

## English National Opera Residency

In 2014, Hammick became the first Visual Artist-in Residence for the ENO (English National Opera) at a pivotal moment in his development as an artist.

Hammick sat in on many rehearsals, and witnessed the development from design stage of numerous productions under the artistic directorship of John Berry at a time when ENO was arguably at its most collaborative and avant-garde. Rachel Campbell-Johnston's article in *The Times* (2015) describes how the challenge for Hammick was 'not to be too derivative or literally illustrative'. He had to conjure up a world of imagery from narratives that were inspired by the ENO productions, but not falling into the trap of transposing the works directly from the designers and directors engaged in the Operas during his tenure at The London Coliseum.

Hammick acknowledges the extent to which his residency at the ENO transformed his work; it was an intoxicating and fertile environment for him, and opened up a new line of investigation and enquiry within his vocabulary as a visual artist where he was able to extend the characters beyond what was presented onstage and written up in the libretto of each opera.

As an example, *Walther von Stolzing's New Suit* (oil on canvas, 2015, 188 x 244) derived from Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*, shows the way the artist adds to and adapts the narrative and emotional impact of Walther's loving relationship with Eva. Time

has shifted beyond the remit of the opera. Walther's castle, (mentioned in the opera as he initially walks to Nuremberg) is re-imagined as a minimalist modernist pavilion on the edge of the Bavarian forest. The now married couple are captured luminously in their future where light and colour is heightened, as if the whole scene is seen through tinted isinglass that refracts the light. The saturated and surreal colour palette throughout the picture-plane can be seen as a metaphor for the breathtaking singing that takes place in the opera at the end amongst the quintet of singers at the competition. It lifts the listener into a revelry, as Walther's Prize Song in *Meistersinger*, his 'Selige Morgentraum', (blissful morning dream); the audience experiences Walther's understanding that his love for Eva has made him at last into a true artist. This becomes the 'eureka' moment of the opera and something through the cultural assonance of transposition that Hammick is exploring in his painting.... That art can be transformed and elevated by love. It is one of the greatest celebrations of art, love and altruism in Opera. As an image, Hammick is attempting to re-conjure and explore this in the language of painting.

The image depicts the two ethereal figures in a forest clearing; the male figure faces the viewer ecstatically flaunting his embellished new suit, and the woman faces him welcoming his homecoming. It's as if the viewer's experience of Walther, fresh and innocent, reminds Eva time and time again of whom she is now married to. In the opera it is insinuated that after the prize-giving they will return

home together. Campbell-Johnston picks up on the way Hammick 'selects and unravels a single strand' of narrative to imply that Walther's child-like enthusiasm for all beautiful things, from birdsong and nature to a well cut suit, is humored by Eva as his return from future expeditions beyond the singing competition is celebrated. Their loving relationship is looped in the painting around a life of parting and returning. Campbell-Johnston goes onto describe in the same article how these paintings impersonate the mode by which opera operates, 'drawing its audience into a mad, simultaneous melee'.

The dense layers of potential meaning within the works of this time are synchronous with Hammick's depth of inspirations that are commonly explored in Opera, Theatre and Film. The ENO operas become the starting point of something that integrates with Hammick's own historical practice, and the tropes he often refers to in his visual source material. The architecture of Modernists like Mies Van der Rohe and Buckminster Fuller; the child-like imagery of Rousseau; Casper David's romantic use of '*Ruckenfigur*' and '*Waldeinsamkeit*', emphasizing aspects of Love and Loss, and the German Expressionists' emotional use of colour, are a few of the web of interpretive insights that Hammick draws from.

Many other paintings, monotypes, woodcuts and etchings from his residency at ENO instigate a similar polymathic working process; building up visual images to emphasize the equivalent of a core dramatic narrative within an opera. This gathering starts with hasty

choreographical notes made watching a performance and these lay down the parameters of an image's arrangement. In *Carmen and the Bull* (2015) both woodcut and monotype are block-like and set out as 'simple and forceful composition(s)' (Campbell-Johnston 2015), the fiery sun hanging low behind the female's proud and erect stance against the silhouette of the bull, to powerful effect. She is not the least bit affected by the solid malevolent mass of the bull and the heat of the sun in a scorching magenta sky. It's as if the indefatigable coolness of Carmen, dressed in a classically cut pale blue dress (transposed from a design by Hussein Chalayan) defies the brutality of her fate at the hands of her jealous lover Don Jose, wrapped up in the sexism and chauvinism of her time.

Similarly, in *Violetta and Alfredo's Escape* (2016 Woodcut, and 2015 painting) the 'uncanny atmosphere'; described by Dr. Gill Saunders, in her article celebrating the acquisition of 17 works by Hammick (2017); is created by his idiosyncratic and non-natural handling of light. Saunders recognises Hammick's ability to conjure motifs of winter and summer, 'dusk or dawn or moonlight' simultaneously within the same image, displaying a vision of a subtly displaced, dystopian world. This combined use of night and day, reminiscent of paintings by Max Ernst and Henri Magritte, mix with Hammick's flattened out imagery, adding a stage set theatricality to the distilled and childlike narrative of the composition. It turns what at first glance would seem a simple blocked out composition into a bizarre and complex dreamscape where perspective becomes contorted and realities (seasons) co-exist. It is as if the dystopian

SiFi stories of J.G. Ballard are combined with an Angela Carter like dream world of myth and ritual. Hammick is able to, through the assimilated layering processes of his print-making and painting techniques, build these 'hermetic' levels of meaning within these works.

***'Wall, Window, World': A show at Flowers Gallery in response to the ENO residency***

Hammick's exhibition at Flowers Gallery, *'Wall, Window, World'* (2015), displayed new works (prints and paintings) following his residency at ENO. The exhibition is a synthesis of the music and drama taken from a selection of the operas he witnessed and worked from as source material, and combined with his own personal narratives sourced from family life. The exhibition exposes the mysterious essence of reality through 'otherworldly and dreamlike landscapes' (Flowers Gallery, Press Release 2015). In Julian Bell's book *WALL, WINDOW, WORLD* (2015), he recounts how the concept of 'hidden narratives' within these works are an endeavor to explore the 'not being shown of something', and by releasing the viewer from the scene, this might uncover the truth of its meaning. The subjects' status within these works are ambiguous: are they extracted representations of reality situated in a world of fantasy or are they a piece of the reality that Hammick himself constructs? The obscurity and ambiguity of the work encourages a distancing from reality and it is through this that Hammick establishes this liminal

space of hypnagogia, whereby one is neither fully awake or in full dream world, where the lines of each are blurred and interrelated. *Violetta II* and *Fallout*, both achieve this 'in-between' world which Bell describes as the place where 'the poetic possibilities of dreams and the cold breath of reality come into contact'.

This lingering space and state that Hammick evokes both draws from Romanticism in painting and its pursuit for poetic substance found through (the force of) nature, and stems from the emotional responses generated by music and the pyrotechnics of opera that he investigated during his residency at ENO. The transitional state of his 'psychologically charged spaces' may be compared to 'filmic flare or the fizz of screen static' (Hannah Hughes, Flowers, 2015). And in *Pavilion* (2013, oil on canvas, 152 x 197 ), a lonely female figure is depicted staring through the windows of an empty house. The figure dissolves effortlessly into its surroundings; appearing insubstantial and unhinged from reality and gravity; the intangibility of the painting remarks on the fragility of human life.

Hammick additionally made 12 woodcuts from his ENO residency that hung in '*Wall, Window, World*', which were tiny in proportion to his paintings. These wood-cuts were initially made to hang in the foyer of the great opera house, and this requirement made Hammick reconsider how he is orchestrating scale; their small size allows the viewer to pour over these images as if they were semi-precious miniatures, and set up a different sort of experience for a different sort of public who might not normally visit museums and art

galleries. These postage stamps of colour, stylistically following in the poster tradition of Toulouse Lautrec and later Saul Bass, as well as iconic film images of today inspired by the Eastern European tradition of film posters, attempt to encapsulate major aspects of the narrative in one single image. These prints establish a simplistic relationship between figure and ground; the flat background, almost carpet-like, is devoid of western perspective but acts as a hanger for a more expressive and emotional use of colour. Hammick is attempting to connect the landscape/background of the woodcuts to the inner soul of the work and its protagonists.

The process used here as reduction woodcuts (produced using one plate and gradually cutting away) is that, with the combination of colour blends and jigsaw cutting, these prints look beguilingly complex when really they are not. They are just extremely methodical.

Hammick additionally produced a series of etchings, some of which replicate the composition of the woodcuts. As a whole, they allow more detail where needed and consequently drawing becomes the key to bringing the whole image together. It is through the intaglio process whereby the ink is literally squashed into the paper which creates a different sort of surface that is almost like velvet. In both his small scale and large scale prints, there is no attempt by Hammick to cover up the evidence of method and creation and this introduces what Saunders describes as a 'fluctuating tension between the pictorial illusion of space, and an insistence on surface

and material' (2017) and this brings to surface a particular temperament that carries throughout his work.

For both artist and institution, artist residences are entirely unpredictable in their outcome. In this instance Hammick readily acknowledges that his ENO residency enabled him to develop how he was able to use narratives from other art forms to both inspire his own image making and use music to conjure up tonal and colour combinations that dealt expressionistically with the subject matter. Furthermore, this residency enabled Hammick to work and learn from many collaborators whom had the common goal of putting opera on stage and in turn use these communicative skills to benefit the working environment and potential of his own print studio team. Without the experience of his ENO residency Hammick's next big printmaking project, *Lunar Voyage*, which took place in Aberdeen and London and incorporated working with 12 artist printmakers, would have been insurmountable.

## References

Bell, Julian, *Wall, Window, World*, 1st edn (London: Lund Humphries Ltd, 2015), pp. 1-144.

Campbell-Johnstone, Rachel, "How The Opera Helped To Create An Aria Of Art", *The Times*, 2015, p. p12.

Flowers Gallery, *Wall, Window, World*, 2015

[https://www.flowersgallery.com/uploads/documents/PRESS-RELEASE-Tom-Hammick\\_Wall-Window-World2.pdf](https://www.flowersgallery.com/uploads/documents/PRESS-RELEASE-Tom-Hammick_Wall-Window-World2.pdf)

Gill Saunders, "Tom Hammick, Winner Of The V&A Prize At The International Print Biennale, Newcastle, 2016 • V&A Blog", *V&A Blog*, 2018  
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/tom-hammick-winner-of-the-va-prize-at-the-international-print-biennale-newcastle-2016>

[The Week reviews an exhibition at a private gallery, "Tom Hammick at \*Flowers East\*", 2015.](#)

