

Castles in the air

In the first of her series on Camberwell's distinguished artists, *Selina Eger* looks at David Hepher and his work

David Hepher was born in the north of England in 1935. He was fortunate in that he had parents who were both interested in the arts and encouraged his early wish to paint. At 17 he was sent to London with some of his work to see their friend Edward Bawden, at that time head of the Royal College of Art, for advice. He was directed to Camberwell where he joined the School, things being less formal in those days. At this time, they and he were much influenced by the Euston Road group of painters and he was painting figuratively. Since that time, he has taught at Camberwell and then as Professor of Fine Art at the Slade.

David's work has always fascinated me as an architect as it records a time of great hope for the creation of a new society, influenced both by the new methods of construction available with reinforced concrete and by new, utopian ideas of how people might better want to live. Le Corbusier's *la Ville Radieuse* and *Unité d'Habitation* at Marseille were seminal influences; a tutor of mine who was working on the Heygate estate was considered to have the coolest job going. This euphoria did not last. The building trade did not take readily to factory construction methods using precise three-

dimensional grids, and families did not much like living in the air in buildings that were poorly maintained and without adequate local facilities. It was a while before it was realized that high rise buildings did not achieve any greater density of population than before, but removed people to be out of reach of the open spaces created. The Walworth area became a slum that is only recently being redeveloped.

David's paintings though do not show this. They record the buildings as local landscape. He says he lives in a city and that forms his landscape. There is a degree of selection operating here though and something about these new, so-called Brutalist, buildings must have fascinated him. Perhaps their grid construction, perhaps that they were so new and utopian, perhaps the raw anger they generated, perhaps the opportunity to show a human side of them. He himself says in the introduction to his latest exhibition: "I wanted to paint something that everyone could relate to; nondescript ordinary, high-rise towers. I didn't want them to be famous architecture. I thought that they were impressive - I was excited by the scale of the subject."

Camberwell flats Nocturne 2014 oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Flowers Gallery



I went to meet David at his home and studio in Camberwell Grove, a beautiful late Georgian house, the irony of which does not escape him. He makes a mean cup of coffee, and it was fascinating to hear him talk about his work. He has always, or almost always, painted buildings. He makes many references to other painters of buildings, sometimes with inclusion of images by them in his work and sometimes by paintings inspired by them.



David Hepher at work in his Camberwell Grove studio

There are remarkable and very colourful paintings in homage to Piranesi and some rather more sombre work influenced by Lowry. There is a reference to Thomas Jones, the early eighteenth century Welsh painter, whose work shows an interest not just in buildings but in their texture. He says at times these artists and others seemed relevant to what he was trying to do. They form a sort of counterpoint and this juxtaposition of ideas and images is ever present in his work.

David has always taught and enjoyed teaching. It has been an integral part of his life. You feel he probably knows most of the artists currently working in this country and sometimes there are cross references to this. A recent exhibition of Peter Doig's had a very powerful image of a lone man facing the Matterhorn. The Matterhorn also crops up occasionally in David's work - not always accurately but recognizably, and when we went up to his studio there it was again in his current painting, twice. He taught Doig. I think he likes playing games with these references.

They often form a part of what I think of as his grid paintings, that have been his most consuming works and are what he is currently working on. They are almost sculptural in that they are not images on a canvas. He paints on the same material that he is depicting. This is very powerful. No reproduced image does justice to its immediacy. The process is arduous.

He creates a slurry of concrete and covers either a board or canvas with this. Before it sets, he imprints it with board marks, achieving a texture similar to that of the Hayward Gallery. He then paints on this in acrylic paint (oil paint would seep into the porous surface). The acrylic has the benefit of being reminiscent of a shiny building material. It allows very precise work, showing the balconies and windows within the grid in great detail, contrasting with the areas of rough concrete that remain. He also often uses photographic images, taken by himself, as the main depiction of these grids.

His paintings show the tower blocks as they are. There is not much evidence of human habitation, but then if you were to stand and watch one there wouldn't be either. Occasionally there is some washing hanging up on a balcony, or a person behind an open window. Within the roughness of the building grid he develops areas of intricately recorded detail, perhaps the reflection of the sky in windows or a lace curtain blowing in the wind.

Then there are the graffiti. If you live in an area where there is very little to do and quite a lot of bare concrete wall it probably does not take long for the idea of painting on them to develop. This happened on all these estates, perhaps as a way of expressing rebellion and rebellious ideas, sometimes as very beautiful, detailed paintings and more recently as tags claiming gang territory. David has inscribed his own graffiti on his work in a similarly arbitrary fashion, and usually in his 'own' colours of pink and blue. In a twist to his subject matter he has recently painted the new skyscrapers in Vauxhall. It is very far from being utopian. He says that his favourite view of them is of the central structural core before it is clad with flats. A minimalist view.

We climbed up the steep stairs to his studio in the attic, converted to raise the headroom and allow a northlight. Here he paints on enormous canvases, the size of which is only governed by the size of the door that gives onto the flat roof. From here they are lowered down to street level by ropes, a hazardous process which his gallery described as nail biting.

His most recent work shows larger and larger areas of rough concrete and is more abstract. Those who managed to visit the recent exhibition 'The Big City' at the Guildhall gallery will have seen some of them. To me they stood out from everything else in their materiality. They were not the city painted on canvas, they were the city.

David has had many one man and group shows; you can find his work in all major galleries, in London at the Tate Britain, the Museum of London and the Guildhall Gallery. There is a copy of the excellent monograph David Hepher, *Grain of Concrete - Utopia and Entropy* by Ben Lewis in the Camberwell Library. Many thanks to Flowers East Gallery.

Camberwell artists

Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, founded in 1898, has been an integral part of Camberwell life. When the School first opened on Peckham Road under the aegis of the London County Council, it offered day and evening instruction across a wide range of subjects from Architecture, Furniture Design, Life Drawing and Stained-Glass Work to Dressmaking, Pottery and Typography. The school soon established a reputation as a fundamental influence on art development throughout the country when, after the end of World War II, it brought together many of the notable artists formerly associated with the Euston Road School. These included William Coldstream, Lawrence Gowing, Victor Pasmore, Claude Rogers and William Townsend. The ethos of these artists lasted for a considerable time, although by 1992 Camberwell had lost its irreplaceable Fine Art course which had established its reputation. Nevertheless, it has had many famous and varied alumni. Among the central London schools of art, it is singular in being in an area where property is relatively cheap. This has led to many artists remaining in the area after they graduated and has given Camberwell its rich artistic community, with many local studios and an annual arts festival.

Of those who have remained and work in Camberwell David Hepher is perhaps the most remarkable as he does not only live and work here but also takes Camberwell and its close environs as his main subject matter.

Camberwell-based artist and nonagenarian Bernard Cohen's exhibition opens at the Flowers Gallery, Cork Street on 6 September. See **What's On**.