

# ANDREW CRANSTON'S POSSIBLE PASTS

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By Barry Schwabsky

We're coming late to the show. This exhibition, *Waiting for the Bell*, introduces the American public to a mid-career artist whose accomplishment is already substantial; until now, his work has appeared on these shores in just a sparse handful of group shows and a solo fair booth. But it is an occasion at least a few lovers of painting, myself among them, have been anticipating eagerly.

When trying to get a grip on an unfamiliar but distinctive oeuvre, it is natural to start by grasping for comparisons with things one already knows. And that's fine—in fact, it is probably a necessary stage in the process of getting to know and appreciate an artist's work, as long as the process doesn't end there. For an American raised on the history of modernism as it was encapsulated by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it is easy to see Andrew Cranston's paintings as steeped in the early twentieth-century aesthetic of the Fauves and especially of the Nabis—to notice him taking cues from the likes of Henri Matisse, Édouard Vuillard, and, perhaps above all, Pierre Bonnard. What Cranston's work shares with these predecessors' is a tropism toward a certain sense of intimacy, an immersion in the quotidian scene of domesticity, an indifference to dramatic events, and a fascination with the resonances of almost intangible perceptions and small, even faltering, gestures. But there is also a technical commonality, namely a kind of formalism turned against itself, for it was one of the Nabis, Maurice Denis, who famously observed that “a picture, before being a war horse, a nude woman, or telling some other story, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a particular pattern.” “Nabis” is, after all, the Hebrew word for “prophets.” Denis, like all his colleagues, had a message to convey with these methodically applied colors, these ostensibly decorative patterns arranged on a plane: the message of feeling, the revelation that the most mundane events or non-events may have a profound effect on those who experience them.

But if an American viewer tends to see in Cranston's work an immediate connection with some French forebears who were also important for many of our own painters—consider what Vuillard meant to Fairfield Porter, or Matisse to Milton Avery—we shouldn't forget that British painting generally, and that of Scotland in particular, had already been imbued with such influences before Cranston's time, mainly thanks to artists of whom we unfortunately know all too little. Do a Google search for Scottish modernists such as Joan Eardley or Sir William George Gillies or Anne Redpath—who grew up in Cranston's hometown of Hawick, by the way—and you'll begin to see that he has been touched by a local pictorial idiom with far-flung origins. More evident to most viewers may be Cranston's connection to a more recent oeuvre: the oneiric, color-drunk, sometimes eerie art of his friend (and,

back in the 1990s, his teacher at London's Royal College of Art) Peter Doig.

All this cross-referencing is just to say that while Cranston's art encompasses aspects that look familiar, some of the familiar things may actually have arrived by routes that, to New Yorkers, may be quite unfamiliar. In any case, these aspects have all been admitted to the work according to highly personal—one might even say idiosyncratic—criteria. This art is more than a synthesis of its sources. If I had to put into just a few words what is most essential to Cranston's project as an artist, I would say that he is more of a storyteller than most of the artists I've mentioned. And that's a challenge for a painter: the autonomous, self-contained tableau—what Clement Greenberg used to call the “easel picture”—is not really equipped to contain a story. Duration, yes; action, yes; sequence, yes; a full-blown narrative arc, no.

The most obvious way to circumvent this problem is to put one's images into a sequence. Cranston doesn't do that. But his paintings do suggest connections among themselves that, though seemingly impossible to nail down, manage to conjure the atmosphere of a story even without the thing itself. Here, of course, I am obliged to mention the painting in the show whose title makes the problematic concern with narrative most explicit: *Let's talk about this story of yours* (2021). The setting—and this painting, you might say, is almost all setting—looks as if it were a huge classroom, but one out of use. Or perhaps it has just been cleaned? In any case, atop the herringbone-patterned floor that occupies about half the picture sits a scattering of tables, and atop those, the chairs that might normally have been set around them; but, oddly, the chairs are right-side up on their legs, rather than resting on their seats, legs up, the way chairs are usually placed when the floor needs to be cleaned. The two visible sides of the room are given to what I'd really have to call glass walls, rather than mere windows. This classroom is completely open to the sight of a beautiful leafy landscape. How wonderful for the students, one thinks, to have all this natural light illuminate the school day—and yet wouldn't it be distracting? Surely it must be so tempting to observe the doings of birds and squirrels rather than attend to one's lessons?

At the painting's center, in its middle distance, sit two figures at one of the tables—actually, given that this is an interior, they seem almost improbably far away; can it be that this is some magnificently posh establishment where the price of real estate is no object and there's more than enough room for everything and nothing? Or is it just that we are looking on from the perspective of a small child to whom everything looks big? (I remember the shock of revisiting my elementary school as a teenager and realizing how much smaller everything was than it had seemed to me when I was a pupil there.) The woolly-sweatered teacher, looking awkwardly large seated in a child-sized chair, faces away from us while the boy in his school uniform sits at a ninety-degree angle on a larger chair. His feet don't reach the floor. And here I have to stop a minute to talk more about that floor: its herringbone pattern is rendered in surprising detail. I can't help thinking that Cranston got a kick out of applying himself to the depiction of this simple pattern, which he has turned into something incredibly intricate thanks to its variegated multiplicity of earthy reddish-brown tones—not to mention the beautifully modulated shadows and light that

invest it.

I won't go into detail about the many small details one might notice scattered across the painting, from the distinctly Matissean bowl of goldfish on the right window ledge to the turtle—real or toy?—that seems to be crawling across the foreground. Let's talk about this painting's story instead: a story, the title tells us, of talking about a story. Or is it a story? We'll never know, of course, what story the boy has written. And we'll never hear what he and the teacher have to say about it. But the faceless boy with his crossed arms holds what looks to be a defensive posture. I identify with his insecurity. "Let's talk about this story of yours." Coming from an authority figure such as a teacher, there is something quietly threatening in that sentence. Something is impending. Has the boy plagiarized his story? Or has it inadvertently revealed something untoward about his home life? Or maybe it has simply been so poorly done that it can hardly count as a story?

In any case, the story that the painting is about is not the painting's story. And if, as I would say, the painting's subject is mainly the room itself, and in particular the warm atmosphere generated by such a rich variety of red-dominated tones, then the story with its implicit troubles is merely the implicit cause for the painting's mood, which is conveyed through color and space. The patterning of the floor suggests the possibility of losing oneself—losing track of space and time—in the hypnotic flux of the visible. Maybe this hypersensitivity to context over event has something to do with why the boy needs a talking-to about the story he turned in?

Maybe. In any case, the ensemble of large paintings Cranston presents in this show—the very small ones he makes on cloth book covers amount to a vast subject unto themselves, one I hope to explore on another occasion—suggests that he does want to work out something about school, or about being school-age. There's *Assembly (Three musicians)* (2020–2021), with its audience of uniformed boys and girls listening, sitting cross-legged on the floor. *Waiting for the Bell* (2021): Might that be a mother waiting for the ringing that announces class is over so she can meet her child? With this in mind, even paintings that display no specific allusion to school might register an unstated one: the idyllic outdoor scenes (*Deja vu*, 2021, seems to deliberately recall paintings such as Matisse's *Luxe, calme et volupté*, 1904) might mean summer holidays or even just class trips to the countryside; the title *Cornwall 1979* (2021) refers to the year when the artist was ten years old. I've seen the insides of some British boarding schools, and an interior similar to the one in *Moth* (2021) could easily be found there.

What's curious about this train of thought is that it leads to a realm of pure speculation, perhaps fictionality. In a conversation with Peter Doig several years ago, Cranston explained that he left school as soon as he could: "I just couldn't wait to leave. School was a disaster. . . . I suppose anything kind of educational wasn't on my radar at all. . . . And so I left when I was fifteen, just a few months before I was sixteen. You could leave before your birthday if it fell at the right time." The future he envisioned for himself was a working-class one: he wanted to be a joiner, that is, a craftsman specializing in the wooden components of a building. Later, when he realized that he wanted to study art, he had to take night school courses

to qualify for entry.

So if Cranston had school on his mind when creating his recent paintings, it is not his own experience of school that is at stake. Maybe at stake is the alternative life he might have had if certain circumstances had been otherwise. What if his time as a schoolboy had been utterly different? We often speculate about possible futures, but Cranston's work seems more concerned with possible pasts—alternative realities that might nonetheless have led to something resembling the present. And this might be a good moment to point out an aspect of pastness that's true of his oeuvre across the board, in the small paintings as well as the large ones: you very rarely see anything in them that did not already exist in the nineteenth century. Not only are there no laptops or cell phones, there are no television sets or cars. The lamp at the center of *Moth* could just as well be oil-burning as electrical—anyway, there's no visible cord; likewise with the lamp in one of the small works, *Heaney farm table* (2020–2021), though power lines are visible in *House of the famous poet* (2020–2021).

Cranston's avoidance of, or at least indifference to, overt symbols of contemporaneity is one more element in his cultivation of a sort of speculative pastness that seems to be deeply personal while radiating out beyond the boundaries of any factual personal history. Noticing this allows me to add to what I spoke of at the beginning of this essay, namely the fact that viewers unfamiliar with his work will probably acquaint themselves with it by seeing it in terms of its art-historical precursors. This work is also a speculation on the possible pasts for new painting today.