

Books *Reviews*

Take two

The publication of the catalogues raisonnés of William Coldstream and Peter Lanyon is an opportunity to assess their work and careers. By **Andrew Lambirth**

William Coldstream: Catalogue Raisonné

Peter T.J. Rumley

Sansom & Company, 304pp, £45 (hb)

Peter Lanyon: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings and Three-Dimensional Works

Toby Treves

Modern Art Press, 688pp, £150 (hb)

William Coldstream (1908–87) is something of an enigma in the British art world. Better known as a teacher and arts administrator (author of the 1960 Coldstream Report, which changed the face of art education), he was also a painter of considerable sensitivity who has long been associated with an inflexible method of observational painting known as “Euston Road”, after the school he co-founded. Coldstream’s own painting is all about doubt and uncertainty, and the immense difficulty of realising a convincing image of a person or place on a canvas. The distinctive measuring marks by which he tried to navigate around the canvas have been slightly referred to as “Camberwell dot-and-carry”, and undoubtedly many students seized upon this technique as a way of making pictures when their own invention failed. Coldstream’s art deserves better treatment.

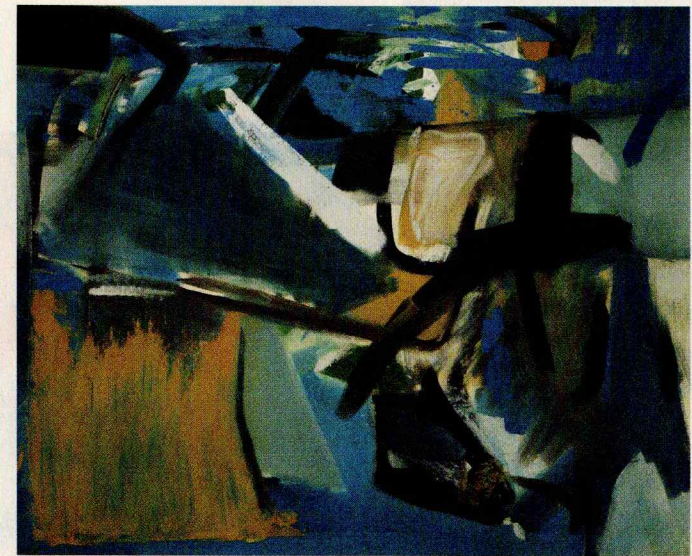
The publication of a catalogue raisonné of his paintings goes some way to redressing the balance, but this is an oddly unsatisfying book. Although it contains recently rediscovered 1930s paintings (such as the portraits of Christopher Isherwood and Louis MacNeice), little is made of them, and prominence is given instead to a series of dull 1960s portraits of businessmen. The book has been written by Peter Rumley, yet it has a preface of eight separate essays by artists and art-world luminaries. Rumley contributes a lengthy biographical account of the artist, which, while often interesting, seems out of place in a catalogue raisonné, especially given the existence of Bruce Laughton’s 2004 biography. I cannot help feeling that the present tome will do little to make Coldstream more visible, though it will be an invaluable work of reference for scholars and enthusiasts. A different book (or, better still, a carefully selected museum show) is needed to do proper justice to the man David Sylvester called “the Prime Minister of British art”.

In the summer of 1939, Peter Lanyon (1918–64) came to London from his native Cornwall to study for one term at the Euston Road School, under Coldstream and Victor Pasmore. For a while, Lanyon painted Euston Road still-lives, landscapes and portraits. Later he said that Coldstream’s “careful, structure concern” and Pasmore’s “extreme enthusiasm and beautiful use of paint” probably “infected me quite a lot and have done ever since”. He returned to Cornwall, fell under

the influence of Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo, and began to make 3D constructions and paint in an abstract idiom. Post-war, he explored ways of abstracting the figure in the landscape.

Modern Art Press is a registered charity that specialises in publishing handsome catalogues raisonnés and other educational art books. The Lanyon volume took Toby Treves ten years to write, but he has used that time constructively. There are three main texts: Treves’s beautifully and perceptively written introductory text, a stimulating essay by Sam Smiles on Lanyon and the English landscape tradition, and a joint essay by Treves and Mary Bustin on materials and techniques.

One of the lasting pleasures is the sheer richness and inventiveness of Lanyon’s achievement. Contemplating this substantial book, I almost felt I had discovered a new painter, to which no previous exhibition of his work had introduced me. Treves succinctly evokes Lanyon’s formal experiments in prose, which is not just eminently readable but also consistently enlightening. There are fascinating accounts of how he painted, starting with the early drawing out of designs on gesso-prepared boards with subsequent layers of thin paint much rubbed back and worked over, resulting in palimpsest-like paintings; of the change from board to canvas, and the broadening palette following visits to Mexico, Texas and the Tatra mountains of Czechoslovakia, introducing yellows, pinks and reds; and of the later collaging of items (mirror fragments, garden hose or pieces



The catalogues raisonnés include Coldstream’s recently rediscovered 1937 portrait of Christopher Isherwood (left) and Lanyon’s *Gunwalloe* (1959)

of polystyrene) to the picture surface.

Lanyon was much concerned with posterity and left detailed descriptions of the development of his artistic processes. Treves makes this material available to us – such as the complete text of an audio recording Lanyon made about the genesis of his painting *Offshore* (1959) – as well as quoting from the artist’s letters and contemporary critical responses. The book charts Lanyon’s output from around 1935 to his untimely death in 1964 – a mere 30-year career. Treves documents 613 items, including a group of glazed stoneware vessels made in the 1950s. This book is full of surprises, not least in terms of the paintings – so many lovely little paintings and unfamiliar but impressive larger ones – and is an essential purchase for any serious admirer of Modern British painting. It will also be the foundation of all future Lanyon scholarship. A model catalogue raisonné and an unexpectedly exciting one.

Andrew Lambirth is a freelance writer, critic and curator. He was the art critic of *The Spectator* from 2002 to 2014. He is currently writing a book about Bryan Robertson (1925–2002), legendary director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the 1950s and 1960s, art critic, writer and broadcaster