

John Cranswick

A Quiet Nature



John Cranswick *Last Stop / Fraser River* (2010) acrylic on canvas 30.5 x 40.6 cm

June 25 – August 21, 2011

surrey
art gallery 
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John Cranswick: *A Quiet Nature*

John Cranswick creates images of a world of contrasts, between the enduring natural realm and the transitory reality of human-built environments. Highly regarded for his close observations of birds and animals, his work evokes quiet and contemplative moods while speaking volumes about current issues of our global environment.

The exhibition focuses on three Cranswick's central interests: the study of birds, local scenes, and world travel. Spanning from 1996 to the present, the works in graphite, acrylic, and watercolour showcase his exploration of these worlds. Through his eyes we see a world of quiet beauty; and an ability to appreciate a wondrous nature. Cranswick's works invite each viewer into moments of contemplation, enjoying the richness of the images and the quiet moods which inhabit them.

The earliest work in the exhibition is *Clover* (1996), a graphite drawing of a rabbit¹. As an investigation into light effects, the drawing shifts from being quite detailed on the right-hand side of the image to very pale and almost abstract on the left. This study drawing is an example of the care the artists takes in developing his imagery, and this careful approach is a key to understanding how he researches and works out his visual elements.



John Cranswick *Clover*, 1996
graphite on paper 21.5 x 31.5 cm

¹ The animal would subsequently appear in the painting *Rabbit Behind Wagon Wheel*.

John Cranswick's process is very methodical. For each image, such as *Bamboo Perch / Chestnut-backed Chickadee* (2010), there is a process of learning and problem solving. To develop his images of birds, Cranswick employs close first hand observation. He creates many study drawings, palette swatches, and maquette sculptures, and then makes use of his photographic reference images to create a composition. He pays particular attention to the lighting of the scene, with special care for the effect of light on colour.



John Cranswick *Bamboo Perch / Chestnut backed Chickadee*, 2010 acrylic on canvas 28 x 35.6 cm

When discussing his travel paintings during a studio visit, Cranswick stated that he doesn't change the images in his reference photographs. However, he then discussed how he rethinks the colours and changes the arrangements of objects. In *Thira Market / Santorini* (2011), women shop in the shadows of a Thira street market. In configuring the painting, Cranswick altered the women's position further back into the street and into a darker area. In *Seaside Adventurers / Dungeness Spit* (1998), children play at the beach, viewed from afar, silhouetted against the clouds. The viewer's relationship to the figures in both paintings is remote. In some paintings we experience human activity through objects rather than through actual people, inferred through items such



John Cranswick *Front Row Seats / South Beach*, 2004

as a bicycle or a chair. Using objects, Cranswick is able to evoke a quiet mood, a “story” that is open-ended, that stirs curiosity. In the enigmatic painting *Front Row Seats / South Beach* (2004), two unoccupied beach chairs sit on a desolate shoreline, inanimate spectators to an expanse of nature.



John Cranswick, *Peter's Travels #1 / Venice*, 2011 acrylic on canvas 50.8x 40.6 cm

In his compositions, he frequently makes a contrast of the natural world with the human-built environment. While nature is vital, the human-made objects and buildings are usually in a state of decline: a seagull rests on a rusting boat (*Tired and Resting / Gull at Steveston* (1997)); building bricks show the wear of weather while a plant takes hold on a ledge (*Peter's Travels #1 / Venice* (2011)). In *American Gold Finch / Blackberries* (1997), the invincible plant has invasively grown into the decaying building. Cranswick observes, “Man-

made things don't last.” Nature is eternal, the manufactured transitory. This sentiment is echoed in *Last Stop / Fraser River* (2010) where an abandoned work boat has been left to the will and power of the river.

Cranswick's work is often viewed within the realist tradition and many artists who work in this genre are sources of inspiration. His interest in artists stretches from Albrecht Durer to John James Audubon and to contemporaries such as Robert Bateman. Cranswick, though, is equally interested in modern and abstract art. It is this interest in the abstract qualities of light and composition, as seen in *Bamboo Perch / Chestnut-backed Chickadee* (2010), together with the juxtaposition of the natural and manufactured in his paintings that distinguishes his work.

Symbolism is particularly important in the watercolour *Apple Box Perch* (2001). Cranswick was moved by the way Canadians provided support to Americans when the World Trade Towers were destroyed in 2001. He had begun preliminary research for the image when the Al-Qaida attacks began. Airports, like Gander International, became temporary resting spots when the no-fly

order was enacted, and local residents provided food and accommodation to these temporarily stranded visitors. He continued to develop the image in light of these events. In the final composition, the box of Canadian Apples provides a perch for a bird – a female American Redstart. With the elements carefully arranged in the manner of a still life painting, and lit by dappled sunlight, *Apple Box Perch* brings together associations of “red, white, and blue,” American Apple Pie, and the close relationship of the two countries. Cranswick also wryly observes that “the Redstart lives in both the US and Canada, and they are much like us Canadians, they migrate south to the US to avoid our winters.”



John Cranswick *Apple Box Perch*, 2001 watercolour 24.8 x 31.8 cm

In contrast to the above work, John Cranswick typically prefers to resist explaining his images; he wants the viewer to spend time, carefully reading what each work has visually to offer. These images affect our state of mind in subtle ways. They are arrested moments, crafted carefully by the artist to lead us into an appreciation of the world of a quiet nature.

Brian Foreman
Assistant Curator

About the Artist

John Cranswick is a self taught painter who now works mainly in acrylics, after many years working in watercolour and graphite.

Despite a lifelong interest in the visual arts and a career in the graphic arts industry, he did not start painting until 1986. This desire came when the graphics industry started the evolution from hand crafted and screen printed images to computer generated and digitally printed images. At that time Cranswick chose to continue with his personal development of the hands-on techniques of drawing and painting.

Cranswick has been employed in the graphics industry since 1969, handling many of Vancouver's larger corporate accounts; designing and / or managing production of promotions and trade show exhibits. Currently he is a Senior Account Executive for one of the largest graphics providers in North America.

Cranswick was born in Vancouver in , raised in Burnaby and has resided in Surrey for the past 36 years. He is an active member of the Canadian Federation of Artists, Surrey Artswest Society and the Arts Council of Surrey. He has been called upon to adjudicate many community art shows. He has participated in many group shows and has been the recipient of numerous awards over the years. This survey exhibition is his first solo exhibition in public gallery.

Artist's Statement

With my wife Carol, I have travelled extensively since we were married 40 years ago, collecting reference photos along the way. The subjects I paint, either from my own reference photos or from a fellow traveler, will reflect an earth-tone pallet with a few select accent colors: one blue chair, one blue boat, or one red piece of laundry. Many of my ocean-side paintings are a result of walking the beaches of Point Roberts, where the family enjoys a summer cabin.

Although my paintings remain realistic, I take an artist's liberty of exaggerating the light, often painting my small birds to a larger-than-normal scale, over emphasizing current accent colors, creating abstract backgrounds and even hiding names and numbers in some of my pieces.

I do not consider myself a wildlife artist but many of my works contain a "living, breathing and seeing" subject often placed in their natural environments or in a rustic man-made environment. Lately, I have been dropping the "living" subject but have kept rustic man-made elements and placing the emphasis on color or mood.

June, 2011

List of Works

all works courtesy of the artist except where noted

Clover, 1996

graphite on paper

Courtesy of the Artist

American Gold Finch / Blackberries, 1997

acrylic on hardboard

Low Tide / Great Blue Heron, 1997

acrylic on board

Collection of Steve and Joan Gustard

Tired and Resting / Gull at Steveston, 1997

watercolour

Seaside Adventurers / Dungeness Spit, 1998

acrylic on board

Blackberries / House Finch, 1999

acrylic on panel

Collection of Sandy McKenna and Dave Saunders

Apple Box Perch, 2001

watercolour

Collection of Sandy McKenna and Dave Saunders

Lakeside Solitude / Green Timbers Lake, 2003

acrylic on hard panel

Front Row Seats / South Beach, 2004

acrylic on canvas

Old Clinker / Mayne Island, 2006

acrylic on canvas

Collection of April Davidson

End of the Road / Mayne Island, 2007

acrylic on panel

Mykonos Shade / House Cat, 2007

acrylic on canvas

Chestnut backed Chickadee / Bamboo Perch, 2010
acrylic on canvas

Last Stop / Fraser River, 2010
acrylic on canvas

Blue Chair / Cuba, 2005-2011
acrylic on canvas

Peter's Travels #1: Venice, 2011
acrylic on canvas
(image based on reference photograph courtesy of Peter Koelbleitner)

South Beach Wharf / Great Blue Heron, 2011
acrylic on canvas

Peter's Travels #2: Bicycle and Bricks in Beijing, 2011
acrylic on canvas
(image based on reference photograph courtesy of Peter Koelbleitner)

Thira Market / Santorini, 2011
acrylic on panel

Thira Harvest / Santorini, 2011
acrylic on panel

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The Gallery wishes to acknowledge the generosity of the lenders, and the support of the artist in the development and presentation of the exhibition.



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