

Dominic Shepherd  
Downstream

No. 2



Dominic Shepherd  
Downstream

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CHARLIE SMITH LONDON

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# How some perfumes smell of the nineties

by Miranda Peake

It's familiar in that way, this current of yellow, delicious and gently painful. The scud of grey blue across the action and I do love Bonnard, but that's not really the point of this memory, anyway – it's how light or heat or the combination of both can catapult you back when you thought you were just going to the garden centre or putting a geranium in a pot. Catherine, or whatever her name was, but this type of memory is not about names, it's about a day, particular and yellow, how it lasted longer, how it tasted wonderful and old fashioned. You won't remember what actually happened, you'll remember the yellow was crucial, but seemed almost accidental reflected on the woman's skin and the woman herself – half woman, half disappearance.



*Downstream*, 2018 Oil on linen 92x115cm



# BETWEEN THE VIADUCTS OF YOUR DREAM

by Gavin Parkinson

The psychedelic, acid-tab styling of Dominic Shepherd's painting continues in current works such as *The Shout* (2019), thinly rendered over a light ground applied to linen that is allowed to show its tooth through the multi-hued strings, dabs and smudges of paint. Familiar themes are also present in the recent pictures, primarily those of the forest, the single figure in nature and the occultist, romantic, folklorish or traditional vision of a past and maybe future England. The ambiguity of place, period and person runs alongside some ambivalence. Contemporary politics, technology and culture are typically not in evidence and you can draw your own conclusions from that. What also continues in the current paintings and takes on a new concentration is the cue they take from diverse iterations of water in the natural habitat. It is true that bodies of water have been present in Shepherd's previous work, especially those that featured in the 2017 solo exhibition *Old England*, to the point of constituting a sub-theme, but here their presence is constant and heightened to a major theme.

Shepherd takes an intuitive approach to his art, by which I mean that in the moment of painting a stream, waterfall or winter pond his aim may well be simply to depict with reasonable accuracy through the medium of his style what is before him or in his imagination. But associative thinking or metaphor is as innate to the mind as refraction is to water; the nature of the medium alters the direction of what passes through it. The pictures have immediacy as everything does – you might observe initially their size, shape, surface, colour

*The Shout*, 2019 Oil on linen 92x115cm

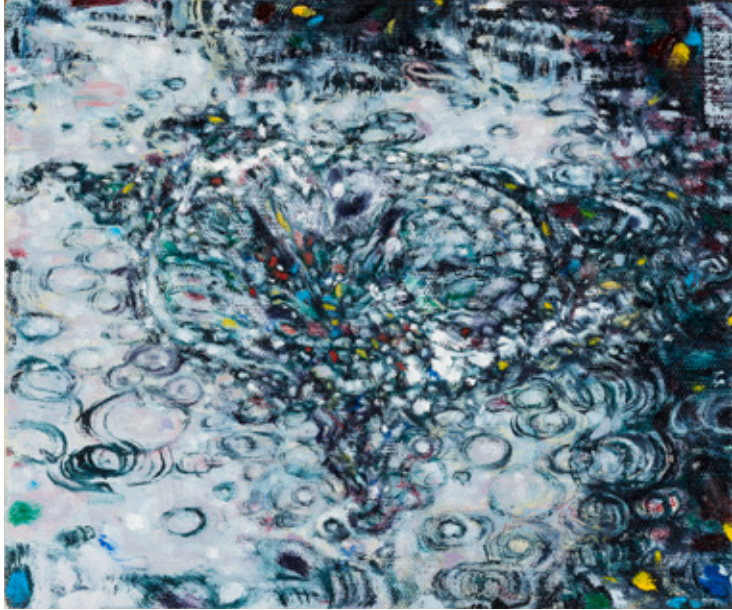




or scenography – but the greater part of their heft comes from the imaginative register in association, when concentration flits wantonly towards (art) history, mythology, religion, literature and/or poetic symbolism (and maybe we should add autobiography: Shepherd's pictures speak very directly to memory, dreams, hallucination and intimate life experience, particularly those of family). For this reason, it not only pays to write inferentially and contextually about them, but it is almost impossible not to.

The medium of water has offered an immense fund of symbolism to writers and artists due partly to its highly suggestive, threefold register of depth, surface and reflection (of ourselves, the sky and so on). As well as its promise of a latent, concealed world – suggested in the cosmic dimension of Shepherd's *Dark Star* (2019) – water manifests our own terrain in a mirror image. In this sense, the artist paints what is already a representation, carried on the surface of the lake. Water also draws swimmers, like those in *Travellers* (2019), to a world familiar to birds and fish, one fully of three dimensions rather than the limited three, which is more like two, that we humans normally inhabit, fixed as we are for the most part to the two dimensions of the Earth's surface. This is the property of water and our relationship with it that lends itself so powerfully to dreams, stirring the unconscious profoundly.

Not much of this crossed the minds of pioneering modernists Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir when they invented



*Dark Star*, 2019 Oil on linen 21x24cm

Impressionism through studies of water, carried out at the floating restaurant and bathing place La Grenouillère west of Paris late in 1869. It is unlikely that Renoir ever thought in such terms. However, the decisive paintings of Monet and Paul Cézanne in the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have been reassessed in recent years as less a project furthered by positivism and to do with the manipulation of materials on a flat surface and more like a project against the disenchantment brought on by modernity. In this interpretation, magic, prophecy and dream take precedence. Monet's water lilies, especially the large canvases of 1914-18 at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, shod of perspective or any other conventional optical entry, assume a cosmic significance. Likewise, the early twentieth century bather paintings of Cézanne and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner are, respectively, oneiric and ritualistic, imagining a reversal of the clock of progress to a dreamtime of utopia, collectivity and natural healing. Beyond these, there is an entire canon of modernist pictures extending from the late nineteenth century up to the 1920s of which Shepherd is perfectly aware – of bathers, of women at the source, of women and men immersed in streams, rivers and baths – that whisper their presence behind paintings such as *Downstream* (2018).

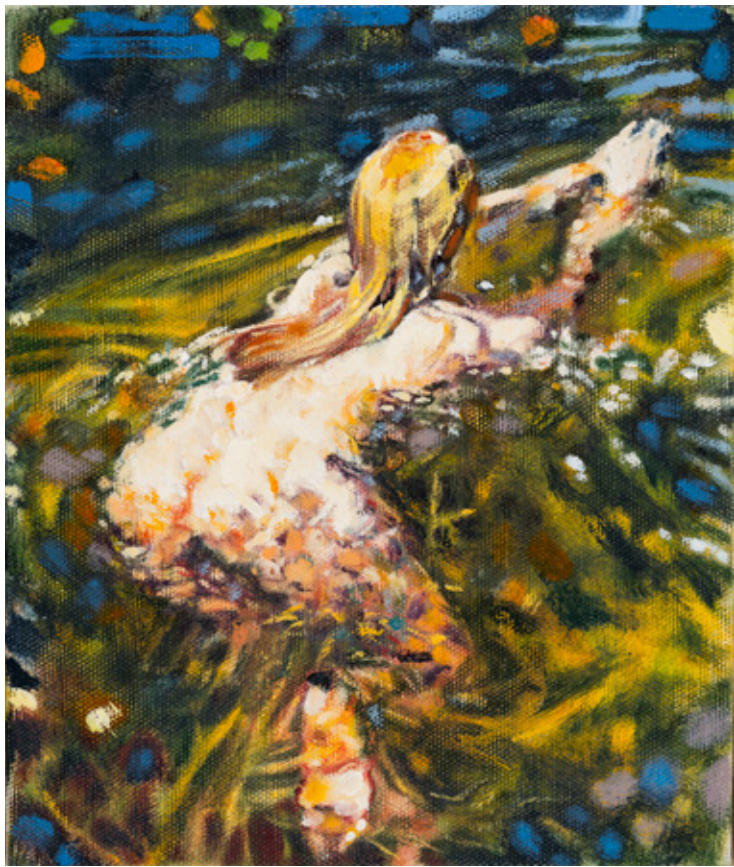
Shepherd picks up the theme at different levels, in the bathers of *Downstream*, *The Shout*, *Travellers* and *Toad Magic* (2019), and in the more overt meditations on ritual and enchantment in the paintings titled *Circle Round the Sun* (2019) and *The*





*Source* (2019). If the first three of these leave the viewer with much of the work to do in seeking out a mythic or metaphorical dimension, then the title of *Toad Magic* nudges us more explicitly in the direction of mythical metamorphosis and witchcraft. The final two, *Circle Round the Sun* and *The Source*, draw upon a longstanding iconography of solitude and the forest, particularly familiar across the long history of German painting (Albrecht Dürer, Albrecht Altdorfer, Caspar David Friedrich, Max Ernst), to steer their audience more in the direction of ritual passage, clairvoyance, divination and magical thinking.

Of course, Shepherd is sensitive to the tendency of a local forest lake to be also the bathing place of Diana and a river to be Lethe or Styx. To his credit, and possibly because of his wakefulness towards such things, he avoids one-to-one correspondences in his characterisations of bodies of water or through his choice of titles. These titles are rather like pedestrian paths created by footfall through the woods (also known as 'desire lines'): you can follow them if you think they will lead to somewhere of interest, but there are plenty of other potential directions in which to roam. The intimate painting *Black Dog* (2019), looking straight out of a novel by Jack London, might be a record of an unexpected near-encounter, but it has an esoteric ambiance connoting chance and luck. The assumed solitariness of both seer and seen in an austere winter setting further evoke the 'black dog' of depression as Samuel Johnson called it, but previous references to folk and rock music in Shepherd's work encourage a reading adjacent



Toad Magic, 2019 Oil on linen 24x21cm



to Nick Drake's late, sparse, disquieting song 'Black-Eyed Dog' (1974) or even conjure the Led Zeppelin classic 'Black Dog' (1971). It is also, the literalist on my other shoulder reminds me, a picture with a lone dog in it, but the inferential bait of the paintings is hard to resist.

In all of these cases, water seems to be taking on meanings of origin and (re)birth, healing and precognition. Among the inferences allowed by the work, then, is a diagnosis of and prognosis for our disenchanted modernity, our divided societies and our failed politics. Shepherd's new paintings immerse us in a medium where, consciously or unconsciously, the questions stirred remain the most profound: where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? They were never more urgent.



*Black Dog*, 2019 Oil on linen 40x56cm







# WATER'S POLYPHONIC SONG

by Tim Russell

The pull of water is strong. We can't live without it. We are even largely made from water. It is water that makes all things live, the very well-spring of life. In old Irish tradition there's a land called *Tír Fa Tonn*, or Land beneath the Waves; it is resplendent, full of riddles, confusions and wonders; out of time entirely.

The fluidity of water, whether moving or the 'shifting screen' of still water alerts us to another facet of the otherworld, or otherworld perception. To see everything as fluid suggests a lack of fixity. This is a layered perception that sees not only a sunset, but also the celestial city sinking into the sea beyond the land's edge. Or as William Blake asks, 'When the sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a golden guinea? - Oh no, no, I see an innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty"'. It's also to see the world and everything comprising it in a state of becoming, its identity entirely defined by the moment of perception – what John Moriarty calls 'silver branch perception'...

He tells the story of Imram Brain; the journey of Bran mac Feabhail to the Otherworld. How Bran wandering alone one day hears an otherworldly music: 'More threatening to him than the silence, the fear was that he wouldn't survive it. While he still had the strength, he looked round and what he saw was a silver branch, and it wasn't that the branch was making the music, it was the music, in its very being it was the music'.



*Five Leaves Left*, 2018 Oil on linen 40x56cm



There are many Otherworlds, and perhaps many Underworlds, all differing in the way the belly of salmon differs from the belly of stag, or crow. The Underworld of water is not the same as the Underworld of earth. And while all Underworlds are Otherworlds, not all Otherworlds are necessarily Underworlds.

But our old ancestral notion of the Otherworld is not always so precisely located, it is more like Henry Corbin's *Mundus Imaginalis*, a 'place outside of place, outside of where'. As such any boundary becomes liminal, none more so than the surface of water, river banks, and tide lines. These become invitations to reverie and dream, drawing us into their depths and shallows, surfaces and reflections.

Stories of the Selkie say something of our longing for a relationship with this realm. The woman who comes from the water hangs up her seal skin robe and just asks to be treated well. Typically she says 'Scold me three times, and I'll leave'. And the man, the fisherman, does. He just can't help himself. The contract is broken, so away she goes, and we've been lonely and longing for this strange wild spirit of the waters ever since.

The old stories suggest a widespread notion that there was once a sort of marriage contract between humans and the world that we've somehow forgotten but deeply long for.

Rivers, pools, springs and even the sea were regarded once as places of pilgrimage, where the gods and invisibles are most



*Circle Round the Sun*, 2019 Oil on linen 102x92cm

present. In classical Greece, before the establishment of the Apollonian pantheon on Mt. Olympus the nymphae acted as intermediaries with these spirits, constellating the bright omens and offering prophetic inspiration. Here we find a tradition of the well maidens. In Arthurian tradition it was the breaking of an old covenant with these that led to the necessity of the Grail Mystery. The old water source shrines of the nymphs were all silenced by the voice of Apollo in a cultural transition that sought to control and mediate the cults associated with water sources: the witches, wise women, diviners and magicians. The diviner Stephen Karcher describes them thus:

They are both highly attractive and highly dangerous, for they are spirit mediums, flash points that attract and constellate spirit forces. The nymphs were part of the in-scape, psyche, sources of inspiration, vortexes and swirls of psychic energy that break through into consciousness. If the gods are complexes, as Jung said, we cannot experience them without the nymphs.

Today there seems to be a widespread sense of disconnection with the land and natural world with the consequence that in the words of W. B. Yeats 'the centre cannot hold' - the world spins into chaos beset with fake news and spin. Old sureties are lost and no-one knows what to believe any more. The colonised imagination loses its connection to the deep sources of inspiration and becomes easily manipulated and corralled. Contemporary shamans and priests in Africa and elsewhere





*Ryll*, 2019. Oil on linen 36x31cm

still maintain the cults of the water spirits. In their life-giving nature they are considered closest to god and offer the most powerful healing and restoration, re-establishing the connection with ancestors who are themselves the stream of life as it flows through time.

The dreaming earth mutters, mumbles, sings and roars through water's polyphony, calling us to be present; to remember what has been shattered, dismembered and forgotten. It is a conversation we absented ourselves from too long ago. But the voice still cries out to be heard by poets, artists and mystics. To insist these are the voice of the artist himself is a form of theft perpetrated by the colonising mind intent on taking everything for itself and believing itself to be the source of all inspiration.

The mythologist Sean Kane suggests that 'Myth...among people who live by hunting, fishing and gathering, seems to be the song of the place to itself, which humans overhear'. This is perhaps no less true of other art forms where an artist maintains a fidelity to place and allows themselves to be claimed; digging in and surrendering hours to give form to something that calls. Who then is the one being dreamt?

*The Source*, 2019 Oil on linen 44x58cm







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