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Clive King: June 17 - July 16, 1994

The Art Museum at Florida International University Frost Art Museum

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Clive King

June 17 - July 16, 1994

Curated by Dahlia Morgan, Director

Essay by Barbara J. Watts, Ph.D.

The Art Museum
AT FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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DIRECTOR'S FORWARD

The Art Museum at Florida International University is pleased to present the work of Clive King. Mr. King joined FIU's Visual Arts Department as chair in 1992. His large-scale body of drawings and paintings from the Valley of the Witches series reflects both his childhood experiences in Cwmwrach, Wales, and his magical world-view of sacred places and ancient cultures.

I wish to thank Dr. Barbara Watts, Associate Professor in the Visual Arts Department at FIU, for her insightful essay.

This exhibition is sponsored at The Art Museum by the James Deering Danielson Foundation; American Airlines; the State of Florida Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs through the Florida Arts Council; the Metropolitan Dade County Cultural Affairs Council and the Metropolitan Dade County Board of County Commissioners; and the Friends of the Art Museum.

Dahlia Morgan
Director

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ARTIST’S STATEMENT

For several years I have been working on a semi-autobiographical series of drawings and paintings. The umbrella title, Valley of the Witches, is the direct English translation of Cwmgwrach, the small Welsh pit village where I spent a great deal of my childhood.

The title gives a flavor of the main themes that interest me—the uneasy relationship between landscape and industry, magic and superstition, cultural erosion, secret/sacred places, characters and events.

Although the paintings are no less important, the large drawings are my main preoccupation. They are a constant nine-foot high and vary in width. It is necessary for them to dominate human scale. Many of them are of high drama in epic landscape, to me they are slices of theatre and need room for their energy to fully develop. It is hard working with graphite on such a scale, but no other drawing material can give me the flexibility, the graphicy and bite that I require.

Most of the work on display have two levels of interpretation, there is an almost literal public face based on an actual place or incident. Each piece has its own private meaning, usually a condition of mind, that is accessible only to myself. For the spectator that wishes to speculate there are some obvious clues.

I have spent much time in the American Southwest in ancient Anasazi Indian sites such as Chako Valley, New Mexico and Mesa Verde, Colorado and more recently Mayan sites in the Yucatan. The sites of the subjects of my work have been expanded from South Wales to include parallel evocative experiences in these areas.

For me there is a similarity between Celtic, Mayan and Anasazi Culture, in symbol, color and ritual, so I have no problem developing a synthetic imagery which feeds off all three sources.

The paintings explore the same themes as the drawings, but do a different job. They create a more sensual, tactile, erotic environment and sealed in “hot-house” effect.

– Clive King

Sanctuary, 1994, Acrylic on canvas, 82” x 68”
Mad Dog Day, 1992-93, Graphite on paper, 108" x 72"
Clive King: Myth, Metaphor, and Experience

Clive King, who joined FIU's Visual Arts Department as chair in 1992, hails from Cwmgwrach, a small village in south Wales. Wales lays claim not only to King's origins but also to his art. This is not to say that his work deals exclusively with Wales and his Celtic heritage, but rather that in Wales, King discovered the nature of his muse. There, he realized that for him, artistic expression is tied to his experience of specific "locations". A place's physical qualities, its mythic heritage, and his personal experience of that place, create, in King's art, his own narrative, a personal myth that evokes the distant past, but that bespeaks the memories of his own lived experiences. The genesis of King's recent work, therefore, is grounded in those places that have triggered in him intense feelings—feelings magical, sensual, spiritual, and horrific. The literal locations that are the subjects of his works extend to areas far afield from Wales, to the remains of Indian civilizations in southwest America, and to Mayan sites in the Yucatan. These "locations" are richly evocative of humanity's early history, lands that offer fragments from a layered past that have been unearthed in the present, places once resonant with the sounds of life, now eloquently mute in their silence, a silence that calls upon one's inner voice to speak in their place. In his drawings and paintings, King's inner voice responds, with emotion and passion.

In some works, King's "locations" are quite literal, representing actual places and specific experiences that he had when visiting them. In others, the "location" is more metaphorical: though a work may refer to a specific place, its subject is not so much that place as it is a reflection of King's state of mind. Here, "location" serves as a vehicle for the expression of King's feelings; it thus becomes a vista seen in retrospect, one that reflects King's present as well as his past. In short, King's images offer pictorial distillations of his life, which is cast and recast by his reshaping imagination. Their biographical content does not, however, preclude a larger significance. The personal quest that King's work records offers an archetypal narrative of "Everyman," who, journeying through life, invests certain experiences with significance, sacred and profane. Thematically, his work thus recalls epic accounts of pilgrimages and their resulting series of personal and spiritual transformations, Dante Alighieri's Commedia, Lord Byron's Childe Harold and James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

The media in which King works are drawing and painting. For him, these media are largely interchangeable, each being a responsive extension of the other. This is implicitly suggested by the analogous size of his drawings and paintings, which measure nine feet high, a scale that makes his works, when displayed as a series, dominate the wall and subsume the viewer. For King, drawing is sharp, edgy, gritty, and kinetic, whereas painting is tactile and sensual, and accordingly, appropriate for subjects that are "particularly rich," that require an emphatic sense of "tactile value." King's choice of medium, therefore, depends upon the nature of the "location" and the emotional content that he wishes to express through it. Representations of his Wales experience (Pig Sunday, Mad Dog Day) are drawn in graphite. This medium enables King to create an atmosphere that is both literarily descriptive and personally evocative; graphite's coal-like tones suggest Wales's landscape and cool climate. And, as well, the bleak atmosphere of its mining towns. So too, the tensile lines that graphite allows enables King to give his drawings a prickliness and nervous edge that individualizes his Welsh "locations" and their violent imagery, making these "locations" King's own.

When sensuousness is intrinsic to the work, as in Dreamer's Lute, King turns to painting, using naphthol crimson, a pigment that for him is emotionally expressive, offering a range of hues that allows diverse emotions to voice themselves. Although certain subjects require one medium, some, when contemplated at a different moment, may call for pictorial restatement in another medium. Thus, King recast his drawing Sanctuary in paint. That a specific image can assume a different character in King's mind, one that warrants a different medium, underscores the blend between past and present that is fundamental to his art: the perception of a place is colored by subsequent experiences, and King's memories of "locations" serve as metaphors for his state of mind, the "undertruth" of each work.

King's drawings are composed of rectangular squares of durable paper that he has taped together. This provides a geometry, a simple ordering system that King prefers be the underpinning of all his works. King works intuitively, drawing, erasing, and redrawing, "abusing the surface," feeling his way towards the image in his mind's eye. As he continually reworks the surface, King's drawing becomes the shadow foundation for another drawing, and yet another. This method of using the eraser as a drawing tool "to carve things back," is a critical part of King's creative process: with change built into the very act of drawing, his technique has a fluidity that suits his intuitive way of working. At the same time, it enables him to mold forms and to make potent, volumetric shapes that he could not otherwise achieve. King likes to see the drawing in progress and the drawing beneath it simultaneously, to have "all the production values up on the screen," as he erases and congests the paper. This process bespeaks the flux of temporality—a present that becomes the past, overlaid with a new present that will also become the past—and it is essential to King's notion of creative progress:

When you're working in a relatively intuitive way, you're bringing all the past with you, bringing all the little actions that you have with you, and you fall into all your own little clichés. A lot of the time, you've got
Pig Sunday, 1989, Graphite on paper, 108" x 72"
to get that down so that you can get to that particular state of mind. But that state of mind is history—you've got to go beyond that. So you're actually canceling and reinforcing, reinforcing what's good about your intuitive staff, and trying to cancel out the bad things that you've picked up from the past, and also the things that you've liked in the past that actually stick with you. You've got to knock them back and bring new things in. . . . You work your own way through it all 'til it's right, and obviously, it's wrong until it's right.

King's worked and reworked surfaces, in his drawings, and, as well, in his richly textured acrylic paintings, emphasize both the materiality of his medium and his process of intuitive image-making. In so doing, they metaphorically bespeak the literal, conceptual, and personal themes of his work. King's surfaces, which visibly reveal his material excavation of his own drawings and paintings, therefore present images in which the past and present are collapsed. They thus evoke the literal subjects of his works, those ancient places which once had a living story that now is history. These scarred and layered surfaces are also emblematic of King's personal excavation of his own past, of his interpretation and reinterpretation of that past in the ever-changing present.

The works in this exhibition represent a continuation of King's earlier series, Valley of the Witches, a title that refers to Cwmgwarch, the town in which he was born. According to legend, Cwmgwarch was founded around a community of "white witches" whose herbal cures drew people to them. King's series is not centered upon Cwmgwarch's origins, however, but rather, his own. His initial works in this series represent his return to Wales as an adult, recalling childhood memories and recovering a long-forgotten self. In King's work, this series represents a turn away from illustration and from the social and political issues that had been his themes, and a turn inward, to an expressive exploration of himself and the themes of his own life.

Pig Sunday, one of the early drawings in the series, represents an event that occurred annually in King's village, the day that each family's pigs were slaughtered. Its vacillating, atmospheric surface suggests a memory-image, and its hard, staccato marks amidst brittle, linear webs evoke the visual and aural experience of violent carnage. The design's geometry, with its patterned forms and emphatic central axis, transforms this annual event in the Welsh community into an image of ritualistic sacrifice.

Mad Dog Day records a single event in King's life, and in the series, it represents a point of transition. In 1992, King revisited Wales, feeling the need to bring closure to his Welsh experience. The subject with which he chose to do this, appropriately, is an event that marked the end of his youth in Wales. When he was eighteen, on the day before King and his friends were to depart for school or jobs in distant cities, they gathered for the last time at one of their childhood haunts, Morlais Castle, a Norman mound on a bluff overlooking the city. There they commemorated their friendship, drinking, reminiscing on the past, revealing in anticipations of the future, and sorrowing over their incipient parting. At the end of the day, the friends began their return to town, descending in the shroud of night's shadows. Suddenly, a pack of mad dogs attacked them. The town's butcher had distributed a consignment of rancid dog meat that had caused the dogs to go berserk. After terrorizing the town, they headed straight into the path of King and his friends. After the attack, the dogs ran into the caves of the Morlais Castle, and during the night, they died. Of this experience, King comments:

'It was like our own uncertain future; here we're breaking up, sad, maudlin, serviced by these dogs. It was a kind of epilogue to the whole thing, loss of innocence, drunkenness, celebration . . . We never had that unity again.'

Like Pig Sunday, Mad Dog Day is a densely packed image, but it has a greater sense of space and an overall effect that is more violent. Its scarred surface is etched with harsh lines and sharp-edged forms, their expressiveness heightened by dramatic light-dark contrasts. The setting represents a fusion of the "locations" of King's past and present: a fortress-like structure is overlayed with shapes reminiscent of Indian sites. In the foreground, menacing dogs bare their teeth, transforming the setting into a night-marish vision.

King's subsequent works treat American locations and experiences. On the whole, these represent an evolution towards larger forms, simpler designs, and an atmosphere more sensual than agitated. Devil's Gate, a colored drawing, represents an arch that King came upon in the Yucatan at a time when he was feeling particularly wretched. It suggested the Gates of Hell to him, creating an 'intensity of image' that he could not shake off. The drawing evokes the visceral, infernal image that King experienced, not, as in his earlier drawings, through congestion of imagery, but through a dominant simple shape in a design with an ambient space and expressive color. Other drawings, such as Loltan Caves, Macula, and Sanctuary, explore the evocative qualities of enclosed spaces. This represents a new direction for King, but one that has its roots in Wales, where as a youth, he was fascinated by caves, caverns, and the maze-like cells of bulldozered industrial sites. The cathedral-like spaces of the Loltan caves and Mesa Verde tapped something in King, making him feel "totally keyed into those spaces, giving him 'magical flashbacks'" to his youthful experiences. In most of these works, King represents door-windows found in Anasazi sites and at Mesa Verde, invert-
ed keystone shapes that he finds to be particularly powerful. For King, these door-windows serve as symbols of the "location:" as graphic shapes, they provide his designs with "a background orientation or wall so that I can throw all the action in the front." These drawings, though in graphite, have a character that is decisively different from his Wales drawings. As King observes:

The first ones are very dynamic, very active, incredibly dense, but as my focus changes, and as I actually get more focused, they get quieter, they get more ordered; these are more formal elements. You can run your eye panoramically and actually see the physical change in the work and in the quality of the line . . . . and I like that, seeing the whole history of the series there on the wall.

One of King's most recent drawings, Sanctuary, has a sense of space and calm that is dramatically different from the agitated drawings of former years, indicating a directional change in King's art and reflecting, pictorially, his own change of mood. As with previous drawings, the kiva shape serves as a physical focus, but here, this simple form provides the keynote of a unified and harmonious composition. The drawing's title fits its spirit. King comments:

Sanctuary is about things in my life that are beginning to make me very stable, all kind of bits and pieces, relationships, a feeling that I've adjusted to this place. Every week I feel more orientated. I like this long, hollowing kind of vital form (in the center), a vital presence, like fanning something down, fanning my energy down or my disorientation or fragmentation down, or releasing it and energizing me. There's a dual thing going on there. The floating presence in the center is like a logo for something that's giving me stability. Now, everything's calming down a bit, as I'm deintensifying things; although there's a lot there, I'm not jam-packing the image any longer.

Dreamer's Lust, The Nectum, Parsipo (Ghost Hole), and Sanctuary comprise a subseries within Valley of the Witches that King has titled Savage Gardens, an oxymoron that suggests his ongoing dialectic with himself. Each has a profusion of images, symbols, and totemic shapes that surround a stabilizing "general statement" in the center, giving a clear focus to the design and a formal unity to the series. King's colors create atmospheres that reinforce the characters of his subjects. The fiery reds of Dreamer's Lust, for example, evoke a torpid sensuality that underscores the work's sexual content. In Parsipo and Sanctuary the palette is cooler. In these, the reds also have a dynamic presence, but the overall coloristic effect is more spiritual than sensual, again suggesting a potent life-force, but one that is under control. King's need to express himself with color and his introduction of warm hues reflects his response to the climates of the southwest and of south Florida:

I find all these areas very exotic, I find them very sensual as well, just the way I feel in this area, the way I feel my skin's changing and these sensual things come through in the paintings . . . . There are a couple of cool ones, because of the climate I came from; I used to be a very cool painter, but now my paintings are definitely warming up in the climate. I'm going to go with that for the time being, because I'm still finding my way in this new environment . . . . What's nice about areas like that is that it justifies you making this giant leap, a life-changer; you're wondering what the hell you're doing going places—"Life, Part Two" coming down here. Sometimes I wonder, "Although I like Miami, is this it?" And then I find on my doorstep things that I can directly tune into creatively, and that's an affirmation of that move. So I've romanticized it quite a lot, but I've found something to touch me here that actually continues . . . . and that's like lifting a curtain.

With Valley of the Witches, King has lifted the curtains of his past and present, offering a dramatic pictorial narrative that draws the viewer into his world, a world chilling and warm, violent and peaceful. The "locations" that he describes, literal and metaphorical, have a compelling vitality that command response. Let us hope that his journey continues, and ours with him.

Barbara J. Watts, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Visual Arts Department
Florida International University

*This essay, including quotations, is drawn from a taped interview with Clive King (4 May 1994, Miami, Florida).
EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

DRAWINGS
Valley of the Witches, 1988
Graphite on paper
108” x 132”

Pig Sunday, 1989
Graphite on paper
108” x 72”

Unthinkable Memory, 1989
Graphite on paper
108” x 48”

Manyunk Kiva, 1990-91
Acrylic oil, graphite on paper
108” x 48”

Secret Meeting, 1990-91
Acrylic oil, graphite on paper
108” x 120”

Kiva Rinconada, 1991-92
Graphite on paper
Triptych, central panel
108” x 72”

Running Shelf, 1992
Graphite on paper
Triptych, left panel
108” x 24”

Running Shelf, 1992
Graphite on paper
Triptych, right panel
108” x 24”

Unthinkable Memory, 1989
Graphite on paper
108” x 48”

Mad Dog Day, 1992-93
Graphite on paper
108” x 72”

Loftan Caves, 1993-94
Graphite on paper
Triptych
108” x 120”

Sanctuary, 1994
Graphite on paper
108” x 72”

Dreamer’s Lust, 1990
Acrylic on canvas
82” x 68”

The Nectarium, 1990-91
Acrylic on canvas
82” x 68”

The Parsipo (Ghost Hole), 1992
Acrylic on canvas
82” x 68”

The Anvil Revisited, 1994
Acrylic on canvas
82” x 68”

Coruscation, 1994
Acrylic on canvas
82” x 68”

Devil’s Gate, 1994
Acrylic and graphite on paper
108” x 72”

Loftan, 1994
Acrylic on canvas
82” x 68”

Sanctuary, 1994
Acrylic on canvas
82” x 68”

ARTIST’S BIOGRAPHY

Selected Solo Exhibitions:
1990 Glynn Vivian Gallery, Swansea, Wales
1988 Nexus Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
1986 John Furlong Gallery, Wisconsin, IL
Eau Claire Gallery, Wisconsin, IL
Spaces Gallery, Exeter, England
1975 South Hill Park Art Centre, Bracknell, England

Selected Group Exhibitions:
1993 Miami-Dade Community College Art Gallery, Miami, FL
Gulf Coast Art Gallery, Panama City, FL
Ground Level Gallery, Miami Beach, FL
Dunedin Fine Art Center, Dunedin, FL
1990 A&B Gallery, Philadelphia, PA

Publications:
1989 Six British Artists, traveling exhibition
1988 Milton Keynes Open, Milton Keynes, England
1983 Images for Today, traveling exhibition
1979 Southampton Art Gallery, Southampton, NY
1975 Bohun Gallery, Henley-on-Thames, England
1974 Chapel Gallery, New York, NY

1986 Illustrations for Baudelaire’s Flowers of Evil
Inky Parrot Press
Studio International, Design, Arts Review, Artist Newsletter, Contemporania