JOHN HITCHENS
Aspects of Landscape

SOUTHAMPTON
CITY ART GALLERY
Jo# Hitchens was born in 1940. He was educated at Bedales School, Petersfield, Hampshire, and studied fine art at Bath Academy of Art at Corsham (1958–61).

He lives and works near Petworth, West Sussex.

His paintings are held in many public and private collections in the UK and abroad. Jo# Hitchens’ work has been shown in more than 30 solo exhibitions and in numerous group shows.

The main source of his paintings are the landscapes of the British Isles.

A period photographing these landscapes from the air, gave him an awareness of land as a two-dimensional composition. Much of his current work is abstract, with strong landscape associations.

Jo# Hitchens comes from a family of painters, including his father, Ivon Hitchens (1893–1979) and grandfather, Alfred Hitchens (1861–1942).

Introduction

‘Aspects of Landscape’ coincides with Jo# Hitchens’ 80th birthday. This major retrospective presents the first overview of his work over nearly sixty years, in all its variety. Thanks to the space available across four exhibition galleries at the Southampton City Art Gallery, it has been possible to include some large-scale paintings which have not been seen in public before.

Much of Hitchens’ work is influenced by the landscape of Sussex and the South Downs, where he grew up and where he still has his studio. He first became known as a landscape painter in the 1960s and ‘70s, with several solo exhibitions in London.

Public collections across the UK have acquired his work, and these paintings are now displayed on the Art UK website for the world to see. Interestingly, there are now four generations of Hitchens artists on the site, Jo# being accompanied by his father Ivon, his grandfather Alfred and his son Simon.

Over the past decades, Hitchens’ work has evolved and changed considerably. His inquisitive mind and prodigious creativity continue to find new ways of seeing forms, patterns, light and colour, and connections between them in our landscape, and of presenting them for the viewer to behold.

In my mind, it is this sensitive observation of landscape, of man-made patterns and traces on the land, that makes Jo# Hitchens’ work so relevant at a time when many of us are re-thinking our relationship to the land we inhabit.

Andrew Ellis
Director of Art UK
John Hitchens’ retrospective begins with seven large-scale works painted in the past two decades, between his 60th and 80th birthdays. These have not been shown in public before.

They explore new ways of seeing and depicting aspects of landscape, and represent a departure from the artist’s earlier depictions of wide horizons and large skies in the South Downs, Scotland and Wales, painted up to the 1980s (Galleries 3, 4).

A period of working with aerial photography, flying low over the fields of the South Downs, had given Hitchens a different awareness of the landscape. The subject matter of these recent paintings is still landscape-related but freer in its interpretation, with objects inhabiting their own environment and space.

Dots and lines reflect rows of stubble, post-holes in the ground and paths on the hills. Dark areas hark back to the custom of stubble burning, which remained common into the 1990s.

The viewer’s relationship with these large canvases changes with proximity, as smaller areas of detail capture the landscape on a more intimate scale.

Alongside these large works Hitchens has, since the 1990s, created a separate body of work using shaped and textured canvases, often singly and on a smaller scale (Gallery 2).
Gallery 1
‘Departure’ – Recent Paintings, 2000 onwards

Contour Sequence, 2004,
oil on canvas, 117 x 91.5 cm / 46 x 36 in
The decade after 1990 saw fundamental changes in Hitchens’ work and in his approach to the subject of landscape. He dispensed with many features of his earlier work and turned his attention to exploring landscape through its essential elements, such as stones, sand or wood. Structures were reduced to the basic forms of line and circle.

A group of collages and paintings based on stone circles belong to this period. A cluster of works explore cup-shaped forms based on partly opened circles, partly enclosed centres or hollow forms in wood. The device of outlining an area repeatedly with parallel lines draws both on soil formations and more transient patterns created by the plough.

Another innovation of this time saw Hitchens depart from the use of conventional square-cornered canvases. His paintings reveal the influence of other, three-dimensional art forms, such as land art and sculpture. The selection of works in this gallery includes examples of distinctive, irregularly shaped and layered canvases.

As Hitchens’ approach to his subject changed, so too did his practice, with the transition from painting in the landscape to working as a studio artist. Indoors, the shifting arrangement of the studio and its collection of found, assembled and created objects has since become a source of inspiration in itself, as well as a living installation (Gallery 0).
Field Interweave, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 113 × 206 cm / 44½ × 81 in
The main focus of this room is the Far Wood series of paintings, which make up a large part of John Hitchens’ work from this period.

Far Wood, with its dense vegetation, lies near the artist’s Sussex studio. Locations further afield gave rise to a contrasting group of paintings in the course of the 1970s. Painted at Selsey and various locations in Scotland, they show Hitchens interpreting other landscapes in the British Isles, such as the wide, sandy beaches of North Uist.

The Far Wood landscapes of the 1980s are characteristic of Hitchens’ approach at this time. He was beginning to dispense with skylines and cloud formations, and his paintings were becoming freer in their construction and brushwork. Towards the end of this period, the Great Storm of 1987 hastened these developments by introducing new and unfamiliar forms to Hitchens’ subject matter.

A large number of smaller paintings featuring the Wealden view from Duncton Hill, and scenes in Wales and the Scottish Highlands, date to the same period. These had to be omitted from the exhibition but are represented in the artist’s monograph, published concurrently by Sansom & Co.
Sollas Sand, 1969,
oil on canvas, 50.5 × 76 cm / 20 × 30 in

Church Norton, March Sunset, 1970,
oil on canvas, 43 × 151.5 cm / 17 × 59¾ in

Through the Blue Day, 1984,
oil on canvas, 61 × 213 cm / 24 × 84 in (detail)
‘South Downs Blue Hill’ is one of the earliest works in John Hitchens’ retrospective. Painted in 1964, it shows a view of the South Downs landscape close to his Sussex studio – an environment which has been a defining influence throughout his artistic life.

1964 also marked the year of Hitchens’ first solo exhibition in London, at the age of 24. It was mounted by the Marjorie Parr Gallery, where many of his subsequent solo exhibitions were held.

Following the gallery’s closure, he was represented by Montpelier Studio, also in London.

This part of the exhibition shows several examples of Hitchens’ early landscapes, featuring open spaces, hills, the sea, and cloud formations.

Flowers were another theme of this period. The resulting group of paintings includes examples of abstraction, reducing flowers to spaces of colour, as well as later, more naturalistic works.
Two recent paintings resulting from Jo# Hitchens’ collaboration with American composer Peter Dayton are displayed in the Main Hall:

From Sombre Lands, Orchestral, 2016, oil on canvas, 183 × 366 cm / 72 × 144 in

Grounds, 2018, oil on canvas, 84 × 366 cm / 33 × 144 in (see page 2)

See also the composer’s website: www.peterdaytonmusic.com/grounds-string-orchestra

(A newly released record of the composer’s work is on sale at the gallery.)

Photographs on pages 2, 3 and 18 © Anne Purkiss
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Opening Times:
Mon to Fri: 10am – 3pm, Sat: 10am – 5pm,
Sun: Closed, Bank Holidays: 10am – 3pm.
Free Admission

Emma’s Field, 2015, oil on canvas, 103 × 230.5 cm / 40½ × 90½ in