



TERRY FROST
Royal Academy
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It's a sad thing but nowadays, there's probably a bigger concentration of bad art around St. Ives and Newlyn than anywhere: sludgy views of sea and countryside, pretty boats on pretty beaches... Tourism injects money into an economy but it's a spider bite, dissolving the cultural innards prior to eating it entirely. It wasn't always so: there was a stronger economy - fishing, mining - which makes a harder and better bed for good artists to lie on. The snapshots record it all - there's Hepworth, and there's Nicholson, Lanyon, Hilton, Heron and isn't that Clement Greenberg lunching en plein air... De Kooning came, and bought a house. It's still a great place to visit, with a magical landscape and magical light: but who's left now from those heady days?

Well, Terry Frost for one. And he's 85. Frost was a commando in the Second World War, and he was captured in 1941. Without that war, he's certain he wouldn't have become an artist. Partly because he wouldn't have been thrown from the groove prepared for him by class and education (but stayed in the Midlands and worked in a local factory or shop) and partly because having seen front line action and the violent death of friends, having endured four years' incarceration in German prison camps, he was intent on doing what he wanted. He tried, soon after demobilisation, to return to that groove and it made him ill - psychosomatic, he says now, remembering that he was hospitalised and tested for this or that but they could find nothing major amiss. Of course in those days little credence was given to post-traumatic stress.

Life had become too precious. It couldn't be wasted. So he got himself to art school and, by now already over 30, sat down with the well-born

in the life room. Terry is emphatic that the war blew away class barriers in the years immediately following it, and he benefited from that situation - but he's aware as well they came back later... Before long he and Kath were heading for St Ives, which was where it was "happening." Life was joyous but hard - skivvying for long hours, caring for babies, Terry working on his art through the night if necessary. He uses the word "innocent" to describe himself in those early years, unencumbered by the inhibiting knowledge and reverence which glued his fellow Camberwell students to the floor. He says he was "learning without being taught." In close contact with the late Adrian Heath (a fellow prisoner in Germany, a lifelong friend and supporter) Victor Pasmore, Ben Nicholson and Roger Hilton, Frost went straight to the avant garde without passing GO, rejecting perspective and illusory space, moving into abstraction.

His work began to attract attention, and in the mid 1950's a Fellowship took Frost to Leeds. He was there at a time of good "ferment"; he must have enjoyed being part of what people now call "the cutting edge." But he struggled at the same time with the cult of "necessary rejection" which was rather built into the avant garde - i.e "no one will understand us, only the select few will buy our work." Terry wanted to escape the demands of teaching and yet if he were able to make a living out of selling work then the anxiety haunted him that the work must be no good... Those attitudes have largely gone: the embrace by younger artists of what he calls "the business-like" has helped Frost too. Like any successful artist, he has to juggle the prerequisites for survival as an artist (i.e. making the most of opportunities and contacts, etc) with the dedication to his art that sustains his self-respect. The art of compromise rather than the compromise of art. Of course, he gets angry, he feels hurt by rejection as we all do - but he's never become bitter. He's said of those days that he'd have preferred to make his living from the art and teach for the pleasure of it - rather than the other way round. Indeed, he cut back on the teaching when he became scared it would make him lie back and await the pension. But I think he did enjoy it, he enjoyed being with students; he still watches the achievements of new generations with genuine enthusiasm.

Frost has been a prolific artist, working extensively (alongside painting) in printmaking (most famously in a suite of prints inspired by Lorca, one of his great loves) and he's excited by the chance to turn his hand to designs for ceramics, and glass. He's happy to hire other people's skills to achieve projects in media where he can't do it all on his own. He admires the daring of artists like Damien Hirst, and wishes he'd had the same backing: he would have loved to expand more into other media. Some ten years ago he wanted to initiate a contemporary dance work using pure colour but he was unable to see

it to fruition. It remains in his mind, a project unachieved. Maybe there's a clue here to his staying power: anything he's wanted to do but hasn't done needles him, gets him out of bed. "Bugger" he thinks. "Must try it again."

He's been a prolific parent too: Kath and Terry have six children. In the 1960's, ready for a shift out of West Cornwall (where the art scene could get a bit overheated) he moved to Banbury, having found a house big enough for the family plus a space to work. They were placed, then, roughly equidistant between home territory (Terry was raised in Leamington Spa) and London. Alongside a widespread national and international success in terms of exhibitions, he taught mainly at Reading for much of his career, retiring finally as a Professor in 1981.

In the mid 1970's the Frosts moved back to Cornwall: they bought the house on the hill overlooking Newlyn where Terry and Kath still live. But a spate of deaths robbed them of Hepworth, Hilton and Bryan Wynter and the years that followed proved to be a testing time. There was a big retrospective show which opened at the Serpentine and toured in 1976/77 but the tide was turning against artists of Terry's generation. Radical developments were all around: conceptual and time-based work, new and vigorous figuration. Waddington ceased to represent Frost and he felt he was being consigned to history. If the Thatcher years were so famously about greed, the Frosts were not invited to the feast. I expect Terry was canny enough to have kept work from the 1950's and 1960's and sales of that doubtless helped, depressing though it was when he couldn't sell current work. But "the art game" as Terry calls it turns like a wheel, and now he's showing widely again.

In notes written some years ago, Terry described West Cornwall thus: "The sea contains such a narrow strip of land, it dominates by gale and wind, by pressure on the sand and rocks, and it lulls by blue and calm and sun and colour. Extremes: breaking points and warm cuddles of encouragement." His own work though, is not about extremes: I sense he's always pulled back from them, in his life and in consequence in his art. He might beat himself up over that sometimes, but at its best his work is electric - it makes huge light bulbs light up in your mind. It grows out of an intense preoccupation with colour and shape; it grows from interactions, endless possibilities around certain key forms, key colour combinations to which Frost returns lovingly and obsessively. I guess a Jungian would say his work is about "archetypes" and indeed, he's pleased to tell you that the concept of *The Three Graces* (one of Frost's most enduring loves) can be traced in many cultures as far back as 5000 B.C.

When I went to see Terry and Kath in late June, it was Mazy Day in Penzance: fireworks on the Friday night, parades and dressing up on Saturday, the main street given over to stalls, and in the evening there was music squeezing from the pub doorways, people out on the pull... And there were flags everywhere. Terry's work makes me think of flags. He has his shapes - they might derive from the sun or the moon, from curving lines of a boat or a body, from landscape, from other cultures, from love and desire - but he has them. Signs and signal flags, and I believe there will always be people who rally to such flying colours.

So here we are with another retrospective. I recall Terry didn't enjoy the last one (I helped to organise it) and he won't enjoy this one either. Why should he? It's not for him anyway. He knows that we must live in the present moment or we've had it. The piles of photographs he's taken during his life, particularly on his travels, attest to the moments when he sees the configurations of light or colour, of pattern or shape which inspire him. Dawn over the sea in Cornwall, the sun making shadows as if charring the very ground in Spain - these things have thrilled him, and fed into his art. The moment, something seen, the new experience, these things fire up his imagination. What matters to him is to be able to get up early, walk the few yards from house to studio and get stuck in.

Hugh Stoddart