Interlude 1

Aeroplane

Peter Kinley's 1977 painting *Aeroplane* is very characteristic of the artist's restrained visual language. Recognisable figurative forms rendered to finely nuanced shapes, sitting harmoniously within the picture where any illusionistic depth and material painting surface coexist in careful balance. At the same time literal and metaphorical, both dynamic and static, a bold flat shape hovers calmly in an even expanse of blue. Part of the painting's intrigue is the uncertainty of view. Although seen vertically against a wall are we in fact looking directly up into the sky? Deprived of vestigial detail or distinguishing insignia the bold child-like rendition of fuselage and un-swept perpendicular wings is instantly readable as a pre-jet-age airplane.

I first encountered this work around in 1980 when as a young art student at Bath Academy of Art Peter Kinley was one of my painting tutors. *Aeroplane* immediately resonated although it wasn't all due to my boyish fascination for machines of transport. My concerns as an artist, I felt confident at the time, were all to do with abstraction and landscape. Peter's paintings seemed to articulate perfectly a relationship between a landscape informed figuration with the pure formal qualities of painting that seemed to be so prevalent in British painting at the time. Interestingly, in some of Kinley's other works I also recognised particular shapes and colours of rounded forms and house motifs as distinctive characteristics of the Wiltshire landscape in which I spent my early childhood.

Kinley's Aeroplane is derived from a specific early childhood memory from his native home in Austria where he would marvel at the new means of transport flying overhead. In this case a Sabena airline twin prop Savoia- Marchetti S73. The aeroplane was painted repeatedly from 1977 until the artist's death in 1988 and during this time Kinley also painted multiple versions of battleships and submarines. As a teenage refugee in England during the Second World War, like so many boys, Kinley made model airplanes and was well versed in the classes of battleships. One can only speculate on the aeroplane's manifestation of human ingenuity or role as a symbol of aggression although his relationship to machines of war would have been particular and profound. Yet, a fascination with technology continued throughout artist's life and he had a particular

romantic attachment to flight. Aircraft were symbols of freedom and independence of spirit.

Despite the specifics of Peter's childhood memory, the aircraft he paints is largely unspecific. There are some elements that possibly locate it in the history of aircraft technological development but there is nothing that indicates clearly a particular place or moment in time. In its very simple geometry and graphic information Aeroplane offers something much more universal. If anything, historical coordinates can be found not in any recognisable image but more readily in the qualities of the painting itself. The interplay between figuration and abstraction that dominated so much post European painting including Peter's early influence the French painter Nicholas De Stael as well as British near contemporaries like Patrick Heron or Bob Law. The aeroplane's form and composition - its scale, shape, colour and position in relations to sky/canvas edge - is determined very much by the requirements of the painting and no longer an 'accurate' rendition of a specific memory. In many respects a painting, or indeed any artwork, becomes independent to the various observations, methods and ideas, including memories, that interact in its making. In a work like Peter's *Aeroplane* the intertwined narratives of personal history, painting history and wider cultural history begin before the artist even contemplates the artwork and continue long after he or she considers it finished.

Conversely, in such an object the extended narratives of time are collapsed into a singular entity existing in the present. The artist's experience is met by the experience of the viewer and it is in this encounter that the artwork can function, and its meaning formed; sometime in a way the artist may not have anticipated. Over time it occurred to me that Peter's Aeroplane was also part of my own childhood landscape. This painting is of the lone propeller aircraft heard high in the sky during long summer days. The aeroplane that is largely imagined; clearly audible it remains mostly unseen. Such an aeroplane is the Netheravon Jump Plane.

Netheravon is a village located along Wiltshire's upper Avon valley where the river cuts almost due south from the Vale of Pewsey into the vast expanse of Salisbury Plain; skirting just east of Stonehenge, before joined by further tributaries among the flood-prone fields surrounding Salisbury's majestic cathedral. This is a valley of ancient water meadows, old mill races, small parish churches and thatch cottages. Additional villages have the delightful

names of Upavon, Chisenbury and Enford. In contrast to the dry empty openness of the chalk down-land of the Plain itself, the valley feels unusually populated and particularly picturesque in that quintessentially and Constablesque English rural manner.

Some eighty years after Constable painted his famous scenes of Salisbury Cathedral and Stonehenge the otherwise less noticed high shoulders of the Avon valley found a new purpose befitting the technological revolutions of the early 20th century: the siting of new aerodromes. The first was Upavon established in 1912 as home the then newly created Royal Flying Corps (later to become the Royal Air Force) Very quickly others followed, including Netheravon until a line of airfields was rand down the valley as far as Old Sarum just north of Salisbury itself.

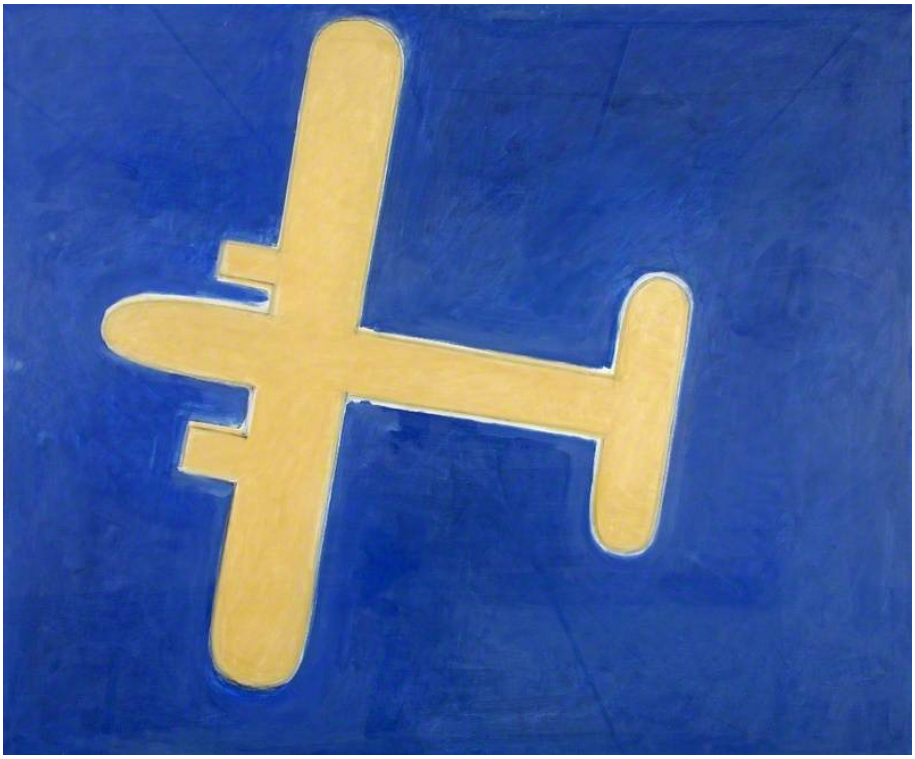
Over the past half century or more those most familiar with this landscape may choose to describe one of the valley's defining characteristics in less visual terms. On any day throughout the year, assuming relatively clear skies and no more than moderate wind, can be heard the unmistakable sound of a propeller aeroplane straining its way high up into the sky. Unlike the jet airliners that stealthily grace most of our skies leaving contrails to mark their trans-global journeys the Jump plane doesn't really go anywhere. It does however, go up and down in a repetitive ballet releasing its passengers to dance their way back down to the ground.

As the workhorse of the Army Parachuting Association the Netheravon Jump Plane has only one function. After taking off from the airfield situated upon the shoulder of the downs, the plane slowly ascends through series of circuits until the desired altitude when it will deposit its payload of fearless skydivers. It will then quickly descend to ground before repeating the process with a further group of parachutists.

Propeller engines under strain generate a distinctive whine that can be heard in all corners of the landscape and unlike most aircraft the sound of the Jump Plane does not travel across the sky, filling a void and fading away. An oscillating drone, the sound hangs in the air, lingering like the sultry summer haze and background hum of nature. Heard and yet unseen the song of the Jump Plane is an equivalent to Vaughan William's Lark Ascending: a powerful evocation of English landscape and attachment it conjured in the mind in the absence of a literal image. It is an emotional contemplation of place and time

condensed into a single abstracted image suggesting that the experience of attachment is somehow elemental, equally intimate and shared. Experienced in the real-time of the present while fundamentally well as rooted in the past.

After a number of decades, the Jump plane continues to be an audible presence in the skies above Wiltshire. And as with much of the surrounding landscape the sound remains relatively unchanged – although it is now a different make of airplane to the one when I knew as a child. Then a De Haviland Dragon Rapide, now a Cessna Caravan. To those who are used the Valley's comings and goings, little attention will be paid to this tiny object almost invisible against the pale blue. Unless, that is, you are a small boy with not much else to do in the warm summer heat than to romanticise about machines in the sky and with only a hint of understanding their true significance. Such a boy hiding in the long grass, will be training his eyes in dreamy wonderment upwards into the deep endless blue and hope to catch sight of the parachutes as they open.



Peter Kinley *Aeroplane* 1978 – 83. Oil on canvas