

Stewart Lee, 2013

Sun Zoom Spark by Stewart Lee

Sun Zoom Spark takes its title from a song by Anthony Frost's beloved Captain Beefheart, the Mojave desert avant-blues auteur and abstract neo-primitivist who died in 2010. Much has been written already of the importance of music in Frost's work. Perhaps, on arriving in Cornwall, critics can't help but expect artists to cite the light and the landscape as their major muses, so it's counter-intuitive to find Frost turning away, perhaps quite deliberately, from the view out over the sea from his Penzance studio window, to surfaces littered with scratched CDs, and a spattered radio playing 6 Music's tasteful mix of hipster art rock all day. From this endless audio slipstream he snatches snappy titles for the works the sounds inform. "I have a notebook of titles for paintings, things I hear on the radio, snippets of phrases. Look. Beautiful burnout. Future babble. Autotune. This phrase 'desert wolf growl' was in a review of a solo album by Drumbo from Captain Beefheart's Magic Band. I paint the picture and then fit the title to it. But this exhibition was different because I knew the paintings were going to be titled after Captain Beefheart songs. I only titled them last week. Strictly Personal. Bat Chain Puller. Look. That looks like a bat chain puller, doesn't it. And you can see why that one is Shiny Beast."

Coming of age just at the right time to absorb the last fading rays of psychedelia and the first gluey fumes of punk, to this day Frost still knows much more about mysterious contemporary music genres like dubstep, happy hardcore, and grime than a man in his early sixties might reasonably be expected to. And it seems to me that Frost creates like a free jazz improviser, painting himself into unknown corners and then trying to extemporise his way out of them. He chooses various canvases without apparent thought, buying "every size of stretched canvas that the company makes because I thought the different shapes of the canvas would dictate what I produced. The use of different materials gets more and more prominent as I'm getting older."

Frost's methods echo John Cage's experiments with unpredictability, and the formal rules by which free improvising musicians engage with the unfamiliar and the unexpected. I once saw the saxophonist Evan Parker duet brilliantly with a leak in a Cheltenham theatre roof, that dripped into an unhelpfully sonorous tin bucket, an event I'm sure Frost would relate to. He goes on, "I use a lot of physical objects, and work with different materials to see what happens, to see what they present. This time I worked my way through all the different canvases, with different materials – windsurf sails, fishing nets and such like – stuck down on them at random. I try to collage over the whole thing with all this beach stuff in a non-thinking way, to try and come to it as if it's unfamiliar each time, so that when I come to paint over it I have to make sense of something I don't understand. I put it all on a stretcher without thinking and then it's a case of bringing it all together. Basically I collage and then I fill in and then I have to make something magical out of it. I discover things like drips, bleeds, dots, depressions, and I have to paint with them. That green bit there wasn't what I wanted," he says, gesturing at a piece, "but it was what happened. Accidents will happen. Obviously, I've learned to capitalise on them, but even so I don't want them to be contrived."

The Fluxus artist Emmett Williams coined the phrase "the topography of chance" to describe a catalogue of objects left on the desk of his friend Daniel Spoerri, and it's too good a phrase

not to invoke in relation to the unplanned landscapes Frost cajoles into being as underlay for his finished pieces. But two things strike me about Frost's explanation of his methods. Firstly, he denies the pull of the local landscape, and of specifically Cornish influences, in favour of non-stop diet of pre and post punk noise, perhaps indicating an attempt to escape the shadow of The St Ives School. But his use of nautical detritus nevertheless serves, inadvertently, to give the pieces a specific geographical flavor. Those post-war painters are every bit as persuasive as the Godfather's mobsters, of whom Michael Corleone famously said, "Just when I thought I was out... they pull me back in." Despite his best efforts, Frost's ended up painting over sails and netting and beach junk, all of which is very Cornish. "Yeah," he agrees, "but if I was in London I'd use whatever was lying about. But I am in Cornwall, so I just respond to the materials around me. Sails, rigging, windsurfing stuff. I'm like a beachcomber making use of what I've found."

Secondly, though Frost appears to be contriving strategies to escape from himself, to paint and create almost subconsciously and automatically, isn't this ultimately a doomed exercise? "Well, you can't escape the fact that you've painted before, you can't escape that," he admits, "but I don't want to. The bottom line is you can't get away from the experience, the knowledge, the bit you use although you also try to suppress it. I want it to be almost free form but it can't be because I can't help the fact that it's me doing it. But I'm always trying not to make something that is not strictly representational but something that is honest, real and truthful. This refers back to someone like Mark E Smith, from The Fall, because no matter what comes up in the world he is always going to make something that is real, not let himself off the hook. He is always the real thing."

Tellingly, the last strand of Frost's current creative splurge has a personal flavor. "The last thing I did before this exhibition was I ordered every paint that Golden Acrylic make, and I inherited my dad's paints too, so I got all these colours I would normally not use. Like these grays...." Frost's father was Terry Frost, one of the key players in the Cornish art scene, who died in 2003. He is amongst a number of artists whose influence is currently being reassessed in the Tate St Ives' exhibition, *The Far And The Near*, which contextualises The St Ives School alongside De Kooning, Bonnard, and Matisse, showing how the '50s St Ives artists now have international standing. If I were a dramatist staging Anthony Frost's life, I'd use the scene where he finally uses his late father's paints as a perhaps rather heavy handed way of showing someone coming to terms with their history. As we drive over the moors, having viewed the Tate exhibition, listening to a new CD reissue of Beefheart's *Bat Chain Puller*, I ask Frost if he feels like he's part of a tradition.

"My thing with my father was he was always referring to nature and landscape then he'd go all Russian constructivist, repeating images, and then there'd be a sun or a moon bursting out over the sea. But I wanted to be totally abstract. I wanted to be different to my dad, totally abstract, and anything that seemed recognizable I'd just paint it out." "But your paintings do communicate unambiguous feelings," I suggest, "happiness, and positivity, so you've not avoided definite statements. And that painting, *Tinned Teardrop*, to me it's a landscape." "I suppose.", Frost concedes, "I can see it's almost an aerial view, from every angle going. That's another thing I wouldn't have done in the old days, turn all of the paintings around while I'm doing them. If its better upside down I'll turn it round and paint it another way. If it helps me, I'm not bothered now."

I've walked the landscape of the Penwith Peninsula many times, following old trails over open ground, between burial chambers, and stone circles and industrial archaeological remains. Driving through it now with Frost, past his cottage on the North Atlantic Coast, it takes on a different hue, as he points at the Zennor hilltop where Bryan Wynter set off explosives on Bonfire night, or the Gunard's Head pub where his father's artist friends played local farmers at cricket, or the Botallack cottage where Roger Hilton painted through the night. Time collapses a little bit. And then the influence of a morning staring at Frost's canvases kicks in, and I feel the fuzzy visual afterbuzz you sometimes get off a heavy dose of abstracts, and momentarily I'm above the landscape even as we pass through it at ground level, looking down as swathes of purple and green and brown knot themselves around rocky prehistoric outcrops and the pitted depressions of old mine workings, seeking to make the best of the hand they've been dealt.

Stewart Lee, *writer/clown*

