

Writing about Howard Rogers' paintings in *Modern Painters* some 15 years or so ago, I made the observation, using Sidney Nolan and Philip Guston as examples, "of two largely ignored facts: that good, even great art rarely comes from the direction you are looking in, and that you can, as a painter, very rarely go far wrong if you stick with what you know and try to explore that experience to the depth of your being, both intellectually and spiritually, and to the outer limit of your technical resources." I still stick with the essential truth of that thought, though looking at this astonishing new group of paintings by Howard, all completed over the last five months or so, you cannot escape the conclusion that his work had, even then, in mid-career, a great deal further to go in the ongoing process of critical self-examination that he sees as one of the chief goals of his art.

The Philip Guston reference is perhaps particularly pertinent in this particular context because these new paintings will almost certainly provide something of a distinct jolt – and here I include myself – to those of us who thought they had the general direction of his work reasonably figured out. And while he had, over the last five years or more, clearly been moving away from urban and landscape settings for his explorations of the modern life of man, and towards a generally much more figure based subject matter, nothing there really prepares you for the raw, stripped down (literally so in *Marsyas*) quality of these new paintings. Using himself as the model in all but one of them (*The First Eve*), these tough, uncompromising and, on occasion, also self-mockingly humorous paintings, would seem to come at a point in his painting career – he is c 60 now where he has made the decision really not to hold back any more (not that he ever did in truth!) and start making those explorations of his self-hood that every good painter in his later career should aim to engage in. It's a tricky area – they could so easily end up being embarrassing examples of an older painter baring all to gain our attention – but Howard has always been a painter of the most commanding technical gifts, a superb draughtsman who uses colour with rich and experimental vigour and able to handle paint with extraordinary strength and subtlety – and here these skills are used to the absolute to achieve a remarkable youthfulness of feeling in them. In the freedom and fluidity of the handling these feel like the paintings of a painter at the very start of his career.

What are they about? I am not going to embark on a round of cod-psychology about his reaction to the death of his father some five years ago and the substantial psychotherapy he undertook as a consequence or start to deliberate on the spiritual implications of a non-believing Jewish-born artist choosing such resolutely Christian/Greek mythological subject matter as *Adam and Eve* and *Lazarus* or *The Three Graces* but rather focus on the sense I have of these paintings as marking a very distinct turning-point in his art. Whether, as with other artists' engagement in the reflexive art of self-portraiture – for this is what, in effect, it is – it marks the end of one phase in his work or presages the beginning of another we are still much too close up to say. My instinct tells me though that these paintings, with their entirely idiosyncratic mix of humour, self-knowledge and, finally, quiet tenderness towards the self that is revealed, may mark the opening out of a mature phase of his work that could finally confirm him as one of the more consistently honest and emotionally relevant painters of his generation.

Nicholas J Usherwood