

EXTRACT: SEAN ASHTON

*But painters do talk about paintings having a 'life' and when they overwork them they say they have 'killed' them...*

Is a painting a container or an empty vessel? A tabula rasa?

*I think they have a certain autonomy at least when they are...good?*

Containing emotion at least?

*That is their traditional justification. I would go a little further. I believe that just as it is possible for a painting to contain emotion it is also possible for it to contain thought.*

Matisse did say that painting was thinking...

*And if we accept that as a fundamental I would also posit the notion that an autonomous vessel containing both emotion (feeling) and intellect (thinking) can make a claim to a form of sentience.*

What? You think paintings really are alive?

*Obviously not as we understand life. But they do have a very singular existence or state of existence involving time and space as well as everything I have said and I probably believe they need a new form of categorisation if they must be categorised at all.*

Some paintings are stuck in their time. Is that because certain painters were? I always consider Ravilious to be this painter of particular crystalline moments of silence, of clarity during the war and yet they still seem so important. A balancing of exterior world with an interior, a certain sensibility. Do you know *Convoy Passing an Island*? He painted it the year before he died. I love to check off each of its separate parts, make sure they are still there! There is something so delightful and insouciant about it, as though Ravilious forgot there was a war on while he did it. And the painting itself it's almost as though it's unconcerned about whether we notice it or not. A simple seascape, nothing more, a casual composition that started as a respite from his military commission. A stab at something typical, civilian in spirit to mitigate the fear of war, take his mind off it, the kind of thing he'd painted perhaps a hundred times: a gravel path leading by a farm down to the shoreline, a loose horse loitering alone by the harbour, three barrels, two upright, one toppling over, a low wall, nicely built, of boulders and flint, a scattering of wooden posts, some straight, some bent, an ordinary island scene, with one or two stone shacks, the kind of thing one dashes off merely to relax and having done so puts aside and easily forgets. But then he looked up and saw those naval silhouettes.