

## OCCASIONAL ESSAY 2

*Dr Richard Keesing writes about a favourite modern artist closely associated with York, some of whose works might be described as Neo-Romantic*

### **Dudley Holland: The Artist and the Man**

When I first came to York in 1965, people were talking about an amazing, charismatic artist. His name was Dudley Holland. He had been the head of York Art School between 1949 and 1951, and left to become head at Guildford, where he died tragically in a motorcycle accident. The year was 1956. People spoke of him in almost reverential tones, and seemed greatly to be in awe of him. And subsequently I discovered that his death left scars in many people which just would not heal. I found bits of his work scattered here and there, and slowly begun to build up a picture of the man.

Holland was born in Surrey in 1915, and went to Kingston Grammar School and thence to Chelsea School of Art. He subsequently graduated from Willesden School of Art, and was awarded a Royal Exhibition to the Royal College of Art. However he did not take up the scholarship because he wanted to get on with his own painting. He subsequently taught at Willesden, Harrow, and Goldsmiths, and at the age of 34 was appointed head of York Art School. And it seems he was recruited by the dynamic curator of York Art Gallery, Hans Hess, a refugee from Nazi Germany appointed to the post in 1948. And from the accounts I have heard, Holland hit the somnolent art school like a whirlwind. And one of the few people who is still with us and knew Dudley Holland is the York-born artist John Langton, who was one of his students both in York and in Guildford.

As soon as Holland arrived in York, Hans Hess commenced assembling an exhibition of his work together with that of the sculptor Austin Wright. The exhibition, entitled 'Two Modern Artists', ran in the Art Gallery from June to July 1950. Holland provided 41 oil paintings, 13 gouaches, and 9 linocuts. And a selection of Holland's work shown at York was then

exhibited by the Arts Council in Cambridge the following September. And the flyer to the Cambridge show mentions that Holland had exhibited at the Royal Academy before the War, and also with the Redfern Gallery in Cork Street.

In the forward to the catalogue of the York show Hess was obviously concerned to give the audience some instruction in how to approach 'modern art'; he pointed out that art had not necessarily to exhibit photographic realism, where the more accurate the representation the better the work. To quote from his introduction:

*Art is not an imitation of nature; nature has always imitated itself with such perfection that only fools would try and vie with her... . The artist can borrow forms of nature and rearrange them to suit his purpose, or he can go further by creating his own... . But if we meet the artist and the prophet with humility we shall be enriched by experience and wisdom.*

Furthermore there was an Introduction to the exhibition by Eric Taylor from the Leeds School of Art, who, it is interesting to note, had a similar track record to Holland, in that he was from London and had been a teacher at Willesden before coming to Leeds. This is not the place to quote at length from Taylor's introduction, but he emphasises that 'we are showing how sincere artists develop, and we see by their work, that art is just as much a part of our century as it has been for any other'. Like Hess, Taylor was concerned that the audience might find difficulty in accepting the works in the show as a serious and legitimate expression of art. After Holland's death there was a retrospective exhibition of his work in Guildford.

It was in the mid- sixties that I first encountered Holland's work, and felt that it would be marvellous to try and recreate the 1950 exhibition, because in my opinion his art was too good to be forgotten. And so it was that the host of other people to whom I wrote in 1988 included the artist Len Stoppani, who sent me the following sketch of Dudley Holland:

*In regard to evaluation – that is difficult to do in a few words. Apart from his short stay in York I worked with him virtually on a day to day basis from 1947 until the day he was killed, a day which I remember vividly. He also lived with me and my wife for some months when he was dispossessed of his flat. Like most people I suppose I had a love-hate relationship with him. As a person he was ruthless and totally self*

*centred but he was also a remarkable artist and an outstanding and inspiring educationalist and teacher in advance of his time. He did not suffer fools or second-rate people gladly but could be a fiercely defensive friend. He had a contempt for mindless officialdom and openly and fearlessly opposed the bureaucratic thinking of the then Ministry of Education and many of its second-rate inspectors - a brave thing to do in those days! But he had a compelling and charismatic personality which allowed him to take liberties denied to others.*

*As an artist he was very gifted and was technically excellent at almost everything to which he turned his hand, printmaking, painting, or sculpture - in fact, in his case his virtuosity was to some extent a liability rather than an asset; all flowed perhaps just that too easily. Despite his great gifts as a draughtsman his work was sometimes almost consciously mannered - this to some extent dated and fixed it as of a particular period namely what I can only describe off the top of my head as a kind of 50's formal romanticism.*

*But having said that, from time to time he did produce work of enduring quality and originality and was undoubtedly an artist of some substance.*



I turn now now to some examples of Holland's art. Stoppany mentions that he was technically excellent, and in my opinion he could have used the term 'brilliant'. I have in my possession an amazing etching (see above), the story behind which was recounted to me by John Langton. The very overweight Secretary at Guildford Art School had been terrified

when a strange man had jumped out of the shrubbery and seemingly attempted to molest her. And Holland's response to the drama is illustrated in this amazing etching, which he produced in a few hours after the incident. Words almost fail me in attempting to assess the technical brilliance displayed in this image. Holland often used classical illusions in his work, and the molester who pounced from the shrubbery has become the Minotaur, who has enveloped his hapless victim in its sinuous arms and gripped her ample proportion with its clawed hands, and she in her turn has become like a Sumo wrestler to be raised up and thrown to the ground. And overall in the image there is the unmistakable presence of Aubrey Beardsley! The image is a tour de force displaying a mastery of the etching technique together with an understanding of structure, anatomical detail, and overpowering expression of pure destructive force. And it is evident from the bottom left hand corner of the image that this plate was not meant for printing, because one can see where Holland has sharpened his burin and tested its point with all the little lines which now appear in the print. I believe that other versions of this etching do in fact exist.

And although I have none of Holland's oils, I do have a linocut from the 1950 exhibition:



The image is entitled 'Women in a Wood', and is signed and dated 1946. I have no idea what Holland was expressing in this image, but it is heavy with classical allusion. Holland made a number of these very complex linocuts, where the image is built up from several separate cuts. And again John Langton once commented that Holland, while standing in conversation with a colleague in the Department, would be cutting the image with his pocket-knife. This print needs remounting, for there is a fold which crosses the drapery of the central figure's very delicate dress and interferes slightly with the wonderful flowing lines, which further give the image a feeling of otherworldliness. Perhaps the image is of a classical religious ritual.

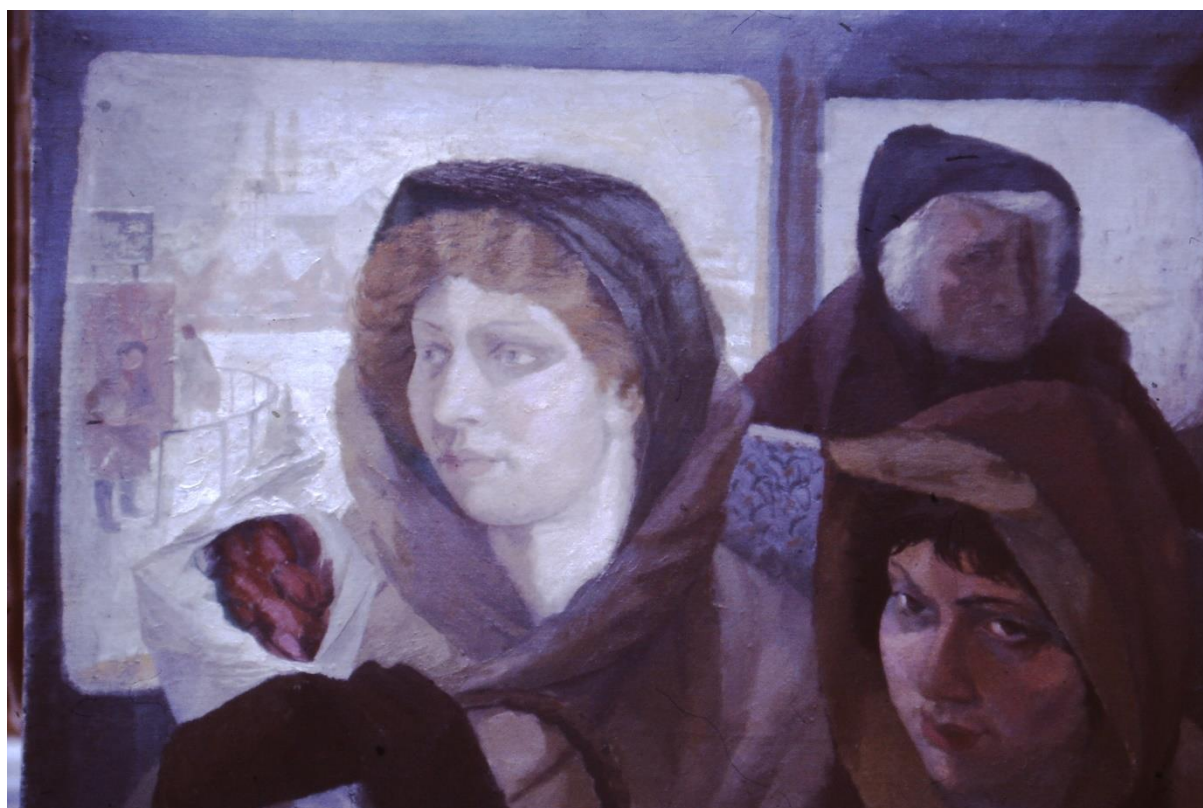
The third image that I wish to reproduce is a gouache, which appears to have been squared off for a larger painting (see below). I travelled down to Totness in Devon to see the holding of work by Holland, which had wound up in Western Arts with Peter Bagust, who had been a student at Camberwell. While he and I were going through stacks of paintings and folios of drawings in a storeroom above the shop, I came across this image. When I saw it, my jaw just dropped, and I blurted out: 'I must have this, how much is it! And he said 'if you must have it, then you can have it', and he just gave it to me! As perhaps I have remarked in the past, we each of us bring a great deal of our own history to our response to a work of art, which opens up the age-old problem of the communicating of meaning between individuals. It is very difficult for me to put into words the way in which this image works and it might be wise to leave it to speak for itself, but perhaps it is the subtlety of the combinations of tone and colour throughout the whole gouache and the amazing treatment of the cabbage leaf, together with the lyrical way in which the long fronds from the maize hold the image in a delicate embrace, which is part of its magic.

The three images I have introduced indicate to me at least that at his best Holland was a very significant artist indeed.



It is invariably assumed that the most important work of an artist is his or her paintings in the medium of oils. Although there were 41 oils in the 1950 exhibition, only two are in public collections, and the remainder may well be held privately in the South of England. The painting entitled 'Two Gypsies', which was thought to be his most important work in the 1950 show, was last shown in Holland's retrospective exhibition in Guildford; and it is thought to have been bought by Surrey County Council, but now it cannot be traced. Of the two works in public collections one is in the Dundee Art Gallery and can be viewed on the internet by Googling, 'Dudley Holland Artist'. This painting is very reminiscent of the work of John Nash and is untypical of Holland's later pieces. The second painting is entitled *Transition* and is in the York City Art Gallery, though rarely if ever on show:

It was commissioned by Hans Hess, and is again not typical of much of his other work. It is important to understand that, although one would expect a professional artist to be aware of the work of other contemporary artists, they may have nothing to do with the particular motivation behind a specific painting. Sensitive artists will respond to the world in which they find themselves and express their response in their art. However, to illustrate Stoppani's comment on Neo-Romanticism, I have managed to locate an oil and two preparatory sketches to indicate how Holland's thinking progressed:



The title of this painting is 'Women on a Bus'. This study seems to represent youth, maturity and old age, set in a world of post-war austerity, where, after six years of hardship and deprivation, there is just more austerity, poverty, and winter. And for most people at this time there were few if any signs of an approaching spring. The elderly woman in the background has lived through two World Wars, and has in her expression a sense of resignation with little hope of a better future. The central figure is of a woman facing the future with stoicism and resolve, and perhaps the flowers are an indication that there is hope of a better future - or maybe they are just being taken to an urban cemetery to be placed on a grave. The young girl in the foreground seems aware of the struggle that lies ahead and must be endured. And the bleakness of the image is enhanced by its placement in a background of cold, grey industrial winter. In respect of the top left preparatory sketch, Holland seems to be toying with the idea of introducing elements of Cubism into the painting but has decided that the subject is too serious for such distraction. And I am all too aware that Holland may have wanted to project a totally different feeling from that which it engenders in myself. However, the important thing about a painting is that it speaks to the observer; and what it implies may be different for each and every one of us.

## **Richard Keesing**

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