mass of humanity. They provide, too, in their light and dark facets, a superb foil for the dark central skyscraper and the two outer, illuminated ones. Humanity is not just suggested simply by those umbrellas either. Suddenly our eye is lifted up to the dark central tower which might simply have become an amorphous dark shape, but for the single illuminated window shining out right at the top. A marvellous pictorial touch, but one which at the same time raises all sorts of suggestions about the human life that that room contains.

For all their humanity, however, these are not easy pictures. They need longer to look at than most contemporary work. This is not because they are difficult or obscure, but rather because we have become unused to dealing with work that is so powerfully conceived and passionate that at first sight they may appear overwhelming. Stay for a while, however, let that reaction pass, and you will begin to see paintings which make connections and give meaning to our twentieth century urban existence.

Nicholas Usherwood June 1988



Towers of Silence 1988 8' x 4'