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National College of Art and Design
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Faculty of Fine Art
Department of Painting

The Nigredo phase of Alchemy in some of Barrie Cooke's work

by

Catherine Nash

Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and Complementary Studies
in Candidacy for the Degree of Fine Art Painting, 1994

Acknowledgements:

My thanks and appreciation to the following who have helped and co-operated with me in the preparation and writing of this thesis:

Barrie Cooke and Dr. Sue McNab

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INTRODUCTION:

The work of Barrie Cooke shows a remarkable language of form, continuity and colour. It is of great benefit to have the opportunity to examine a living artist in contemporary Irish society and find that new understanding can be discovered.

This study is partly based on a number of interviews which Cooke kindly consented to give at his home in Boyle, Co. Sligo on October 31st, November 1st and November 2nd 1993. He was intrigued to hear that the nigredo stage of alchemy could be recognised in some of his works and stated that while he was not familiar with alchemical terms and processes, "metamorphosis in all of its forms" had been of major concern to him for many years. All quotations from the artist were taken from these interviews unless otherwise stated.

His many interests include poetry, pre-civilized societies, Chinese, Irish, Tantric and other cultures and beliefs which feed into what he calls "extraordinarily celebratory realities" which for him come through painting and fishing.

Published material on any Irish artist is very limited, and Cooke is no exception in this. A personal file in N.C.A.D. library, consisting of newspaper reviews, catalogues and other research, were the initial methods for gaining information on the artist.

A number of considerations are examined in this study which project a new emphasis on his concerns. These include the process of arriving at a 'finished' piece of work;

his early development and his search for an individual expression. These are important in arriving at an understanding of this artist. Many of his original ideas are brought together in the Sweeney/Elk series and the discussion leads up to analyse this in some detail. His career to date culminates in the pollution series. This deals with the putrefaction and despair in direct confrontation with the 'damaged' environment and shows how his treatment of this subject turns "the despised" into "the beautiful".

CHAPTER ONE: Process of Working

At the outset, it is important to consider Barrie Cooke's method of working as it provides a key to a better overall understanding of his work. His methods are painstaking. Direct, intensive study and observation of organic motifs builds up to a number of drawings and sketches which are then supplemented by small colour studies. "Drawing provides the metaphor, image and symbol ... (whereas) ... colour carries feeling, mood and emotion".

Cooke stresses the importance of 'response' whereby energy, vitality, and excitement are shared with rather than consciously conveyed to the viewer. Subtleties and relationships of colour in turn have a direct impact which combines with the "intensity of the obsession" of the artist where "each painting is a separate response ... (where) individual risks ..., looking back, ... knowing when to stop ..., taking the chance of destroying what was good" (Cooke: 1992: Model Arts Centre, Sligo) are all part of the painting process.

The self-imposed discipline in the preparatory stages of his works precedes the fluent, self-confident responses which are a constant feature in his paintings, whatever the motif, and is retained in the bone-boxes which articulate the tight closeness of small spaces.

Becoming familiar with the structures inherent in the motifs enables him to explore other formal relationships and allows a synthesis of previous stages to occur. The discipline of sustained, intensive observation permits the 'conscious ideas' to pass to

the unconscious, and most importantly, prepares the ground for the "spontaneity of responses" in the final expression.

A major source in all of Cooke's work is water, and, as a dedicated fisherman, it provides him with a means of meditation, concentration and alertness. The actions of the fisherman provide "a metaphor for an inward ... state of mind" (Cooke: 1984: Coleraine lecture) where wits are measured against the natural forces of nature and raw, inescapable facts are confronted. This results in a holistic view of nature where struggle and resistance, survival and extinction, growth and decay are enacted in equal terms.

Fishing for pike on Lough Key, which can be viewed from his home which he shares with American writer Jean Valentine, Cooke spoke about the depths of the water while concentrating on the fishing line and the 'presence' of fish beneath the surface. The bobbing of the boat on the water, the underwater, swaying plants and the sudden appearance of rocks just beneath the surface 'brought home' the fleeting nature of existence which Cooke evokes in his works. (Fig. 1) Fishing the rivers and lakes of Ireland provides Cooke with the ideal situation for observation and understanding of the various forms, colours and activities which are of crucial concern to his life and work. Sometimes, superficial glances become the forms which subliminally 'held', are responded to in his studio. This interplay between artist and nature, organism and environment, are important aspects of Cooke's work and lends scope and breadth to an understanding of it.

Born in 1931, Barrie Cooke's move with his family from Cheshire, England, to



(Fig. 1) Barrie Cooke on Lough Key in Co. Sligo



America in 1947, then onto Jamaica and Bermuda, began a series of journeys which brought him to Ireland in 1954, where he settled, and from where he travelled widely to Europe, Malaysia and New Zealand.

In America, he studied Biology, Art History and Chinese Poetry at Harvard where he also attended night classes. Here he came into contact with the work and ideas of Max Beckman who encouraged students to indulge in the unconscious while maintaining observation of the structure of a painting. At Skowhegan, in Maine, he attended classes during a time when great unease was felt between abstract and figurative tendencies and theories. He was interested in the work of Chaim Soutine who painted "places imbued with fecundity and decay", (Cooke: 1984: Coleraine Lecture) and Willem de Kooning who wrote "Everything that passes me I can see only a little of, but I am always looking" (Chipp: 1968: P. 577). De Kooning interpreted disjuncted forms and unending flux beneath external appearances. Among the many other artists he admires are Rubens, Velasquez, Turner, Monet, Kokoschka and Tapies, most of whom use strong vibrant colours and natural forms to create a lasting impact on the viewer.

Cooke came to Ireland at a time when the influences of Cubism and Surrealism were still relatively scarce and the more conservative tradition of panoramic overview of the landscape was very much dominant. The large scale Abstract Expressionist art of America was only very slowly echoed in Ireland and Cooke's direct contact with this movement helped to make this influence more available to numerous younger artists.

Having settled in Clare, he went to Oskar Kokoschka's "School of Seeing" (1954) in Salzburg where he learned "... the healing power of seeing the world with eyes unclouded by theories" (Kokoschka: 1992: P. 211). Kokoschka advised his students to recover "... a childlike immediacy of response to the sights of the world that (had) been smothered by second-hand reasoning" (Kokoschka: 1992: P. 211).

Cooke's portraits, landscapes and 'carcasses' are concerned with the runniness of paint and presence is sometimes marked by an actual absence of marks. The presence is formed by the treatment of the surrounding area. "His line is always loose and fluid, both in drawings and in his oils and he depends to a large extent on the subtle effects to be derived from tonal values" (Arnold: 1977: P. 170)

Cooke doesn't like categories. He said: "... whether political, gender, mythical, landscape, etc., as far as I'm concerned, its biological".

Learning to see and learning to know what we see was the main objective in the "School of Seeing". This had a consolidating influence on the works of Cooke made in the Burren which show a conviction that organic processes, nature, and life itself "... all force you into a confrontation that is real" (Fuchs: 1992: P. 50). Carcasses of animals and "Woman in the Burren" (1963 Fig. 2) indicate the brute reality of the world and the natural transition of the states of matter.

Hanging on his studio wall is an early work of his based on the Sile na Gig motif, (Fig. 3) and he spoke of the influence of these medieval Christian 'idols' with distinct traits of emaciation shown by skeletal ribs, incised-tattooed faces, shrunken breasts,



(Fig. 2) "Woman in the Burren" 1963 - 64

Oil on Canvas 165 x 206 cm





(Fig. 3) Sile na gig 1962

(detail) stone/plaster/terracotta on board



stunted legs, yet with great emphasis on enormous heads, eyes, mouths, hands, shoulders and genitalia. These awe inspiring figures in strategic positions - like east-facing walls of castles or on church portals - have an aggressive, fearsome deliberate potency. Dr. Anna Ross suggests that the Sile na Gig "portrays the territorial war - goddess in her hag-like aspect" (Anderson: 1977: P. 95). Threat: invitation, war: peace, and death: life opposites are portrayed in this figure where the up - front sexuality and aggression combine to give it an aura of primeval, magical function. They are known by names such as the Evil Eye Stone, the Idol, Devil Stone, Cathleen Owen, St. Shanahan, the Witch or Hag of the Castle or Mill, or Witch of the Well.

One theory suggests the origin of the name to be a derivation from the Irish Sighe, meaning hag, "mistranslated as the name Sile or Sheela ... Sile in a giob, Sheela on her hunkers" (Cherry: 1992: P. 1) which seems appropriate given the fact that most of the Siles are in a squatting, crouched position. The majority of the Sile na Gigs are positioned high up on the fortified walls of Norman castles, abbeys, churches, and mills which suggests that their presence provided protection and overlooked the boundaries or tuaths (territories) of their areas. Cooke spoke of the other Sile na Gigs stored in museums and in private collections.

The confrontation with naked truths - into the static depths of the psyche - that Cooke's Sile na Gigs of the late '50's' and early '60's' embody are comparable to the great goddess, Tara, or Kali "the blood-curdling, blood consuming goddess" (Campbell: 1991: P. 415) of aboriginal India. Before nature's objective eye we realise that we are part of the subjective reality that we are trying to see. Objective reality

is unmasked, becomes nothing and everything. The stare represents the starkness of the abyss that takes all back, reduces, stops. The Sile na gig could be seen as synonymous with Medusa, whose stare petrifies and turns to stone, and Ereshkigal, who fixes the eye-of-death on Inanna. (discussed in Chapter 11)

Aidan Dunne has suggested that the Sile na Gig is "a personification of water's flowing energy" (Dunne: 1986: P. 113). But instead it is a symbolic evocation of the mystery of fecundity and regeneration and is more a mark of all that is invulnerable in the feminine principle. Cooke's Sile na Gigs are represented as flowing clay figures seeping into and part of the environment surrounding and containing her. (Fig. 4)

According to Joseph Campbell, human female figures "represent the ancestral point of origin of the whole people" (Campbell: 1991: P. 314) and derives from "the feeling and recognition of women, especially during menstruation, as the centre of an effective magical force" (Campbell: 1991: P. 314).

In a search to find primal truths, to see reality beneath all of its myriad forms and the illusions and defences it displays, nature is for Cooke a primal reality experienced and responded to in his real life and work. He perceives himself to be part of the universal rhythms of nature and his emphasis on direct observation as a vital aspect of his working process is aided by his obsessive fishing activities.

During the early sixties, two books were published which interested Cooke; Theodor Schwenk's 'Sensitive Chaos' which states:



(Fig. 4) Sile na Gig (detail) 1962

oil/plaster/stone on board

97.5 x 108 cm

"Every Healthy lake, every marsh, is a living totality with its own vital function while at the same time, it belongs to a greater community; it is the organ of a living being - the whole surrounding landscape is in its own turn a member of a yet vaster organism ... " (Schwenk: 1965: P. 15)

The other book, 'Bog, People' by P.V. Glob, described the "strange power in bog-water which prevents decay" (Glob: 1965 : P. 17). These sentiments struck a chord in Cooke who had already affirmed the interchange between organism and environment.

While Cooke says that he "knows very little about the Nigredo or in fact any of the alchemical process, the subject area interests me ..." and he adds "metamorphosis in all of its forms has been of concern to me for many years". But, perhaps unconsciously, Cooke's work of the sixties and seventies depicts the raw state of matter and is analogous to the putrefaction associated with the nigredo. This critical first plateau of achievement, called also the 'blackening', is comparable to the chaos that existed before the separation of the elements. The raw material, often despised in the form of entrails, blood, bones, excrement, lead, etc., is placed in an athanor where, under applied fire, it bursts and separates. An antithetical pair of opposites, solar: lunar, male: female, are released while the original substance putrefies and dissolves in the nigredo.

This event is filled with rage, pain, killing and is associated with black "blackier than black", the void, ambivalence, the crow, signifying the hallmarks of depression or in Jungian psychology, the 'shadow', which was considered dangerous: "where despicable parts of the self had to be confronted and integrated" (Storr: 1990: P. 235). This stage is felt as withdrawal, isolation, conflict, dismemberment, and, for

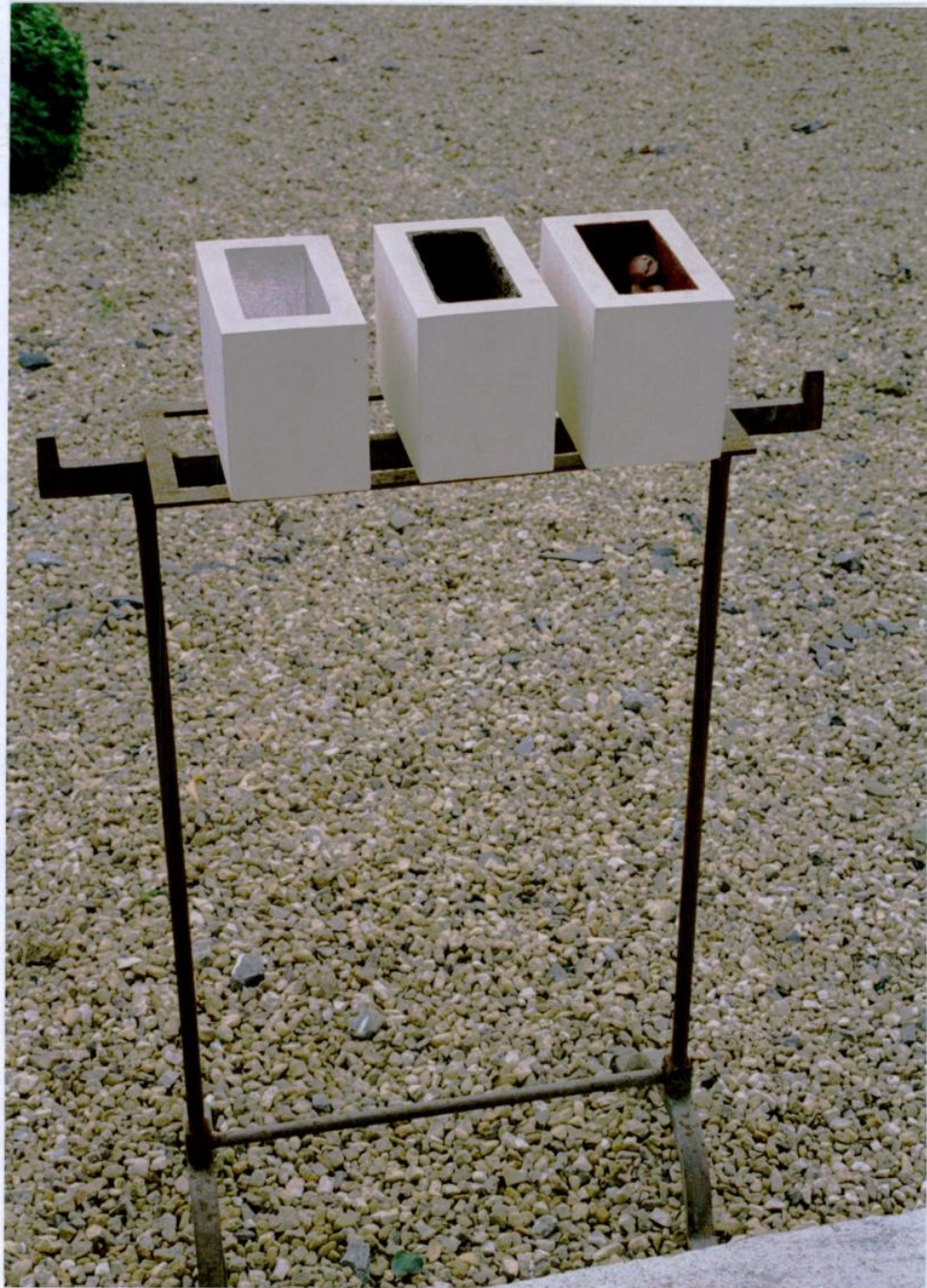
anyone familiar with Irish mythology, could be said to embody the "poet-king" Sweeney. This will be analysed in detail later. The state of putrefaction is a constant motif in Cooke's work and studies of sheep, hare, fish, human, bone-boxes, elk, Sweeney and later works, on the theme of pollution, attest to this.

In 1969 'Air to Water' bone-box (Fig. 5) consists of three small rectangular boxes mounted on a trestle-stand and accompanied by a plaque inscribed with a children's rhyme:

Air To Water
To Soil to Stone
As Blood to flesh
And flesh to Bone

In one box, loose bones lie scattered in a silver backed, coffin-like space. Bones, in several ancient cultures, were seen as the seeds of the body and represented the potential of rebirth. In some cultures the bones of ancestors were ground down and mixed in a draught which was imbibed in a ritual of ancestor worship. This motif harks back to the consort of the Earth Mother, eg., the Daghdha, Dumuzi, Tammuz, Osiris, who were sacrificed to ensure seasonal fecundity.

Schwenk describes how bones grow, as if flowing into one another "across the articular space of joints". (Fuchs: 1992: P. 50) This articulation of space could be read as a metaphor for the prevailing climate of thought which existed during the later sixties and seventies in Irish art, between the figurative expressionists and the abstract modernists. The division that exists between urban: rural, North: South, bitterness:



(Fig. 5) "Air to Water" 1969
Mixed Media

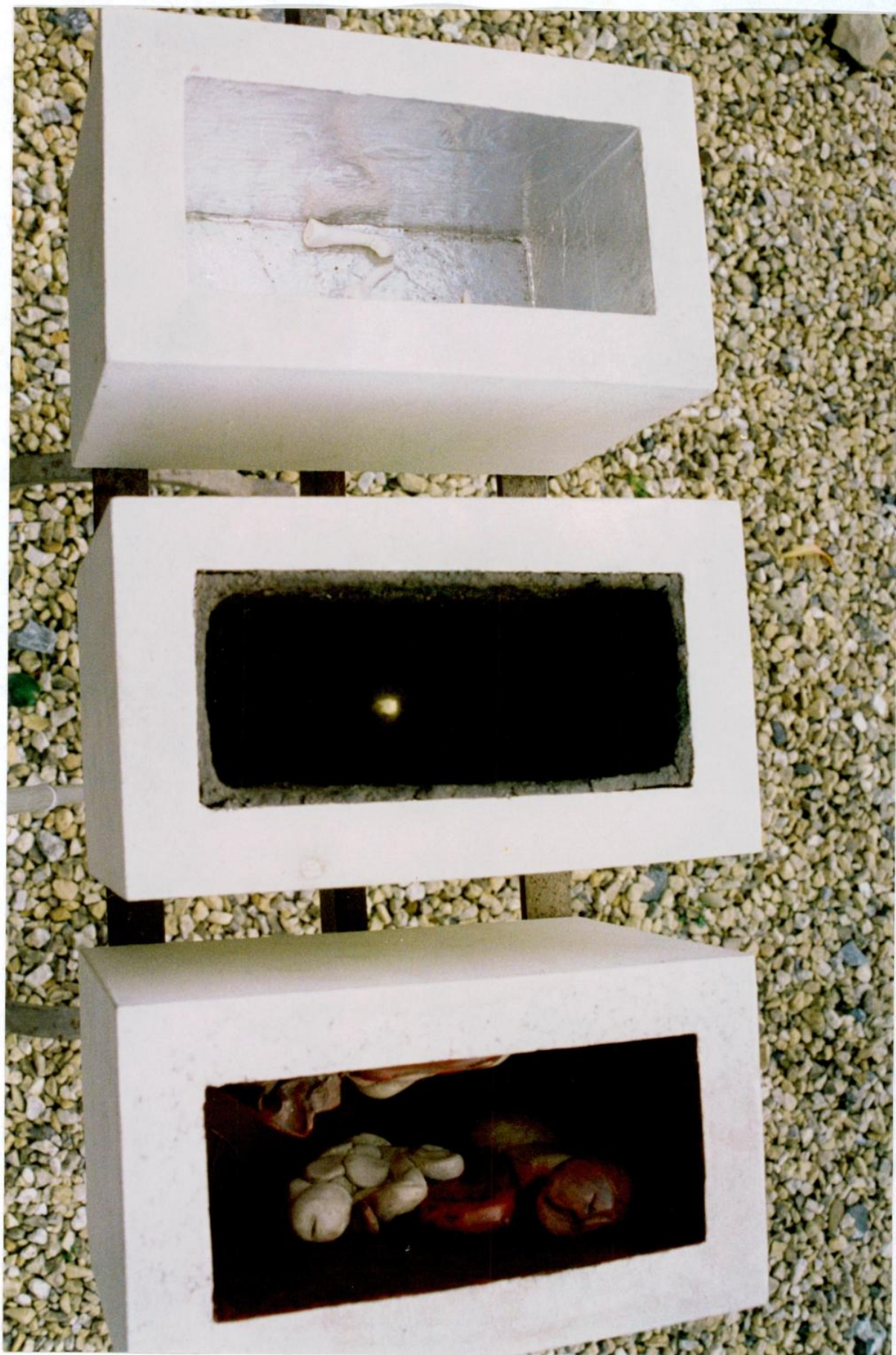


resignation - issues central to "the question of Irish cultural identity and contemporary Irish experience" (Douglas Hyde Gallery: 1990: P. 26).

The loose bones in Cooke's box indicate the decay and continuous break-down of organic materials when seen beside a second box which contains a visceral, compact mass of semi-solid supportive and connective tissue that looks like muscle and fibrous tissue, which extends to become tendon attached to bone resting in a red, umber, fluid-like background. The various processes of development of all biological life is apparent here with an emphasis on the interactions between the different states of matter.

The weight and gravity implied and the interiorization of the work calls to mind the growth and energy lying dormant in the earth. Darkness and 'black' are no longer perceived as absence - of - light but as experienced forces. The polarities of liquid: solid, dark: light, and wet: dry are subliminally felt here. (Fig.6)

The third box contains a gold ball which has been read as the treasures unearthed in Irish bogs. (Aidan Dunne) But this also implies the 'philosophers Stone' or 'lapiz'. This is the final achievement of the alchemical process. Once the conjunction of primal opposites has occurred, and if all other operations have been successful, the 'stone' or 'egg' appears during the Rubedo or 'reddening' stage of the work. In the third box the 'gold' is suspended in a peat background. In 1980, Frances Ruane wrote of Cooke's bone-boxes as "the strangest still-life pieces in this exhibition" and added that these were "structures of tremendous expressive power". She also wrote



(Fig. 6) "Air to Water" (detail) 1969



100-100-100
100-100-100
100-100-100



100-100-100
100-100-100
100-100-100

• "Cooke's bone-boxes carry through the theme we encounter frequently in Irish art, that of focusing on elements that tie contemporary man to the ancients" (Ruane: 1980: P. 22).

Rudolf Steiner wrote:

• "Anyone who with the help of physical science makes a (...) study of the marvellous structure of the human heart or brain, or of each single part of the human skeleton, will be able to feel how infinitely wise and perfect is the arrangement and organisation of the physical body. By taking one single bone, eg., the hip-bone, which combines the utmost carrying capacity with the least expenditure of effort (...) it is possible to have an inkling of what would be experienced if one were to behold the wisdom by which this structure was produced ..." (Steiner: 1910: P. 49)

• In examining organic matter, sides of carcasses provided by a 'local' butcher, Cooke was seeking to find the potential life that lies motionless as the primal matrix beneath all language and its distinctions. Blood, a fluid connecting tissue, is rooted in the bone which both feeds and is in turn nourished through the marrow. By the same token a continuity of exchange from fluid to solid is established. In the 'Rosarium', an ancient alchemical text, the 'prima materia' is called the 'root of itself' (radix ipsium) and 'Beginning of Bone' (1973 Fig 7) indicates a blood supplied bundle of muscles which is tightly packed and attached to the bone. The co-ordination of the highly charged clay construction suggests the state that precedes movement of the bone and this work, coloured in dark blues, is a perfect metaphor for the interrelatedness and continuity of exchange in all life. The different states of matter from fluid to solid is contained in a perspex box on a gravel-like ground and evokes the umber-coloured bodies recovered from the bogs in Ireland and Jutland since the beginning of this century. The elements water, earth, fire and air are intrinsic in this work as are the qualities hot, cold, dry and wet. Albeit unconsciously, Cooke is here



(Fig. 7) "Beginning of Bone" 1973
Mixed Media on perspex box



dealing with the same concerns that the alchemists experimented with in their laboratories.

According to Jung, "the alchemists projected the process of individuation onto the phenomena of chemical change ..." (Jung: 1968: P. 482). 'Individuation' being the search for wholeness and totality that each individual aims for. Positive and negative impulses are brought together, conjoining consciousness and unconsciousness, matter and spirit, intellect and intuition. Anthony Storr makes the statement that "alchemy is also a metaphor of embryogenesis ... indulging in a form of compensation ... to emulate the female capacity to create life". (Storr: 1990: P. 229)

In a synopsis of "A Whole Circulatory System" Cooke writes: "As it is my belief that the life in our bodies is a microcosm of any life and the flow of our energy identical in structure with all energy, I wish to make an image of flow, where coming and going, body and earth, blood and water, all conjoin ... Over, under, echo, complement, each occurrence the analogy of the other", (Cooke: 1972)

This was a plan that Cooke proposed to have built as a Sculpture which would have had a circulation of metaphorical blood through a heart. This plan is in five parts and is in the artists possession. Even though it remains unbuilt, it is possible to see how he is expressing the hermetic maxim:

"That which is above is as that which is below". (Jung: 1959: P. 106)

• In part three of this proposal titled "A Pulsatory System" he adds "where blood is a metaphor for water; river for vein; dam for valve; stone for bone; red for green". A common process is implicit.

• The energy and flow in the body as a microcosm of "the greater community", referred to earlier, evokes the qualities of humanity in a very powerful and subtle way. An attempt is made to understand the basic material of 'being' and to seek aspects which interact and interrelate in varying degrees of energy. Schwenk referred to water as the 'blood of the earth'. Cooke shows in this work that changeability and multiformity begins from a dual fluid source, and this process also includes separation, differentiation and recognition of different levels of awareness.

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CHAPTER 11: Sweeney Prepares to meet Elk.

A recurring aspect of Cooke's work is the number of readings which are possible from it. This is significant in consideration of his belief in the close relationship between painting and poetry. Among the poets which have influenced him are Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and John Montague, whose 'physical' style present forms, images and colour in such a way as to evoke 'recognition' of the experience in the reader. Their poetry encompasses a fundamental search for origins contained in legends, epics and myths. A transcultural language emerges which recounts the most intimate and intense of psychic happenings. This explanatory system gives significance and direction to human suffering.

Cooke's study of Chinese poetry, and his empathy with pre-civilized societies synthesized in his journey to Borneo in 1975-76 where the primal material of nature is structured within its cycles and patterns. He spent three months there with native Dyak people where many of his latter works had their genesis.

The abundance of growth and dense humidity of its unique eco-system has been described as the "earth's gene-pool". (Dunne: 1986: P. 84) On most of their carvings and shields he noticed a recurring pattern of a spiral-like motif which he perceived to be a symbol of the fecundity and decay of the rainforest - an "excess of growth" which, as he painted it, "unintentionally, lost its oppressiveness".

The charged atmosphere and environment combined with the heat, humidity and teeming insect, plant, bird and animal life is an all-pervasive, life-enhancing part of

the experience of Borneo and are responded to in paintings and sculptures made on his return to Ireland. Sketches and watercolours made on-the-spot helped him to 'hold' the response to the place.

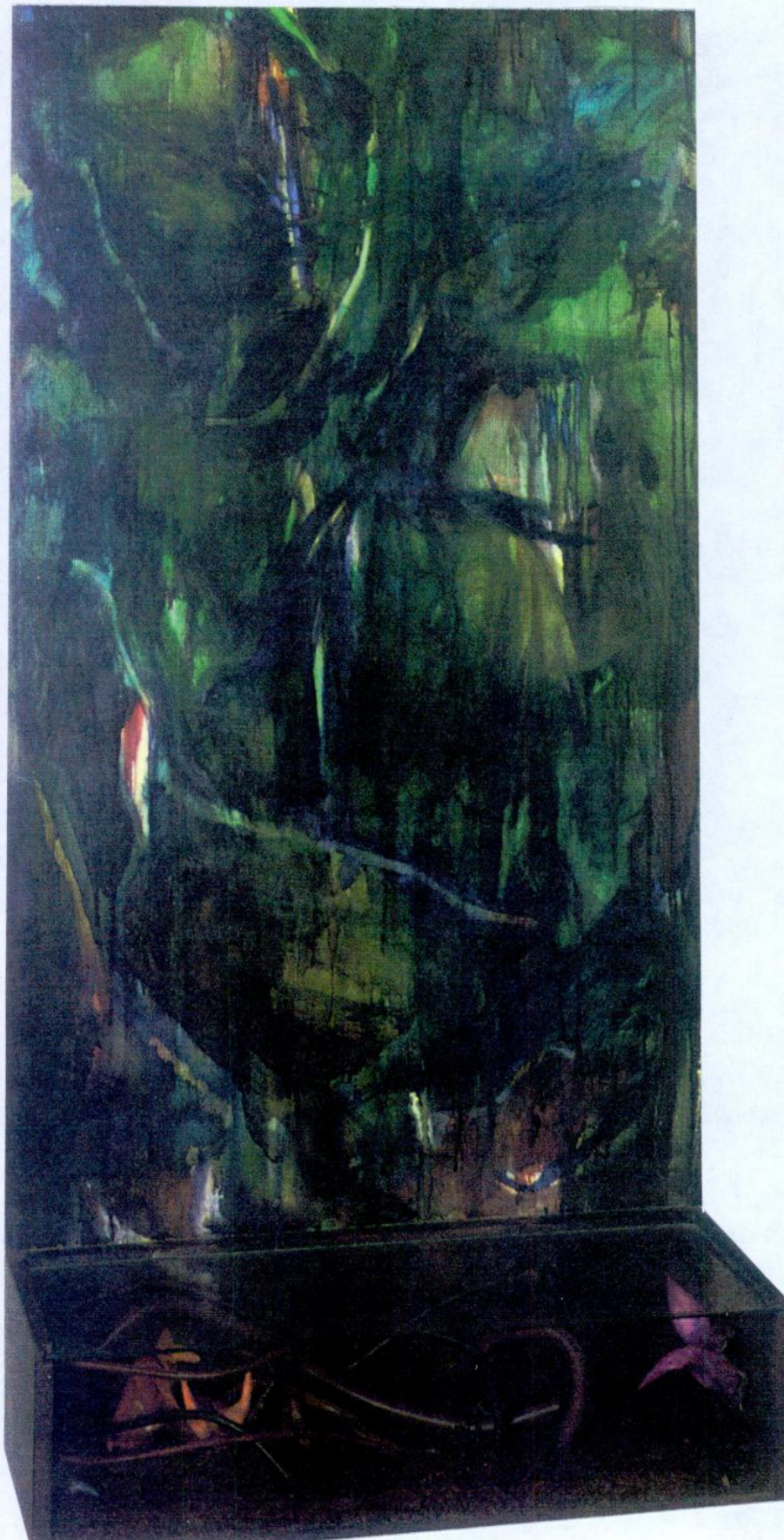
An intense struggle for growth, life and light is evoked in 'Big Forest Borneo' (1976, Fig. 8), and 'Slow Dance 1' (1976, Fig. 9) where snake-like shapes weave and grow from the undergrowth and are physically extended from the lower section of the panel and contained in a perspex box. Dense, weighted greens and moisture-laden atmosphere interact and seem to rustle and stir. Luminous washes are set beside dense, opaque areas to emphasize the restless continuum of growth, decay, and regrowth and the unceasing search for light. A constant flux and energy is translated into a unifying pattern where organic shapes form sinuously from and coil back into the background. The forest burgeons and sags under the weight of the moisture but the gravitational pull is alleviated by thin translucent layers of diluted paint washes. This polarization of opposites is a subtle feature in all of Cooke's works and the rainforest provides a point of departure for many works which he translates in an evocatively poetic way.

Cooke's emphasis on 'individual response' is very apparent now and he says that: "recovering a moment, ... worrying away, ... being haunted with (the painting process) ... takes us back to a particular moment when we held the world in equilibrium" (Cooke: 1992: Model Arts Centre, Sligo). Analogies are found in the process of painting and combined with the viewers own obsession "an empathy, ... an unconscious thing" develops between the painting and the viewer. "A sense of relief ... that someone else has felt ..., has touched on the subconscious at some point" (Cooke: 1992: Model Arts Centre, Sligo) leads to his belief that "the reading



(Fig. 8) Big Forest Borneo 1979
Oil on Canvas
112 x 534 cm (triptych)





(Fig. 9) "Slow Dance 1" 1976

Oil on Canvas with mixed media

112 x 48 cm



is not all that important" (Cooke: 1992: Model Arts Centre, Sligo).

What is important to Cooke is the sensation of energy and vitality that is conveyed in the work. He stresses the importance of 'holding' an experience, of transmitting a sensation of energy. "The finished piece resonates with my experience which has nothing to do with the jungle ... The work must look as if it has just happened, yet it may have taken weeks and weeks". (McMonagle:1992: P. 67 - 68)

This 'apparent' spontaneity is the result of intensive study and synthesis of previous experiences and responses to the motif. The sublimation of previous processes and the 'holding' of the experience is akin to Matisse's method of 'condensing' his emotions and projecting his own insights onto the work.

Many motifs, for example, the vortex, knots, spiral and junctions, had their genesis in the rainforest where an all - encompassing sense of flow is a major factor. Water is essentially an actively creative ingredient of all metabolic processes on earth and in life itself, transmitting the vitality to all growth and change and the vortex is revealed by Cooke as an archetypal pattern of this dynamic development. His scientific scrutinisation and contemplation of nature and his knowledge of its aspects are so deeply internalized that the distinction between observation and memory become almost meaningless. An added looseness and freedom becomes apparent after his journey to Borneo.

One of Cooke's works titled 'Yggdrasil' (1982 - 83) directly connects with mythology associated with shamanic rituals. Present in all journeys, voyages, and descents is the notion of regression, involution, turning-point, ascent, progression, and evolution.

For the shaman, journeys into primal, preverbal states are fraught with dangers. The shaman is seen as an underworld voyager who goes through a series of confrontations "in order to learn, to divine, and to heal" (Halifax: 1982: P. 10). From this comes "the opening to compassion and the awakening to empathy" This awakening "in the midst of an encounter with death - (is) comparable to the Tantric Yogi's experience of Kundalini (and) the Zen Masters experience of enlightenment" (Halifax: 1982: P. 10). It is akin to the visions and dreams of Christianity's Saints, the Alchemists discovery of the 'lapiz' and the individuals experience of the 'Self'.

The regression and introspection is often so slow and deep that it seems to turn into a profound death-like depression, where desolation and dismemberment are felt as actualities. The descent into the static depths of the psyche, the return to the source of life, where consciousness itself is burrowed into to reveal the repressed material of the unconscious, precedes a reconstitution, recovery, and leads to a renewed awareness.

The shape changing, associated with the shaman (as with Sweeney) is common to Celtic legends and myths, for example, Gaelic Tuan, and Welsh Taliesin, and reflects the primal situation in which land, animals and people were held to have a harmonic resonance with one another. Animals and birds represented, by association, certain energies and forces, and totems of their images symbolized those energies in operation. This relationship of animals and deities built into a complex alphabet of energies and the same cyclic structure was applied to trees and other plants. It was a living language which included places, people, animals, plants and all the visible and invisible energies of nature. Each land had a sacred centre from which all forces

spiralled outwards and, in time, returned inwards.

The World Tree, axis mundi, yggdrasil, is the means by which the shaman ascends from the abyss of the underworld and is a symbol of fecundity and perpetual regeneration. "This tree binds the three realms together" (Halifax: 1982: P. 21). This 'cosmic tree' is analogous to the human being in alchemy. In Eddic myth Wotan was sacrificed on its branches and returned to himself. Its roots are constantly being attacked by serpents while stags feed from its branches. In Buddhist teaching the axis mundi is surrounded by a spoked wheel, symbolic of the turning world while the tree is the immovable spot where nirvana, the state of being absolutely still within, is reached.

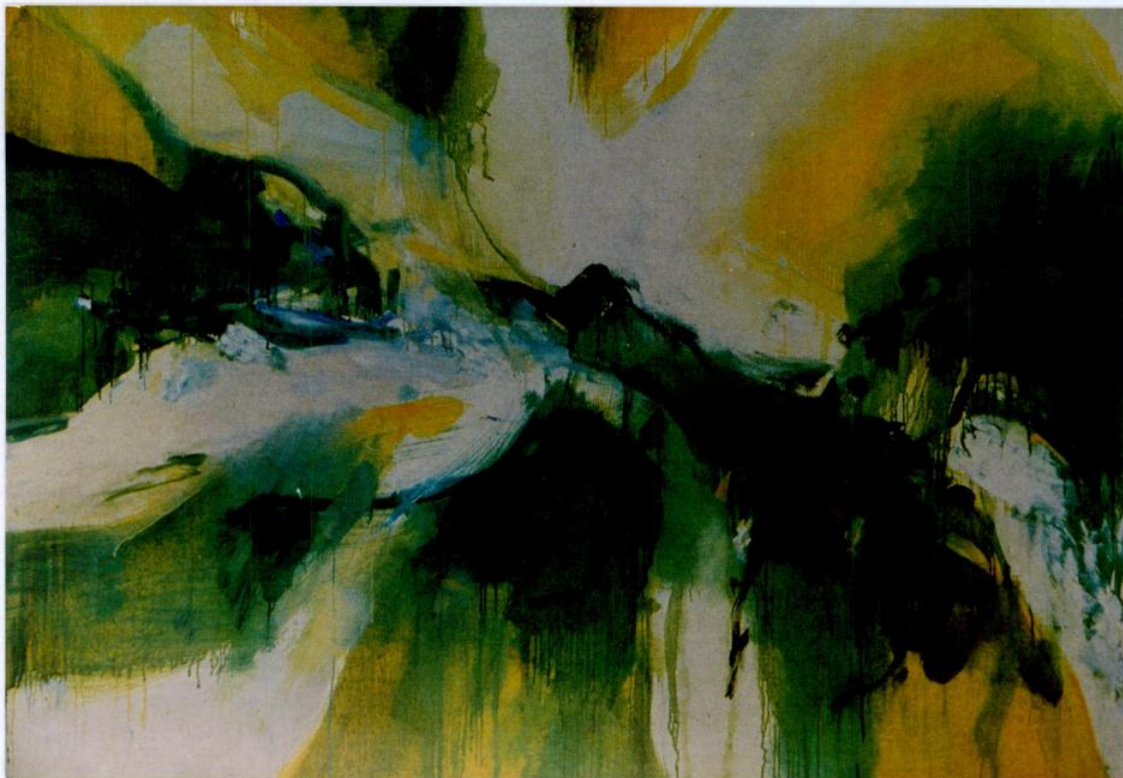
In Cooke's 'Yggdrasil' (1982 - 83 Fig. 10 and Fig 11) a spiral pattern is illuminated which combines the restless, weaving forms with the fluidity of the painting process. Cooke described the spiral energy which he "reacted to as ... Shiva dancing the creation of the world into existence". (Cooke: 1983: Radio Leinster) The growth towards a light source or point of origin is alluded to in this work which is saturated with bright greens, yellows, and whites. The related eddy and spiral shapes make it suitable to symbolize the conception of time as a constant cyclic return-to-the-same, rather than a straight line progression originating in the past and moving towards a distant goal. The movement seems to spread evenly from a centre in all directions. The lush humid environment of the jungle circulates to the boundaries of this triptych and seem to extend into the viewers 'real space'. "Plants are vascular systems through which water, the blood of the earth, streams in living interplay with the atmosphere". (Schwenk: 1965: P. 14)



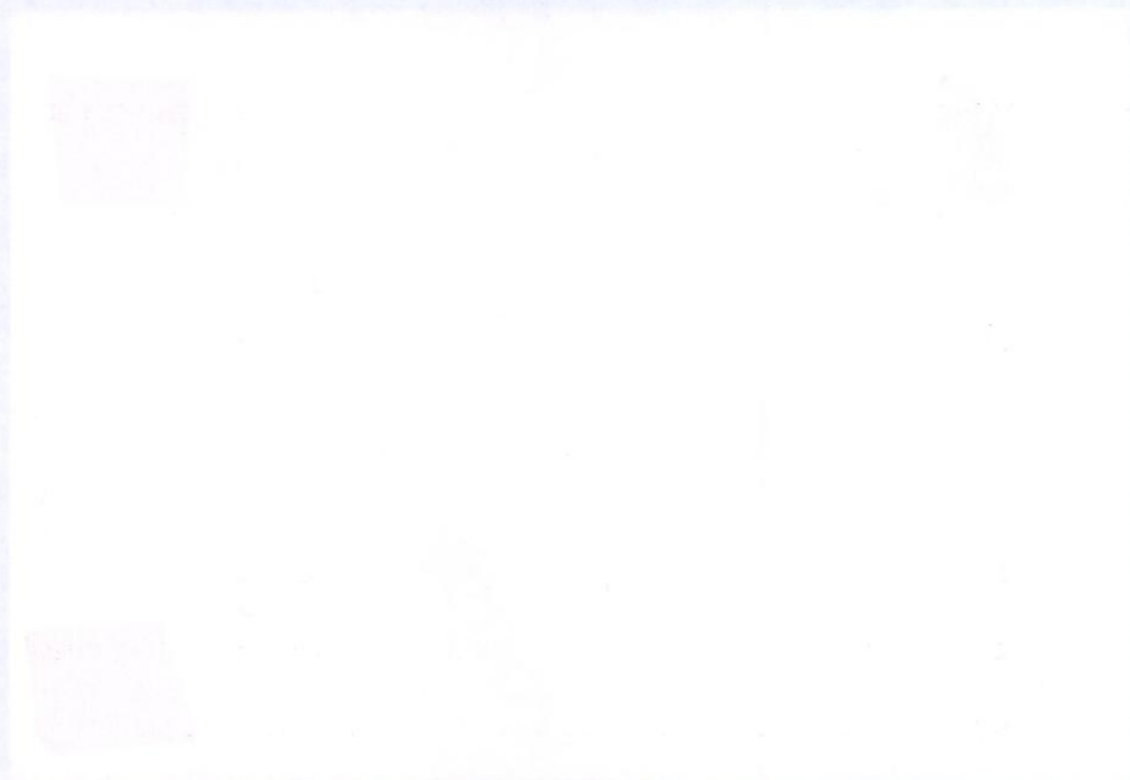
(Fig. 10) "Yggdrasil" 1982 - 83

Oil/Canvas

150 x 450 cm (triptych)



(Fig. 11) "Yggdrasil" - (detail) - 1982 - 83



The influence of magic on pre-civilized societies was strong and provided a 'charge' to simultaneously transmit and contain experience. Jung believed that pre-civilized peoples did not invent myths but experienced them as "involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings". Gods, goddesses, heroes and heroines commonly suffered a period of imprisonment, descents into the underworld, before ultimate liberation or transformation. It is a well known variation of the night - sea - journey where Odysseus, Osiris, Inanna and Jesus are archetypes of pain and fear confronted and suffered through in a subjective experience of isolation, depression, death and renewal.

Surrender to the destructive aspects of existence where "extraction - of - the - soul" and "black blacker than black" (Sharp: 1980: P. 48) is felt, where fear of disintegration, hollowness, fragmentation and dissolution of the ego - personality into its functional components is experienced as equivalent to the mortification and putrefaction of the nigredo phase. This journey into the unconscious is symbolized in myths as being devoured by a fish, swallowed by the sea, stolen into the earth or cave and protected there by a hidden 'fire' (Jonah in the whale's belly). This is equivalent to the self-incubating or 'brooding' state of tantric meditation known as 'tapas'.

Several times, Cooke has taken the legend of 'Sweeney' as his subject and this appears to contain an open line to a sort of psychic energy, an invigorating figure who represents, according to Seamus Heaney, "the artist, displaced, guilty ..., an aspect of the quarrel between creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligations" (Heaney: 1983: Introduction). Heaney explains

that the story developed from "traditions dating back to the Battle of Moira AD 637" (Heaney: 1983: Introduction). Catherine Byron sees Heaney's 'Sweeney Astray' as "a story that focuses on the tragic, radiant, moment of Christianity's arrival amongst a puzzled and passionate people" (Byron: 1992: P. 42) or as Heaney states "the newly dominant Christian ethos and the older, recalcitrant celtic temperament" (Heaney: 1983: Introduction).

Sweeney's plight has been taken up by many other artists including Flann O'Brien, John Montague, Michael O'Sullivan, Brian Bourke, Sean McSweeney, Michael Farrell and continues to strike a chord and have enormous relevance in Irish art. In Amerindian myths, a clever trickster figure, for example coyote, crow or hare, personifies the 'upsetting factor' - what Joseph Campbell calls the "power of the dynamic of the total psyche to overthrow progress" (Boa : 1989: P. 88) the uneasy transition from Pagan to Christian culture creates a collision, between the sacral - king 'Suibhne' and an ecclesiastic, Ronan Finn, who curses him

".... to the trees
bird brain among branches
(where he becomes)
possessed by a dark rending energy
this brain convulsed
his mind split open
and he levitated in a frantic cumbersome motion like a bird in the air"
(Heaney: 1983: Pp. 8-9)

In his guise as crow, Sweeney despaired at what his association with the clergy had turned him into - a crow with man's consciousness. He wanders the length and breadth of Ireland and Southern Scotland for many years where he learns and adapts radically. "He learns to relish the way of life of the outcast despite its human

loneliness and physical distress". (Byron: 1992: P. 44) He becomes paranoid about his fellow-men believing that they intend to capture him and laments his fate, starving and cold until his death at St. Moling. Each fresh encounter with despair deepens the awareness of 'otherness' between nature and culture. The untamed battles with the tame, raw with cooked, and the tensions, contradictions and paradoxes that operate between these extremes become apparent.

Sweeney's position as outcast when compared to his former status are two never-to-be-reconciled endeavours and a misfortune of existence split in two.

Robert Graves suggests that the tale of 'Suibhne' shows "a poet obsessed by the Hag of the Mill, another name for the White Goddess. ... this poet quarrels with both the Church and the bards of the Academic Establishment, and is ... outlawed by them ... He trusts nobody ... and enjoys no companionship but that of the blackbirds, the stags, ... Towards the end of the tale Suibhne even lost the Hag of the Mill ... which means, I suppose, that he breaks down as a poet under the strain of loneliness". (Graves: 1961: P. 455)

Sweeney's empathy with his country's wild places and creatures is related to a type of dinnseanchas, or place-wisdom. He constitutes a partial return to primordial chaos. His sufferings connect him with the shaman who journeys "in order to learn, to divine, and to heal" (Halifax: 1982: P. 10) In "Sweeney Hidden" (1983 Fig 12) he is enmeshed in the swirling background. One eye pupil peeps out from behind a vegetative mass of shifting darks and lights. This reveals Cooke's deep level of understanding of the interplay between all organic processes, blending solid states of



(Fig. 12) "Sweeney Hidden" 1983



matter to fluid. The organism here is undistinguished from the environment, except for the fixed eye, which brings the 'conscious-man' back into the scene. Sweeney, as creature of nature, is free from the 'distortions' of consciousness. Seemingly opposed and disparate elements provide tensions and disruptions, beside more flowing 'dialogues'. Differences are emphasised and then related to each other by the fluid use of stark darks and lights. An infinite number of nuances are given to each part of the painting. Interwoven, having something in common, revealing the paradoxical unity of all phenomena in nature, Sweeney becomes the courier of an energy flow that brings about changes and creates new realities.

A dissonance is evoked between modern and archaic views of nature, where humans were more intimately involved with natural forces and elements. This seeps into much of Cooke's work. "In the country" he says "fight, struggle and death is apparent ... the hard stuff ... the uncontrollable is confronted. The place becomes a metaphor for a state-of-mind inherent in that place". (Cooke: 1984: Coleraine Lecture).

Cooke's friendship with poets Heaney and Montague feed into his paintings of Sweeney, as his friendship with fellow fisherman - poet, Ted Hughes, feeds into his lithographs and paintings of the Great Irish Pike. Cooke believes that the "poetic process is in many ways more direct (as) a poet has to admit to his feelings, ... a painter can disguise his feelings, ... the medium of the arts are linked" (Cooke: 1983 : Radio Leinster). It could be said that the rhythmic movement of lines in the charged landscape, containing Sweeney, with powerful light and dark contrasts, are equivalent to the charge that the poet finds with words. The juxtaposition of dynamic

rhythmic movements, and the emotional impact of colour, charge "Sweeney under Fire" (undated Fig. 13) with meaning and energy. The red-brown earth and irregular curved shapes all move in relation to one another. Solar and earthly powers pour down on Sweeney, symbolic of the imagination of a people. the absence of a defined head is in itself a type of presence.

Many of Cooke's ideas have come together in a series of paintings on the theme of incorporating the Irish elk with Sweeney. Set to meet Sweeney, the Elk evokes primal consciousness and the preservative, devouring aspects of the earths recurring cycles. The diptych "Elk meets Sweeney" (1986 Fig. 14 and Fig. 15) was worked and reworked over a year, and shows Sweeney on the left panel crouched and tentative in a blue area surrounded by peat-brown which extends his presence into the right-hand panel which has the Elk majestically stanced and worked into the paint.

The Elk is synonymous with Inanna, the early Sumerian Goddess of heaven, earth, love and war, who goes into the underworld to meet her dark sister, Ereshkigal. While there, she is killed and hung on a peg by Ereshkigal, who fixes the eye-of-death upon her. Her body rots on one side and turns green. This polarity of decay and preservation is also seen in the legend of Medusa whose "blood from the left side brought death and from the right, healing" (Campbell: 1991: P. 505). Seeming annihilation becomes the abyss of transformation and regeneration. The required waiting, inertia, paralysis and the receptive introversion necessary entails a letting go, a sacrifice of Eros to Thanatos.

Before going into the land-of-no-return, Inanna leaves instructions with her vizier,



(Fig. 13) "Sweeney under Fire" (undated)

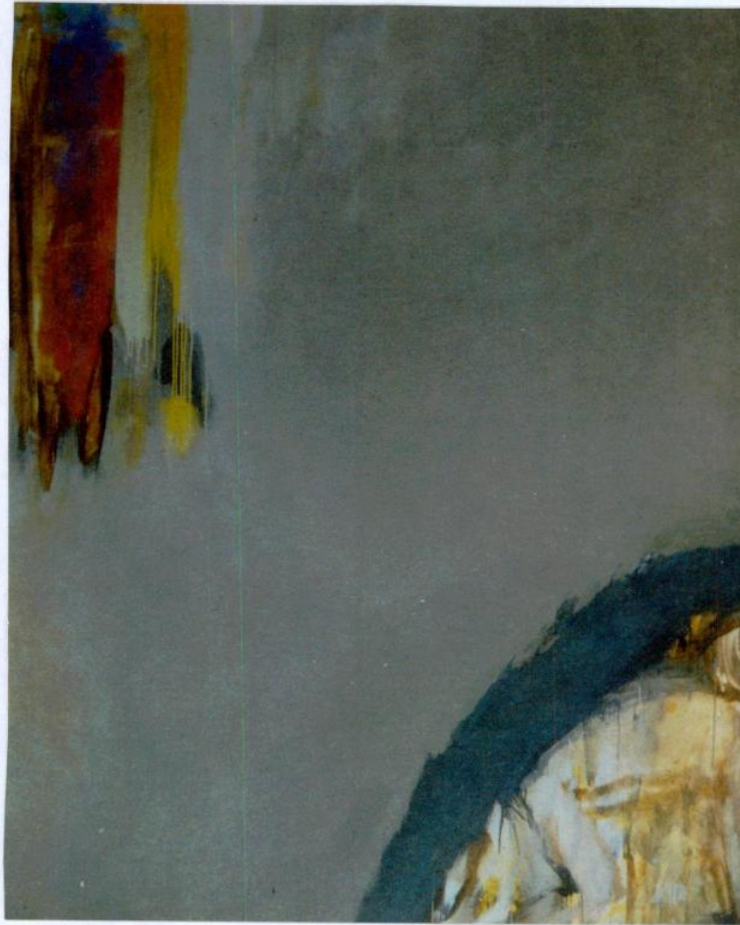


(Fig. 14) "Elk meets Sweeney" 1985 - 86

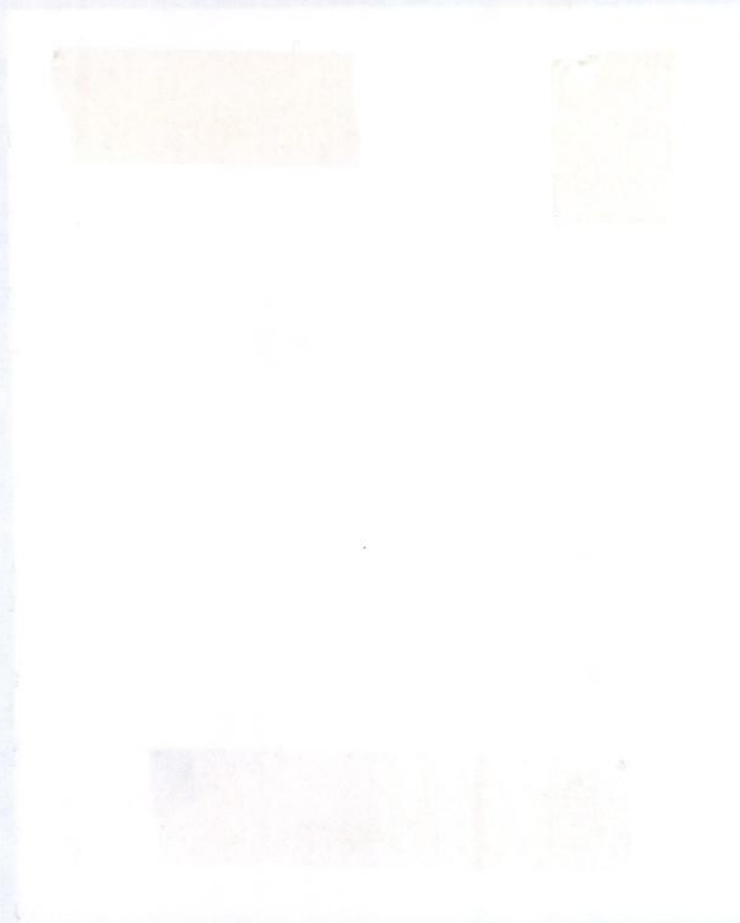
Oil on Canvas

200 x 331 cm (diptych)





(Fig. 15)



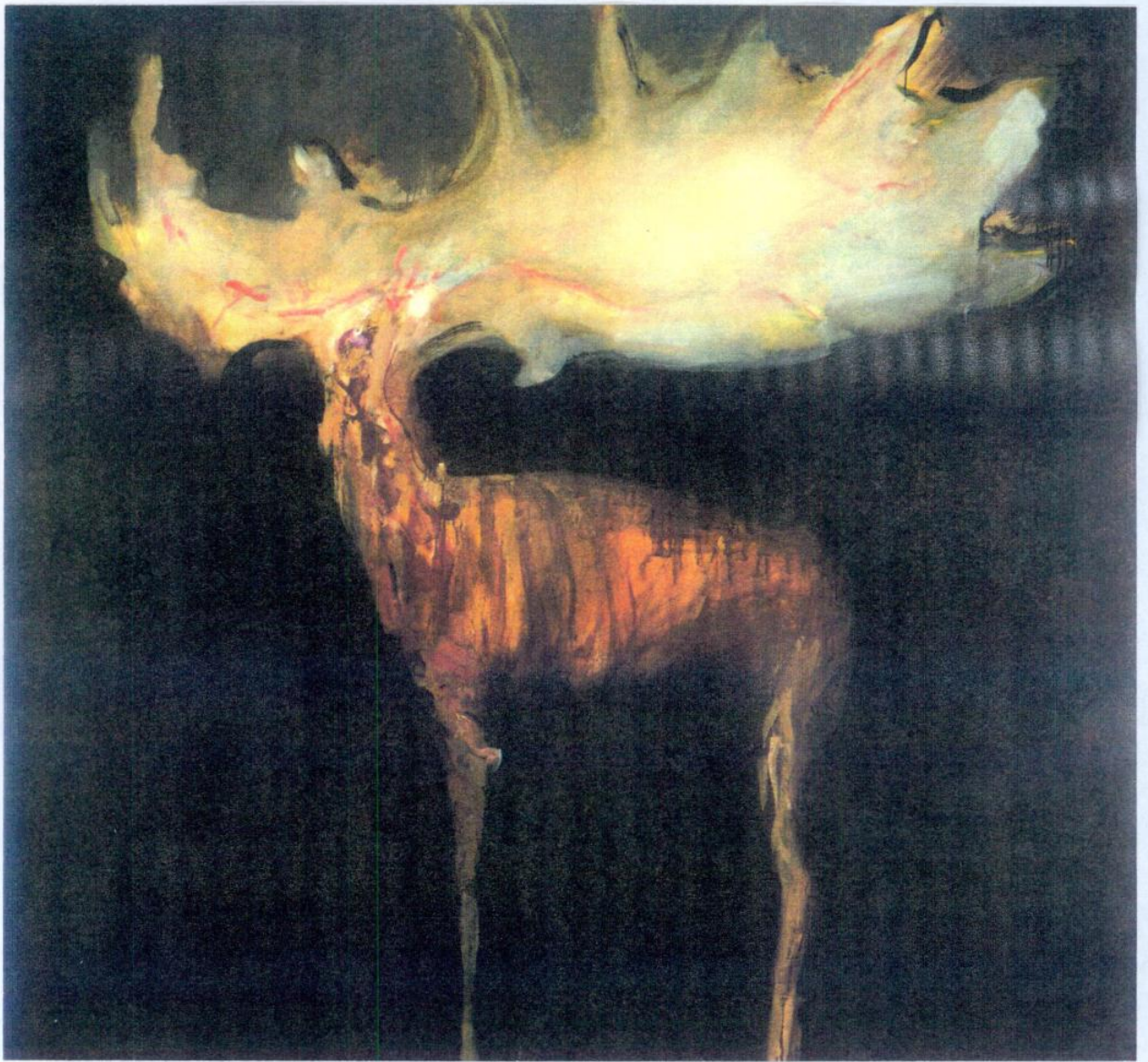
"Elk meets Swainson" 1982 - 84 (detail)

Ninshubur, to appeal for her release if she does not return within three days, which happens. Ninshubur embodies the part of the self that acts as spokesperson in daily life. "In the realm of the underworld there is no possibility of hiding" (Brinton-Perera: 1981: P. 60). The idea of regression into a self-incubating state suggests the potential for healing in the unconscious if consciously worked through; the potential for compassion and empathy.

The polar energies personified in Inanna and Ereshkigal (two of a triad), anabolic and catabolic, is also central to Celtic myth and is embodied in the Irish tradition of the Morrighu, containing the triad of Morrighan, visionary; Badhbh, warrior; and, Macha, fertility/healing. Symbolized by a crow or raven the Morrighu combines the threshold energies of sexuality and war, life and death, in a personification of forces which give and take life and reinvests the Sile na Gig with new meaning.

"Megacerous Hibernicus" (1983, Fig. 16) shows the vascular system of plants apparent in the antlers. Digging beneath the surface, Cooke unearths the criss-crossing network of veins and reinvests the extinct beast, believed in Celtic myth to have the role of spirit guide, with renewed life and meaning. The metamorphosis of soft tissue to solid inert form returns us to the bone-boxes of the seventies. "Metamorphosis requires energy".

This energy is apparent in the antlers of the Great Irish Elk where the startling rate of regrowth, they spanned 12 feet in some cases and were shed annually, fascinate Cooke who sees their vascular system as having "analogies which are found in the painting process" (Cooke: 1983: Radio Leinster). The Elk, whose remains have been



(Fig. 16) "Megacerous Hibernicus" 1983

Oil on Canvas

168 x 183 cm



preserved in the bogs in Ireland, serves as a reminder of the organism - environment symbiotic bond. The elk and the bog are part of one another and nostalgia for an extinct past is evoked. Elk, exhumed from the world of incubating dark and seeming stasis helps us to find meaning in pain, loss and death. Whereas the Elk represents primal consciousness, Sweeney embodies poetic expression. Cooke juxtaposes images nature - culture, instinct and intellect into an organic expression.

Cooke balances the weight of the elk's antlers and rib-cage against the light, slender legs which are worked - into the peat - coloured underground. This balancing act is a constant element in Cooke's work. He balances one against the other, investigates ways out of the confrontation and achieves a valuation that is ambiguous, complex, emotional and personal. Incorporated in an ancient setting and touching on matters of universal concern 'Elk meets Sweeney' possesses many of the characteristics of myth yet the confrontation between nature and culture is primarily intuitive.

Above Sweeney, on the left panel, is a glimmering, silvery water-like ground with splashes of vivid yellow, red and blue leading out of the top of the canvas in the form of a rainbow - coloured ladder, a motif associated with the shaman in his journeys between the realms of above and below. The silvery colours could also be seen as the moisture-laden atmosphere which is a dominant aspect of Ireland's climatic conditions. The descent - ascent of the Elk is also reinforced in this symbol. Stripped of flesh, the Elk suggests the removal of old illusions and identities that served in the conscious world but which count for nothing in the unconscious.

Sweeney, unveiled of his colourful tunics, suggests the need to, and acceptance of,

having one's soul searched by the eye-of-death, combining with the aspects which Sile na Gig embodies. Decomposed yet preserved, the seemingly meaningless state becomes a total transformation of matter.

Peat is formed of decomposing and carbonized plant and animal life, a symbol of the major forces which generate metamorphosis. As with the Jutland bog finds, Tollund and Grauballe women and men, the Gundestruppe cup which shows the horned god Cernunnos, and the finds in Irish bogs described by P.V. Glob, the Elk was very well preserved by the acids in the bog-water in an anaerobic zone trapped in the underlayers of the peat. Traces of the past flow into the present and provide a continuity with half-forgotten energies: the "strange power ... which prevents decay" (Glob: 1965: P. 17)

These bog finds established concrete links between the final pagan phase of their culture and the early Christian era. Unexpected relationships are established, and, set beside Sweeney, they sharpen the focus on the actual sacrificial aspect of change and evolution. Brute reality is revealed in this ricochet into our savage and natural history.

'Cauldron bogs' were sacred places at which many religious rituals took place. Many of the 'bog people' were offered as brides and bridegrooms to the earths gods and goddesses to placate the forces that 'ensured' fecundity in a polar cycle of energies - death in the hope of reward for the greater community. Most Celtic rituals contained two of the potent magical and spiritual symbols which are the cauldron and the club or staff, associated with the Irish deity, Daghdha, god of abundance and fertility.

Myths containing the polarities of life and death appear at the root related, but they differ as representing different interpretations of experience and judgements of the same 'reality'. Suffering, exiles, and maimings - for example, the maimed Fisher King, Anfortas of the Grail Legend; Nuadha, of the Silver Arm, maimed King of the Tuatha de Danann, are intrinsic elements of the tales which aim to find meaning between polarities. Cauldron and club, Grail and lance, become symbols of the female and male principles.

The bog finds are compared to the "worlds oldest heroic epic, Gilgamesh" by Glob. The interchange between organism and environment is re-established in the paintings and bone-boxes of the eighties. Glob describes the distinct layers in the peat as pages of a great picture book illustrating the flora and people of the land through the ages.

This theme of preservation is later set beside the prematurely aged, eutrophic lakes by Cooke in a polarization which is enormously fruitful, that can be made to subsume and illuminate many of the most important problems of contemporary life.

Nature's peristalsis action provides Cooke with a motif which, exhumed from the preservative earth, helps us to find meaning in pain and death. Through a 'narrative' implicit in the motifs, Cooke exemplifies the various attitudes to death and decay that humans tend to adopt: theoretical acceptance, utterly destroyed by one's first close acquaintance with it; revulsion and repellency from the physical corruption; and, finally, a kind of acceptance. The contrast between raw and tame is investigated and the differentness between them is sensitively worked out from a basic matter which signifies a matrix and creative processes of the earth, its roots, saps and germs. As

fuel, it embodies the fire of creativity, and, as fertilizer, it encourages growth and it holds the key to the seasons with its slow organic growth. For Cooke, peat provides a primordial swamp, gene - pools of memory, life, death and inexorable energy. It is a metaphor for Ireland's past of miasmic and deep inchoate places and is analogous to his work in general.

Cooke's use of materials for example, sand, clay, gravel, peat, and bones, links him to artists Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, and Antoni Tapies. Joseph Beuys's answer to the "arts incapacity to directly transform society was to extend the word 'artist' to cover everyone, so that it could be any kind of being or doing rather than specifically making". This extended medium was then designated as a "Social Sculpture" (Hughes: 1991: P. 400). He understood the rituals involving dead animals, bones, felt, fat, etc., as embodying states of pre-civilized consciousness. Kiefer, who was a student of Beuys for a while, uses tar, straw, lead and photographs and makes enormous works which, as John Hutchinson suggests " attests to a longing for the right to explore questions of 'spirit' and 'Being' without attendant guilt" (Hutchinson: 1990: essay). Tapies evokes the human presence in a powerful way using wax, sand, hair, ashes, dust, etc. The materials are meant to question post World War 2 concepts of 'reality' and structures hidden in these materials reveal unexpected connections between the body in nature and the 'spirit' behind it. The materials have a strong suggestive and associative quality with "this object" standing for that which is represented. Structures of meaning are altered and the forms and materials of meaning changes in a process that disguises all the better to reveal.

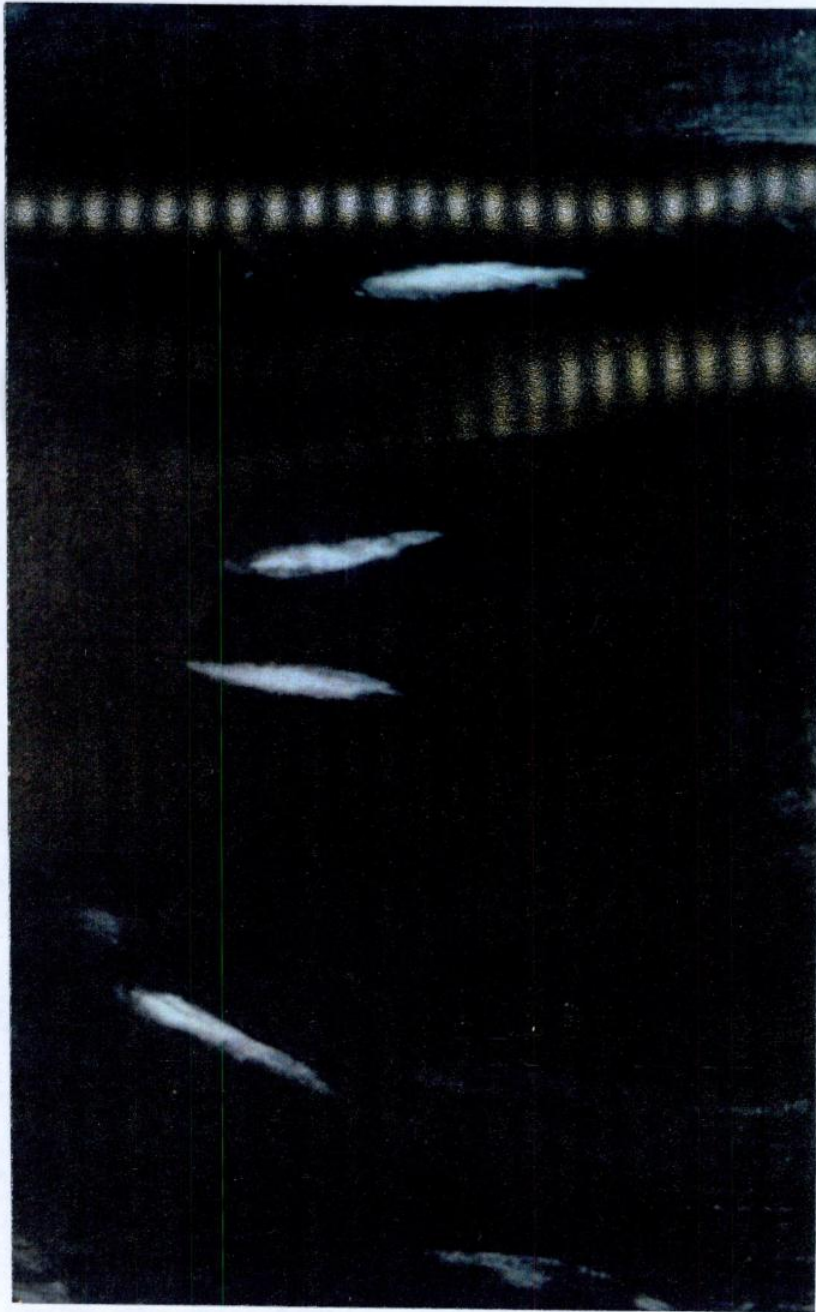
Cooke's use of materials on the one hand, with all of their suggestive and associative qualities, combine with his use of vivid colours and spontaneity to transmit and transcend verbal meaning. His art could be seen as a theoretical antidote for the terror of human history and contains an enormous restorative power.

CHAPTER THREE: "What is Loathsome becomes beautiful".

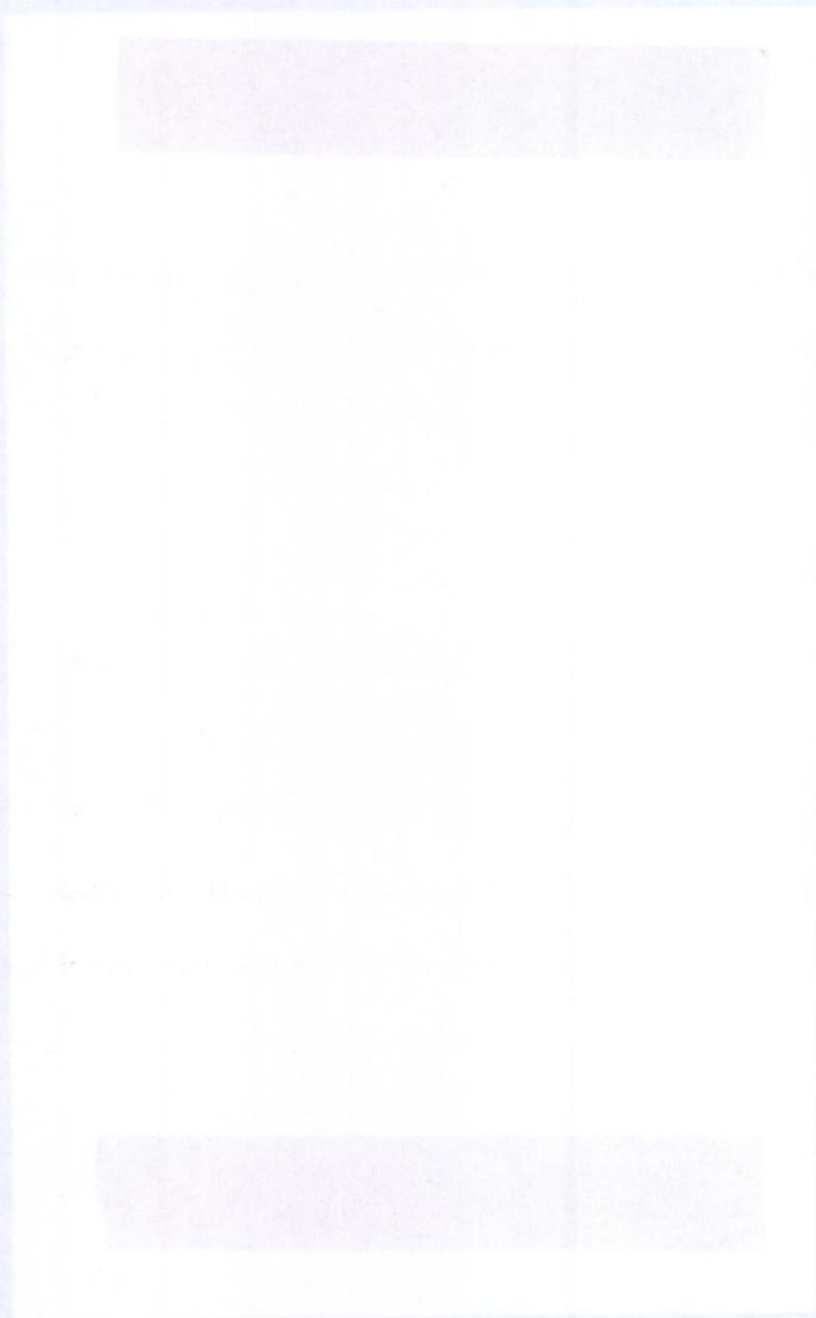
Each stage of Cooke's work is set in motion by a "return to the source", intense, scientific observation, direct sketches, endlessly aiming at a new "childlike immediacy" of response to nature. Shapes, forms and colours metamorphose on his canvases which become areas charged by fluid drenched paints and strong resonating colours. The organic form contained in its surroundings is a recurrent theme. For example 'Deep Current with White Trout' (1962 Fig.17).

The imprints of his fishing practices are all - pervasive, where pike, tench, floats, streams, rivers, lakes and seas have all been tackled in divergent scales, during day and night.

Organic and chemical pollution are major problems for contemporary society and one can only imagine the despair felt by Cooke as he witnesses the destruction it wreaks on the environment in which he lives and works. The celebratory activity of painting in his early 'fishing' works was a response to the water, plants, algae, fish, organisms, and flies which feed them as the basis of life in healthy water systems. Water is permeated with air and other gases dissolved in it. Oxygen purifies and breaks down the organic matter deposited in it and foliage disintegrates, releasing carbon dioxide into the air and creating a seamless continuity of what Schwenk calls "earth's great system of respiration" (Schwenk: 1965:P. 101). Cooke's spontaneous response to these natural processes are transmitted in his earlier works and again in the new Zealand 'clean' water paintings which are calm, clear, almost Utopian. "Brushstrokes become co-efficient of the place ... the inward world is as actual as the



(Fig. 17) "Deep Current with White Trout"



physical (world)" (Cooke: 1984: Coleraine Lecture).

Spirals, vortices, energy and renewal patterns in water and air are reflected in organic growth processes, and Cooke's intimate contact with water are an integral aspect of all his work. It's very presence evokes the forms contained within it and supports his belief in the interrelatedness of all things. Constant observation of this fundamental element leads to an understanding of the macrocosm through a direct study of its most basic microcosm. Goethe writes:

"Into one Whole how all things blend,

Function and live within each other". (MacNeice: 1951: P. 21)

The sometimes unfinished appearance of his paintings defines an organic quality where the forms emerge from and yet remain inseparably contained in the all-supporting environment. Interlocking layers of currents and the all-competing, all-adjusting movement of water is captured as part of its inherent structure.

Ted Hughes wrote: "It is not easy to separate the fascination of rivers from the fascination of fish ... When the water is wild, inhabitants are even more important. Streams, rivers, ponds, lake without fish communicate to me one of the ultimate horrors - the poisoning of the wells, death at the source of all that is meant by water" (Hughes: 1993: P. 183-4). This despair is reflected in the choked surface of Cooke's paintings on polluted water, land, and more recently air.

Accumulating suspensions of foamy scum and bacteria thrive and exhaust the

waterways of their biological vitality. The inexorable growth seen in the rainforest is now concentrated on the 'negative' anaerobic forms.

"Man has had a very detrimental effect on nature, eg., ozone layer, nuclear explosions, black rain, etc.". Excessive nutrients dumped in the waterway increases the need for oxygen to break them down which sometimes exceeds the capacity of the water to do so. Natural organisms either have to leave the area or die, while algae blooms exhaust the vitality of the water system in their ever increasing need to grow and proliferate. The tooth-and-claw battle for survival is responded to by Cooke in a work painting in 1992, "Sewage Outlet" (Fig. 18).

Cooke captures the moment when the slurry sinks under the waters surface from a black pipe. Many waterways in Ireland have suffered this fate and dense greens, browns and greys converge in a central position scattered here and there with white foam - like forms which are scraped onto the canvas as in circular motions. This direct response to the dumping compels us to share the intense denaturing event which we can visualise spreading out of the canvas. The confrontation with what is real is now sickening yet Cooke's optimistic activity of painting relays our fears. Whether the organism is natural or unnatural, the impulse towards growth and evolution predominates. "What is loathsome becomes beautiful" in the handling of paint and the subtle relationships between the colours and forms.

Industrial effluents poison the sewage - works which treat organic wastes and the nutrient-rich slurry and agricultural 'run-off' produces hydrogen sulphide which causes a black silt to accumulate and settle at the bed of the lake or river. As the rich



(Fig. 18) "Sewage Outlet" 1992

Oil on Canvas

97 X 102 cm



black silt accelerates the aging process of the lake, the life span is decreased leaving anaerobic bacteria which thrive in the absence of oxygen. This leaves the lake 'dead' and smelling of rotten eggs. The slurry which drains into the surrounding landscape produces a proliferation of nettles and weeds and the overall area is left in a scorched cauterized state. Eutrophication is the term applied to this state of events and it is a term that Cooke believes "everyone should know and understand" (McMonagle: 1992: Pp. 67 - 68).

Putrefaction is the main characteristic of the nigredo phase and signifies the death of the 'prima materia' having first separated to release the dual nature of the elements contained within it. The concept of transformation, implicit in the alchemical process, is, in the case of pollution, denied and negated. This polarisation of opposites is a major element in all of Cooke's work, and, in relation to the response to changing conditions, engages him in a search for some form of transformative action. "Painting can have an enormous moral effect".

The explosions and leakages of poisonous fumes in the alchemical laboratories are synonymous with the experience, in contemporary society, of explosive releases of atomic energy and poisoning through radiation.

The nigredo stage precedes the albedo stage - called the 'peacock's tail' phase of many colours. Once the 'blackness' "has reached rock - bottom" (Fabricius: 19 : P. 116) it is connected with a feeling that something is breaking through - an enantiodromia. It is signified by a return of the spirit which has been extracted from

the matter and reforms the whole work. Empathy comes from the pain and despair consciously suffered through.

The opposites that Cooke is constantly involved with can be seen by placing dynamic energy and sinister, disruptive activities together. A dynamic energy is embodied in 'Summer Knot', (1982, Fig. 19) and 'Winter Knot' (1982, Fig. 20). Stripped of outer coverings, the knots represent flesh coloured coils of roots lodged dormant in the earth. The biomorphic forms seethe with the earth's energy which serpents symbolize and deal with the extraordinary intimacy between the organism and environment. These forms could be plant or human where interweaving vertical and horizontal lines suggest the union of opposites, male and female principles, a motif used by Joseph Beuys and Antonio Tapies in their works. The preservative - destructive aspects of nature are contained in the polarities which separate and reunite in a constant evolution. "During a number of stages or phases of growth, we are engaged in the search for a patently fragmented self that is propelled forward by the energy generated by a struggle between opposites" (McCarthy: 1993: P. 20)

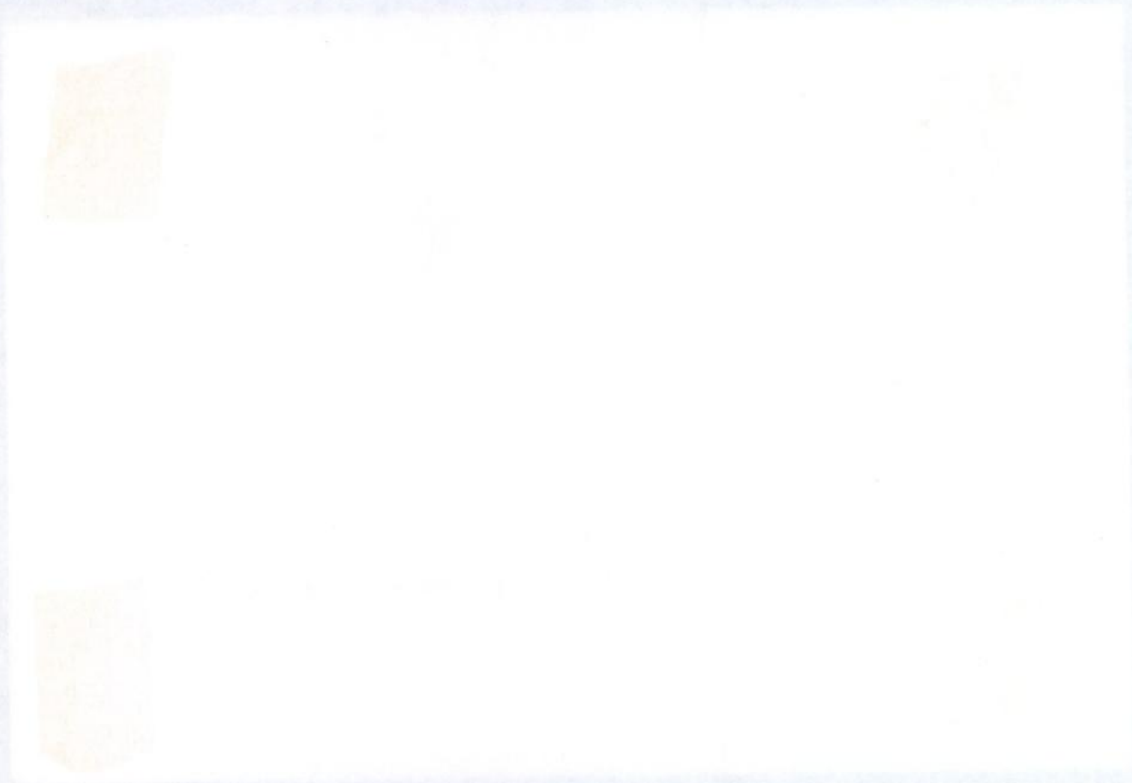
The twisted organic shapes interweave and 'bleed' into each other. Translucent flesh tones merge in a dense opaque background where solid and fluid are expressed, like matter and spirit, each containing the seed of the other. Nature is shown as a web of inter-connected relations between various parts of the whole. The works contrast sharply with "Death of a Lake" (1988/89 Fig. 21), which portrays the final silt-over eutrophic stage of pollution. The decapacitating effects of air, land and water pollution reverberates to Yggdrasil which is attacked on all three realms. An impact of emotional shock is felt and the terms of exchange between art and life are inverted.



(Fig. 19) "Summer Knot" 1982

Oil on Canvas

147 x 244 cm



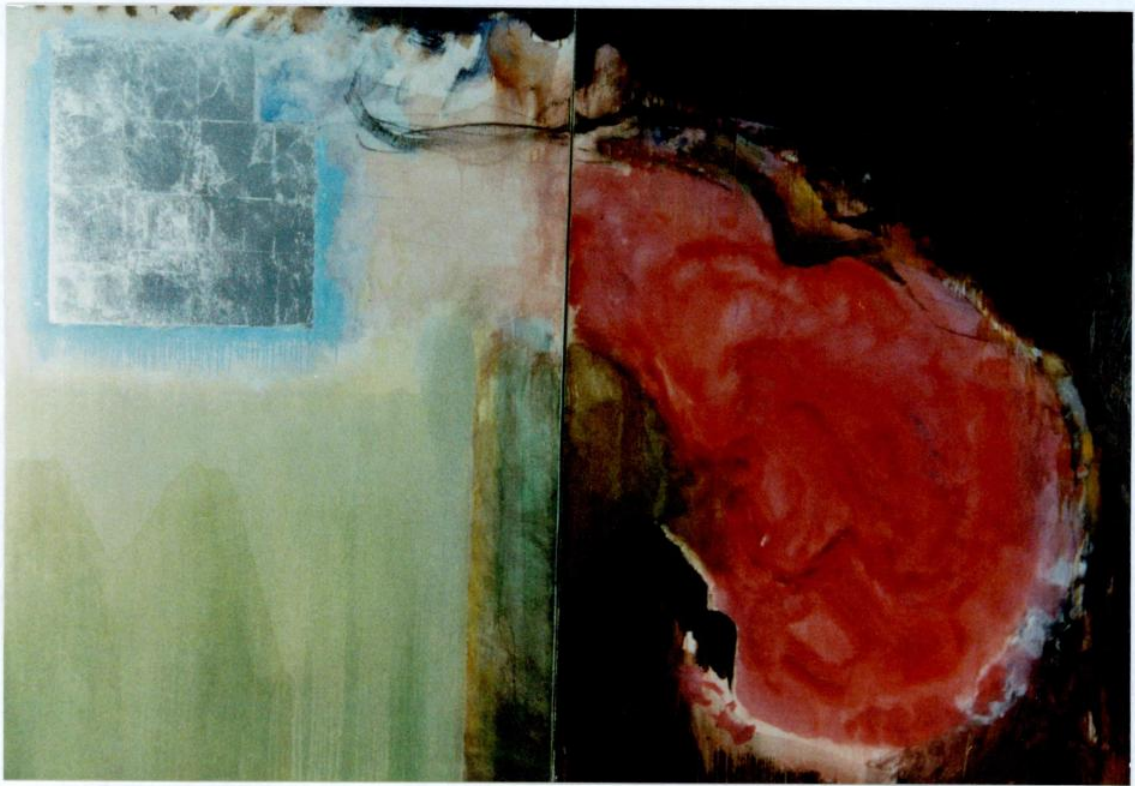


(Fig. 20) "Winter Knot" 1982

Oil on Canvas

150 x 245 cm





(Fig. 21) "Death of a Lake" 1988/89

Oil on Canvas with mixed media.

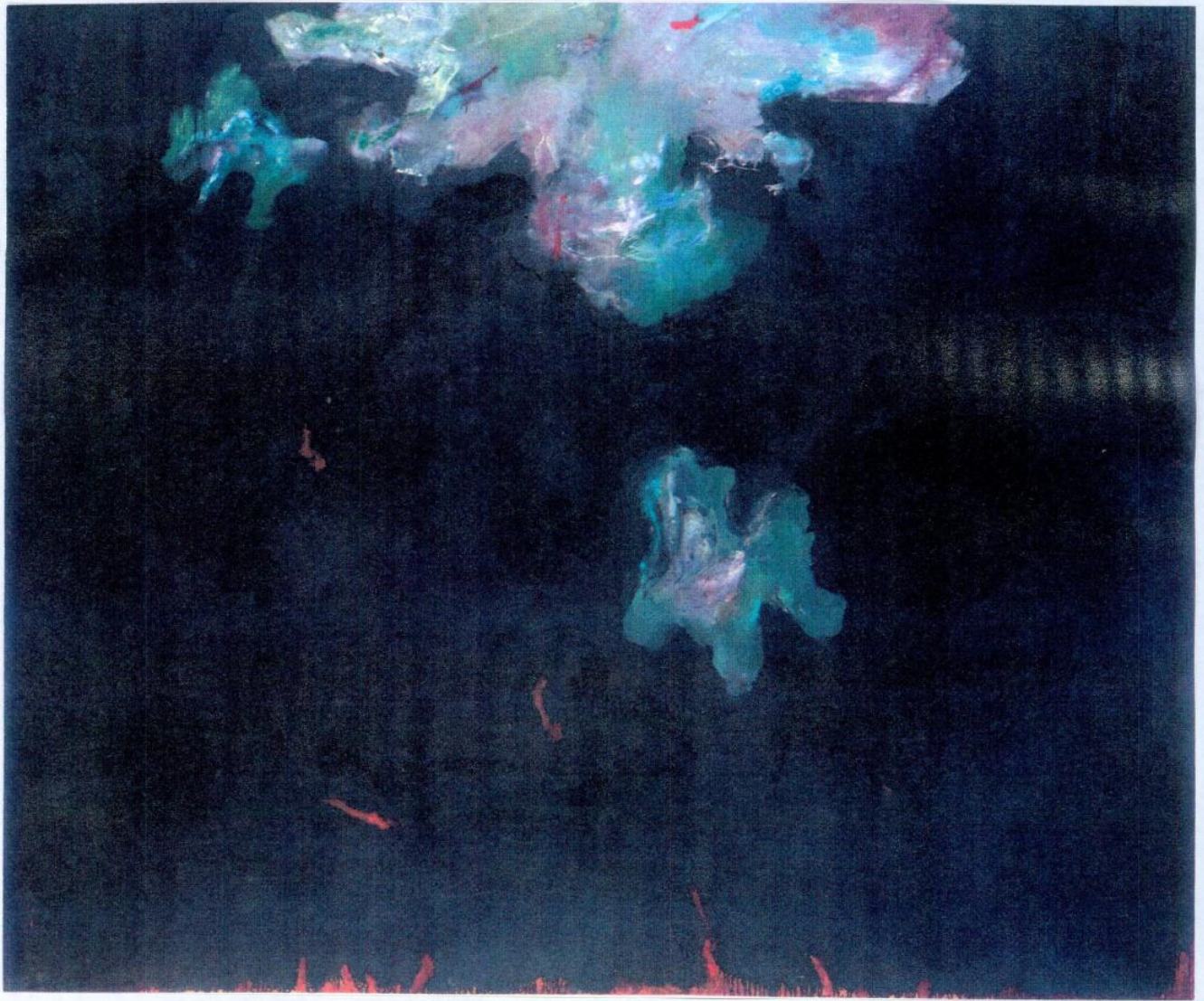
152 X 244 cm (diptych)



An overall sense of spontaneity captures the fleeting qualities of light but the vivid striking contrasts are set beside an overpowering tar-like dark. This diptych portrays the cauterized state.

The deoxidized water which surrounds the vivid, viral-like, pink mass is threatening to, and has begun to, overtake the left-hand panel, which contains a square-silver area covering a blue 'New Zealand like' lake. The washes of pale greens, pinks and blues in this panel have lost their staining qualities indicating the 'absorbed' vitality of the water. Cooke's emphasis on metamorphosis in continuity, continual conversion of one state of matter into another and perpetual interchange is reflected in this work which resulted in intensive observation and response to the motif - "Pollution has been raised to the imaginative level ... (where) Nature is out of control".

A static dynamism is evoked in 'Black Growth' (1992 Fig. 22) which contrasts with the abundance of activity in the earlier Borneo works. Blacks, greens and pinks are applied to poetically reveal the stillness of the water which has been devitalized. An amoebic, gelatinous congregation of slime mould, formed by colonies of beadlike strings within a jelly-like mass, floats on the surface and seems destined to be enlarged by the two smaller forms. A blackened area, which faintly indicates the presence of underwater plants in the painting, surrounds the forms which ooze towards each other. This work represents an importance and complex emotion - an ineffable intuition about the present consumerist culture. It has a Monet-like tone which captures the fleeting movement of shifting darks and lights which fluctuate between presence and absence, and emphasises the continuity in metamorphosis - the perpetual change in life.



(Fig. 22) "Black Growth" 1992

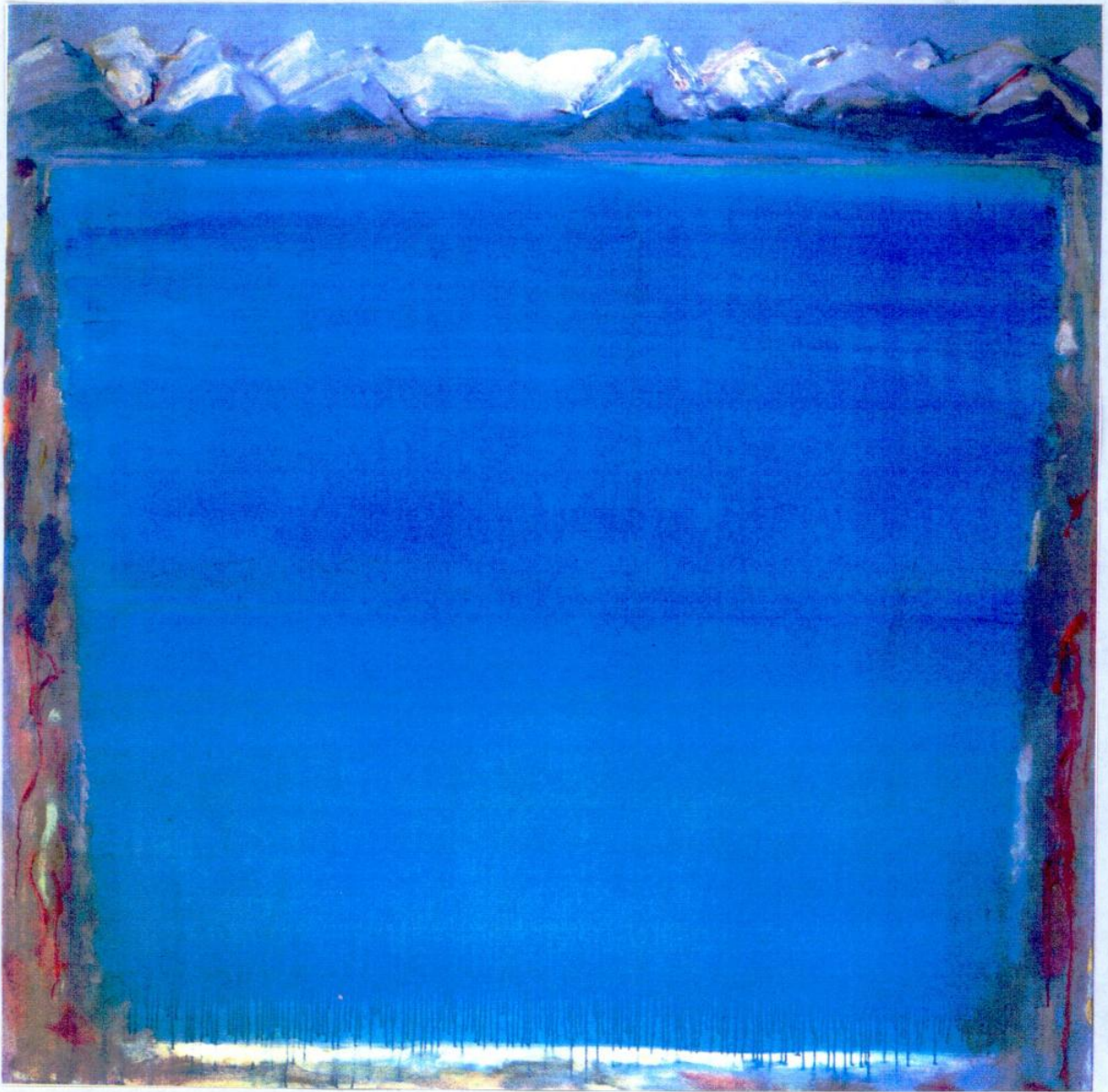
Oil on Canvas : 203 x 244 cm.



The opposites that constantly interest Cooke are carried dramatically into an exhibition in the Kerlin Gallery in 1989 which show the 'pollution' theme juxtaposed beside environmentally - clean paintings made in New Zealand the year before. Set beside 'Death of a Lake', Tekapu Lake 1 (1988 Fig. 23) shows the early unspoiled oligotrophic stage of a healthy lake, the brilliant blue is topped by clear glazier mountains and around the edges are red vein-like markings, as seen in the antlers of the life-invested Great Elk - discussed earlier. Harmony and dissonance are juxtaposed.

Cooke's work oscillates between extremes "in which, Janus-like, it is possible to look both ways, into interior - exterior space" (Walker: 1984: P. 20). The expression of sinister, disruptive activities on the one hand, drastically changes to the awe-inspiring preservation on the other, recollective of the bog-water which contained the Elk. Modern Society's denigration of nature becomes the universal opposite to the energy generated in the preservation of life in nature. Cooke's work draws our attention to the instability of meaning, in relation to our natural resources, that we employ. The cycle of inter-relatedness has been disrupted and the seamless interchange is reflected back on us, split and disjointed.

In a new body of work Cooke has turned his gaze to the skies that have until now been reflected from his paintings of water. The colour studies (all untitled, figures No. 24 - 29) use bright-vibrant and dark-brooding colours and varnishes to depict viral-like shapes and seem to translate his response to air-pollution. Large expanses of sky in the large works are a striking feature in the Sligo area where he lives. From Carrowkeel megalithic tomb he painted out an almost 360° expanse of vision.

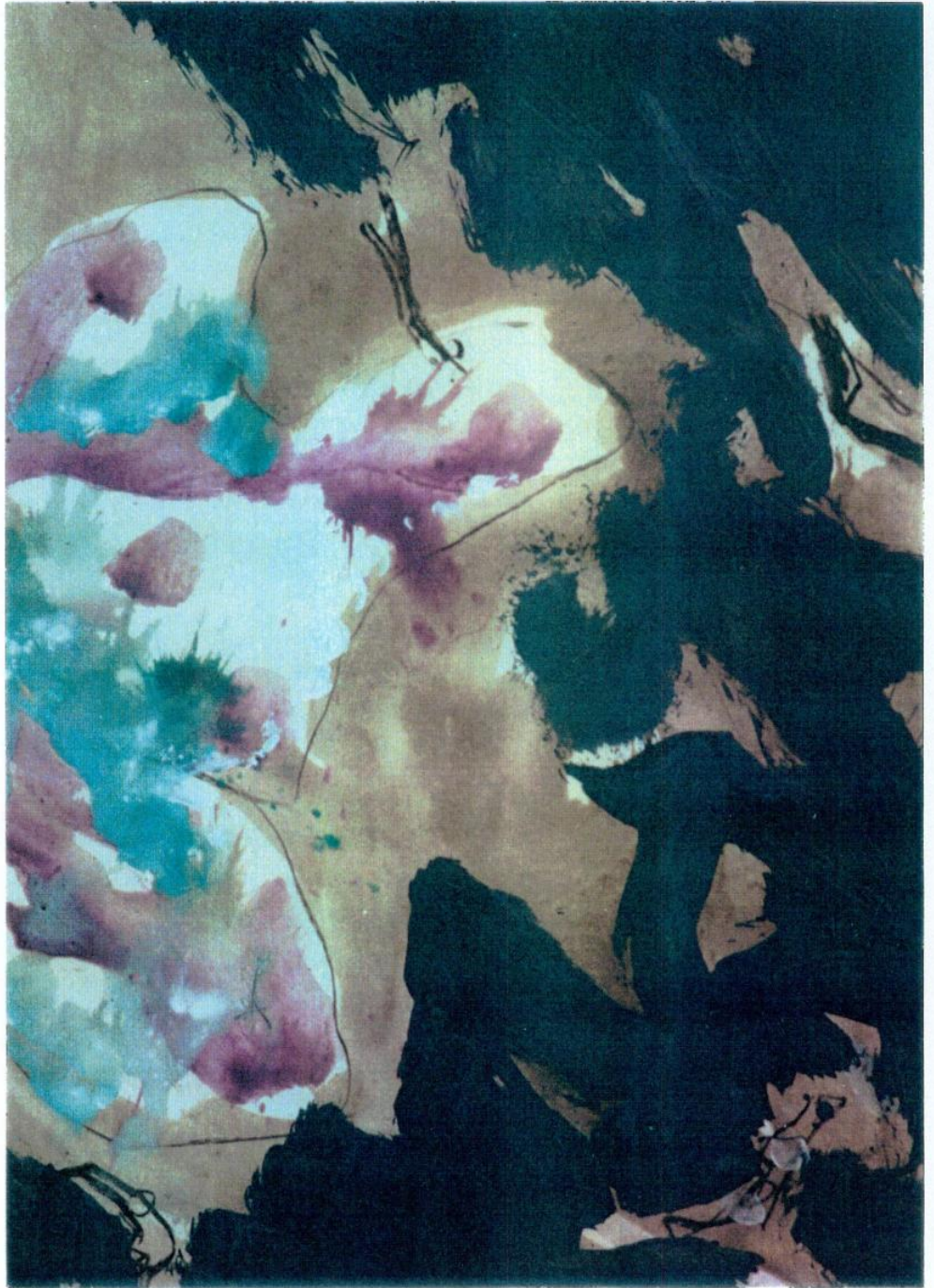


(Fig. 23) "Tekapu Lane 1" 1989

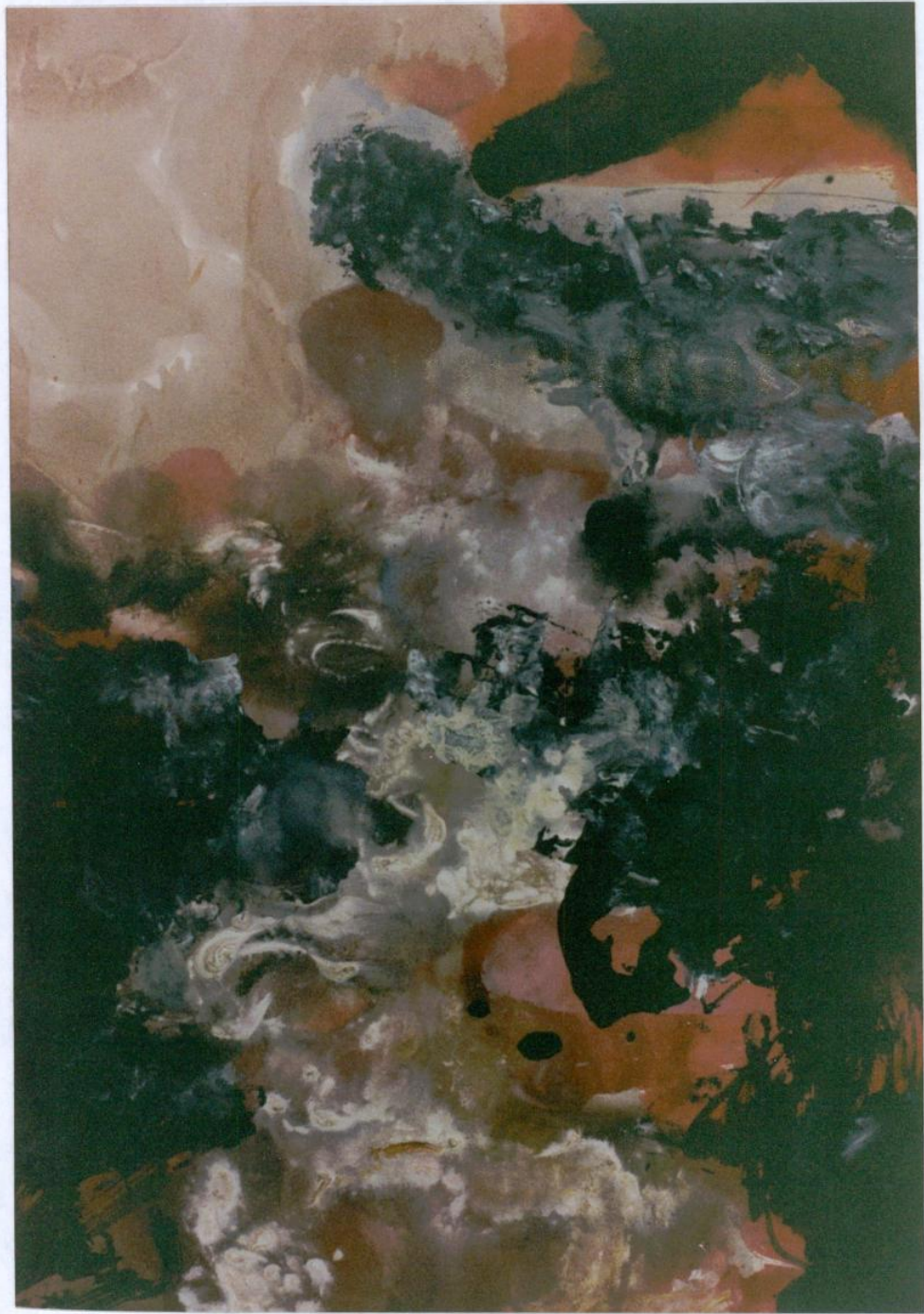
Oil on Canvas

173 x 173 cm



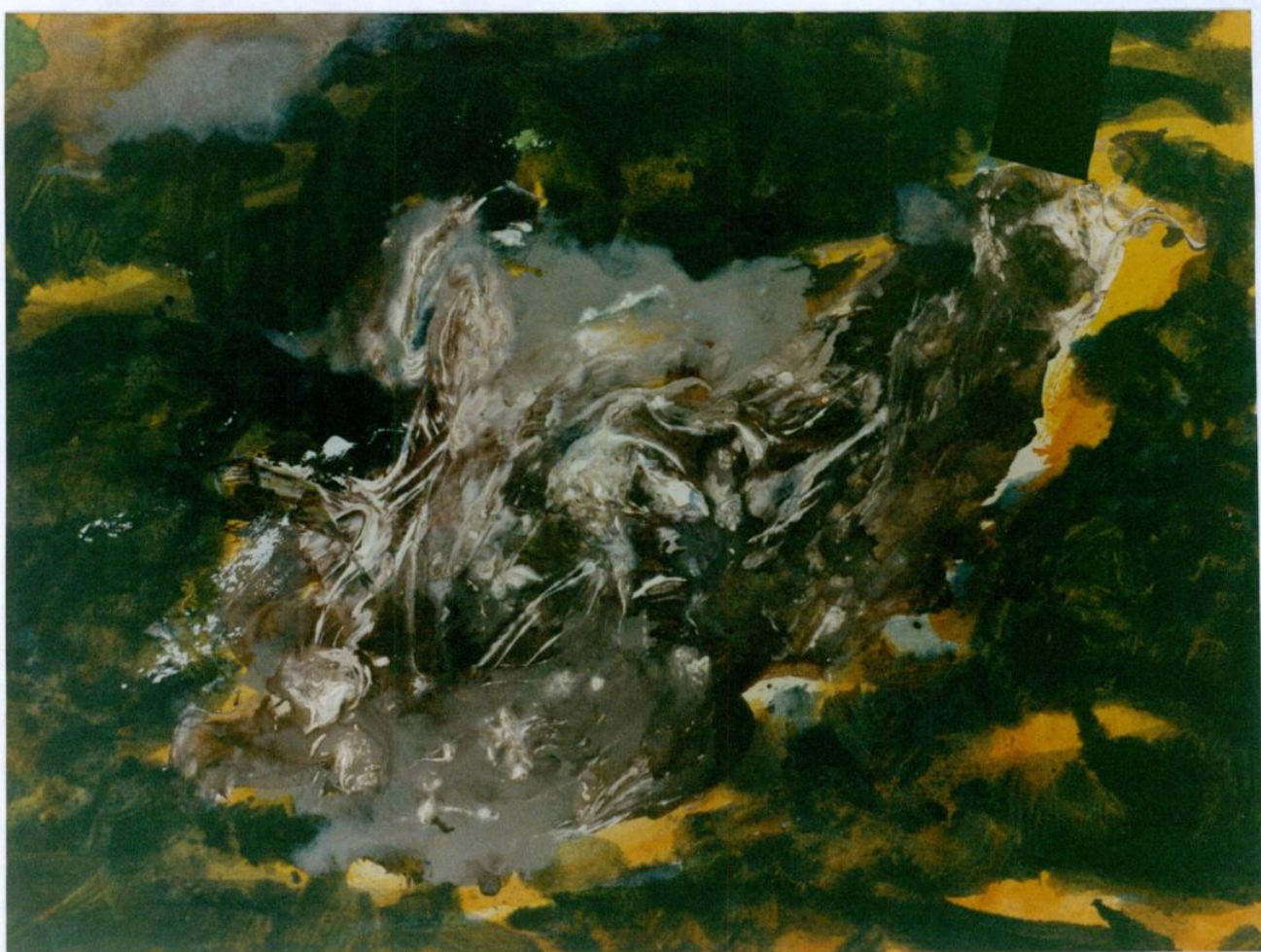


(Fig. 24) Study 1: 1993: Oil on Paper

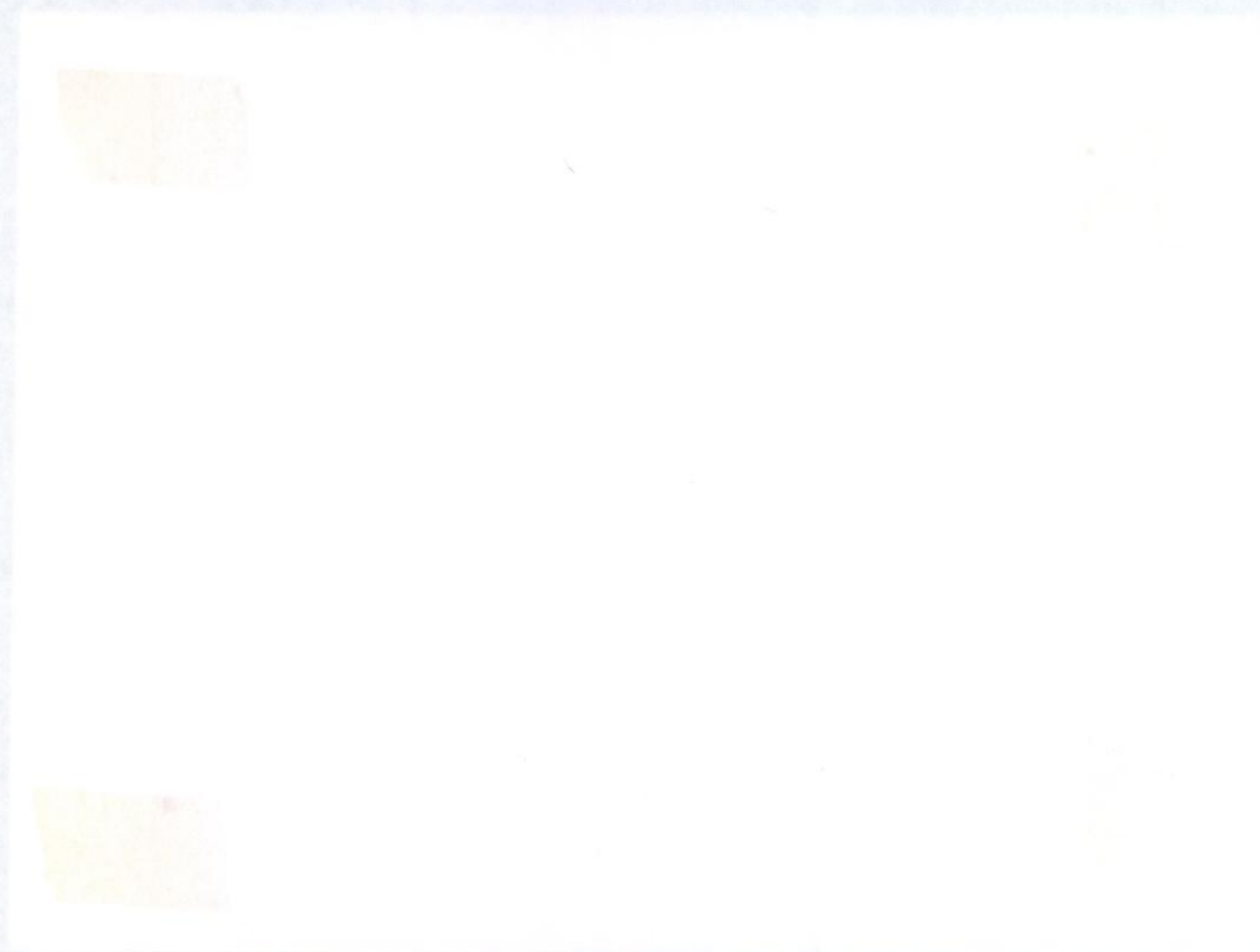


(Fig. 25) Study 2: 1993: Oil on Paper





(Fig. 26) Study 3: 1993: Oil on Paper





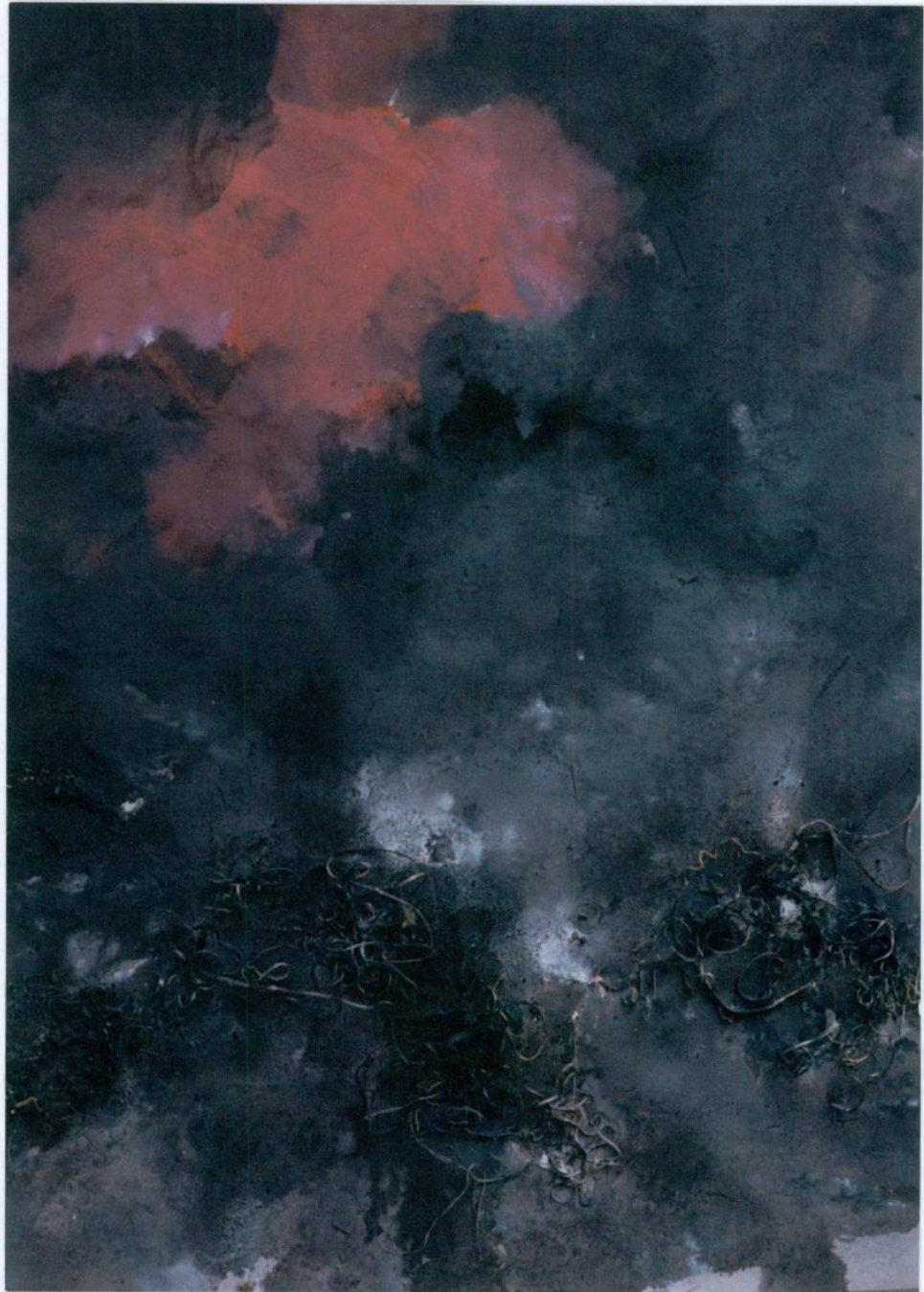
(Fig. 27) Study 4: 1993: Oil on Paper





(Fig 28) Study 5: 1993: Oil on Paper





(Fig. 29) Study 6: 1993: Mixed Media on Paper



These are the subject of the new works. The physical contiguities of paint, the flowing, dripping, swirling motions of liquid, apparent in air as in water, make these works resonate with the same energy as his earlier paintings and his protean approach to organic elements allows the viewer a multiplicity of readings.

The brilliance of the colours, which transmit "feeling, mood and emotion", in Cooke's palette conveys his response to a particular place or motif. Striking blues, reds, yellows and blacks unlock different levels of energy. Filtering variations of light and planes seem to indicate that the flow of air into water is a continuous uroboric process which binds the elements together in a never ending play with no fixed end. This embodies the fluid nature of all of Cooke's works - "All Painting is empathy". The fear and pain felt in dealing with pollution, in a direct confrontation, is consciously worked through and represents an energising examination of our 'present history' which is consigned to meet modern technological demands.

CONCLUSION:

Eros, the energy that drives people to survive and reproduce and Thanatos, the drive to return to the previous inanimate state, are embodied in the life-death polarization which is a key to understanding Barrie Cooke's work. Positive: negative, creative: destructive, and the transitional stages, or articular spaces, between them are explored in a body of work which contains learning, divinatory and healing implications associated with the holistic approach of the ancient shaman.

Jung Wrote:

"When we think of the unending growth and decay of life and civilisation we cannot escape the impression of absolute nullity. Yet I have never lost a sense of something that lives and endures underneath the external flux. What we see is the blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains" (Jung: 1983: P. 18).

For forty years, Barrie Cooke has worked and portrayed his response to lights, darks, images and essences, stopping in many locations in which to find stimuli for his amazing sense of visual curiosity. In his work, nature appears as a complex web of relations between the various parts of the whole; relations which include the observer in an essential way. Nigredo, as the initial phase of metamorphosis is seen in Cooke's work where the primal material is broken down and its elements set in conflict with each other in order to reach a harmonic relationship. When all the outer forms are stripped away, what remains is the 'source', the underlying spirit, the 'rhizome'. It becomes impossible to view nature without simultaneously viewing ourselves.

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