

# HYPERALLERGIC

ART

## Summer Comes to a Close in Paintings of a Modern Arcadia

The intrepid painter Graham Nickson has explored a time-honored theme, the ideal world of Arcadia, making images that are, at once, entirely about the present and suggestive of traditional concepts of a pastoral, terrestrial paradise.

Karen Wilkin | 6 days ago



Graham Nickson, "Tracks" (1982-91) Acrylic on canvas 96 x 192 in. (243.84 x 487.68 cm) (all photos by Lexi Campbell, unless otherwise stated)

Graham Nickson has been painting “forbidden” subjects ever since he was a [Prix de Rome](#) winner in residence at the British Academy in Rome, from 1972 through 1974. The canvases and watercolors he has produced over the years — of flamboyant sunrises and feverish sunsets — address themes that most committed modernists

would either scorn or find too frightening to tackle. Yet Nickson turns these loaded, time-honored motifs into compelling, wholly contemporary images that toggle between unabashed romanticism and a modern celebration of the expressive power of super-saturated color relationships and abstract structure, with a healthy admixture of awareness of the history of western art. The intrepid British-born painter has also explored another equally loaded, equally time-honored theme: the ideal world of Arcadia, making images that are, at once, entirely about the present and suggestive of traditional concepts of a pastoral, terrestrial paradise.



Installation view of *Graham Nickson: Light and Geometry* at Betty Cuningham gallery (all installation views courtesy of Betty Cuningham gallery)

Nickson's Arcadia is no less idyllic than its ancient prototype, but full of people we recognize, rather than classical archetypes. Instead of nymphs and shepherds making music, composing poems, canoodling, and occasionally tending to their flocks, we find explicitly contemporary bathers. Everyone seems young and fit. Like vacationers at leisure — weekenders at the Hamptons, come to mind — they spend their time on wide beaches, dressing and undressing, drying

themselves, performing calisthenics, and more. In some of Nickson's most recent works, however, summer appears to be over. His protagonists stand, fully clothed, their backs towards us, gazing across an expanse of grey water, like casual, updated versions of Caspar David Friedrich's transfixed figures.

The current exhibition at Betty Cuningham Gallery, *Graham Nickson: Light and Geometry*, (the artist's second at the gallery) brings together a selection of paintings, watercolors, and charcoal drawings made between 1982 and 2017, loosely united by the theme of a modern Arcadia.. There's a strong family resemblance among the diverse works — saturated hues, dramatic tonal contrasts, confrontational compositions, and above all, a sense of firm, Apollonian order — but there's equally strong evidence of Nickson's range and inventiveness, of his refusal to do the expected. Nothing is quite what it seems. One of the earliest works in the show, the ample "Study for Red Cloud," (1982-1984), is pared down to a nude pulling a shirt over her head beside a window filled with superheated red, yellow, and purple sunset clouds. An expanse of purple-black minimally suggests a dim interior, strongly contrasted by the rectangle of exaggeratedly glowing sky. Yet the nude's taut torso seems illuminated by the warm light of the sunset, even though her position in the same frontal plane as the window makes this impossible. It's crucial to the painting, however, turning potential anecdote into near abstraction.

The play of light has an important role, not only in "Study for Red Cloud," but also in every work in the exhibition. Nickson is anything but a literal painter, but he *is* a scrupulous observer of the world around him, preternaturally aware of the visible evidence of passing time and changing seasons. For years, he regularly rose before dawn to paint watercolors in response to the character of the sunrise that day and



Graham Nickson, "Study for Red Cloud" (1982-84) Acrylic on canvas 108 x 96 in. (274.32 x 243.84 cm)

was attentive to sunsets with equal regularity and sensitivity. I say "in response to," because even the most apparently specific of Nickson's paintings are never depictions. A quotation from the artist in the handsome little catalogue accompanying the show makes this clear.

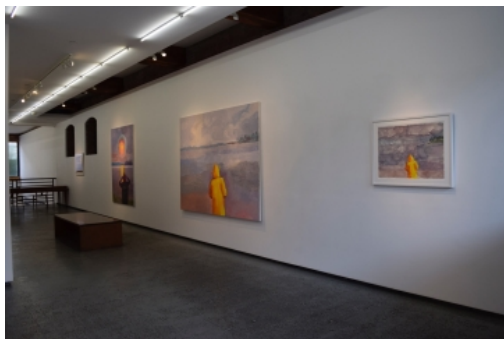
Nickson writes: "I teach that all art is abstract, and imagery is the bonus. The entire process of creating art is abstract, but the finished work is a metaphor for the artist's experience and direct observation."



Graham Nickson, "Sunrise Fog II" (2017) watercolor on paper 22 x 30 in. (55.88 x 76.2 cm)

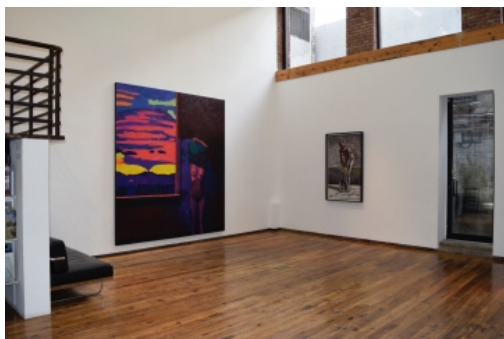
"Sunrise Fog II," a 2017 watercolor plainly bears this out. It presents a view across water toward distant hills, with a glimpse of beach on the left and a pier of some kind on the right. The moist, morning, seaside air and the new, low light piercing the fog are palpable. Yet this intense sense of place and time is created solely by loose pools and touches of thin, flowing paint, and by carefully adjusted, inventive hues, with only the most economical indications of incident. The longer we spend with the picture, the more it threatens to dissolve into explorations of pure, albeit highly evocative color relationships.

Often, Nickson's Arcadia seems under threat. Halcyon weather is about to turn sinister. Dramatic clouds gather. Shadows lengthen. Far from idling in the sun, his bathers frequently seem to be making urgent preparations to leave the scene. They fold beach chairs and towels, and carry things away. Yet the geometric underpinnings



Installation view of *Graham Nickson: Light and Geometry* at Betty Cuninghame gallery

of Nickson's compositions are so powerful that even the exhibition's most dramatic, uneasy vision of beach life, "Departure" (1997) — with its bathers trapped in a band of darkness, making efforts to abandon the beach below a glowing, orange-gold sky — reads as a classical frieze. Every gesture, every movement in the paintings of this period seems to be slowed down, both for maximum expressiveness and to reveal the underlying geometry of the world. It's Long Island beach life, as directed by Robert Wilson. The economy of the figures and the sense of immutable, Platonic archetypal structure remind us of Nickson's often stated admiration of such quattrocento masters as Masolino da Panicale, Piero della Francesca, and Paolo Uccello.



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Nickson is rightly known for his saturated, glowing color, but he's also a master of black, white, and grey tonalities. Witness the exhibition's large, muscular charcoal drawings and one of the most potent paintings on view, "Tracks" (1982-1991). Even at an impressive eight by sixteen feet, this tough, no-holds-barred canvas commands attention less because of its size than because of its rich orchestration of whites, off-whites, greys, and blacks; its range of vigorous marks; and its powerful sense of fading light. Everything converges in the top quarter of the painting where the deep grooves punctuating the beach, a triangle of dunes, and a slice of sea meet below an emphatic horizon line and a wide band of sky, as agitated as the gouged expanse of sand. A single sturdy female bather faces us, arms above her head, face hidden by the shirt she pulls off. Her strongly modeled frontal form reinforces, paradoxically, our awareness of the literal flatness of the canvas.

More paradoxically, even though we are conditioned to read the convergent diagonals of the painting's setting as indicating deep space, we are not exclusively pulled into a fictive distance by the rippling slashes in the sand. Instead, we are forced to consider the entire image as an eloquent accumulation of different kinds of marks and tones across a generous expanse of surface. We are also made acutely aware of the openness and featurelessness of what feels like a very specific place. As

is always true in Nickson's major works, an imprecise narrative is suggested, but remains just out of reach. We search the rest of the painting for clues and are forced to invent our own solutions. Ultimately, however, even the hint of narrative in this mysterious image is overwhelmed by the tension between the illusion of space, and the bulk and amplitude, of the applied pigment, assertive evidence of paint having been deposited on a flat surface by a particular hand.



Graham Nickson, "Maine Grey: Yellow Jacket"  
(2017) oil on canvas, 72 x 96 in. (182.88 x 243.84  
cm)

The most recent of Nickson's works in the exhibition, executed in 2017, are notably looser and more freely painted than the earlier paintings and drawings on view. Witness the "Sunrise Fog II" watercolor and "Yellow Jacket Fog," a watercolor of a half-length figure in a hooded yellow jacket, seen from the rear, against a mass of mauve-grey-blue-rose patches that slowly resolve themselves into a suggestion of some unnamed place in Maine. The

geographic similarities are obvious in

all of these works. A large canvas, "Maine Grey: Yellow Jacket," (2017) described in the catalogue as a work in progress, echoes the composition and setting of "Yellow Jacket Fog," but clarifies and simplifies the watercolor's floating blotches and washes into more coherent expanses — without losing any of the immediacy of the work on paper. Yet the large canvas already has the monumentality and sense of timeless geometry that we associate with Nickson's paintings. A glow of rose at the bottom of the picture envelops the yellow-clad figure, subtly warping the space and, perhaps, subtly shaping the implied, elusive narrative. "Maine Grey: Yellow Jacket" looked quite complete, among the other works in the show, but Nickson is also well-known for spending years fine tuning his images, without — miraculously — killing the impulse that generated the picture in the first place. If he intends to work more on "Maine Grey: Yellow Jacket," we'll just have to wait and see what happens.

Graham Nickson: *Light and Geometry continues at Betty Cunningham Gallery (15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 22.*