

Alistair Crawford

North by North West

“Painting is a blind man’s profession. He paints not what he sees, but what he feels, what he tells himself about what he has seen” Picasso

From the very start, as a boy at school, I have been interested in drawing places, both landscape and architecture, the *Spirit of Place*. This interest has also taken me on several travels to foreign lands, but I noticed, early on, that no matter how far you travel you can only ever find yourself; ‘out there’ is really ‘in here.’ I did, however, try to portray the essence of places, in that, to me, ‘Italy’ does not look like ‘Wales’, although this concept is rare in the history or art (Whistler is the exception). In 2000 when I returned to oil painting (momentarily abandoning my long standing love affair with *paper*: drawings, paintings, prints, photographs) I concentrated, after an absence of a few years, on a depiction of the Welsh landscape and ended up painting what exists outside my back door. I do feel, however, that it is my role to allow a picture to become what it wants to be: some did not want to fit into the specified Welsh motif but I fought them into submission. Afterwards, what had begun to happen in my brain began to demand more attention. While it was always the case that, in order to distil the *essence* of place, my picture could well end up a *capriccio*, a composite, as with Richard Wilson, this time, some of my *Return to Wales* were demanding to be ‘Scotland’ which, given my diaspora, was odd (I have curiously never used it as subject matter since I left in 1968, with the exception of a series I made in 1987-90 as a memory of the Scottish fishing industry.) Thus the landscape, that is, *my* landscape, became a much more emotional journey, where feeling, mood, mystery dictated more than the need to be accurate about the details of ‘place’. ‘Landscape’ became a metaphor, for living. These paintings became the series *Landscape Capriccios* which I am still working on. I became intrigued that after an absence of over 30 years after I fell in love with the sensuous Mediterranean south on my first visit to Italy in 1970, my Spartan, cold, wind swept, and often snow-laden north east of Scotland had begun to reassert itself: it certainly surprised me to have a recent visit in my head from Casper David Friedrich (1774-1840) and the gothic north. When I was invited to do an exhibition last May, during the phone call, my head filled up with white on white on white and the idea that had already started to form in little pictures with titles such as *Northern Lights* , *The ice flow*, *The iceberg*, decided to take over, as my mind travelled further and further *North by North West*.

“Crawford carries with him still the bare countryside of the north”

William Ferguson TES, Scotland 76, 1980.