

JOHN HITCHENS

Aspects of Landscape



SOUTHAMPTON
CITY ART GALLERY

John Hitchens



John Hitchens was born in 1940. He was educated at Bedales School, Petersfield, Hampshire, and studied fine art at Bath Academy of Art at Corsham (1958–61).

He lives and works near Petworth, West Sussex.

His paintings are held in many public and private collections in the UK and abroad. John Hitchens' work has been shown in more than 30 solo exhibitions and in numerous group shows.

The main source of his paintings are the landscapes of the British Isles.

A period photographing these landscapes from the air, gave him an awareness of land as a two-dimensional composition. Much of his current work is abstract, with strong landscape associations.

John Hitchens comes from a family of painters, including his father, Ivon Hitchens (1893-1979) and grandfather, Alfred Hitchens (1861-1942).



Studio view, 2016

Introduction

'Aspects of Landscape' coincides with John Hitchens' 80th birthday. This major retrospective presents the first overview of his work over nearly sixty years, in all its variety. Thanks to the space available across four exhibition galleries at the Southampton City Art Gallery, it has been possible to include some large-scale paintings which have not been seen in public before.

Much of Hitchens' work is influenced by the landscape of Sussex and the South Downs, where he grew up and where he still has his studio. He first became known as a landscape painter in the 1960s and '70s, with several solo exhibitions in London.

Public collections across the UK have acquired his work, and these paintings are now displayed on the Art UK website for the world to see. Interestingly,

there are now four generations of Hitchens artists on the site, John being accompanied by his father Ivon, his grandfather Alfred and his son Simon.

Over the past decades, Hitchens' work has evolved and changed considerably. His inquisitive mind and prodigious creativity continue to find new ways of seeing forms, patterns, light and colour, and connections between them in our landscape, and of presenting them for the viewer to behold.

In my mind, it is this sensitive observation of landscape, of man-made patterns and traces on the land, that makes John Hitchens' work so relevant at a time when many of us are re-thinking our relationship to the land we inhabit.

Andrew Ellis
Director of Art UK



Studio view, 2016, with 'Grounds'



Gallery 1

'Departure' – Recent Paintings, 2000 onwards



Departure, 2005,
oil on canvas, 163 x 129 cm / 64 x 50 in

John Hitchens' retrospective begins with seven large-scale works painted in the past two decades, between his 60th and 80th birthdays. These have not been shown in public before.

They explore new ways of seeing and depicting aspects of landscape, and represent a departure from the artist's earlier depictions of wide horizons and large skies in the South Downs, Scotland and Wales, painted up to the 1980s (Galleries 3, 4).

A period of working with aerial photography, flying low over the fields of the South Downs, had given Hitchens a different awareness of the landscape. The subject matter of these recent paintings is still landscape-related but freer in its

interpretation, with objects inhabiting their own environment and space.

Dots and lines reflect rows of stubble, post-holes in the ground and paths on the hills. Dark areas hark back to the custom of stubble burning, which remained common into the 1990s.

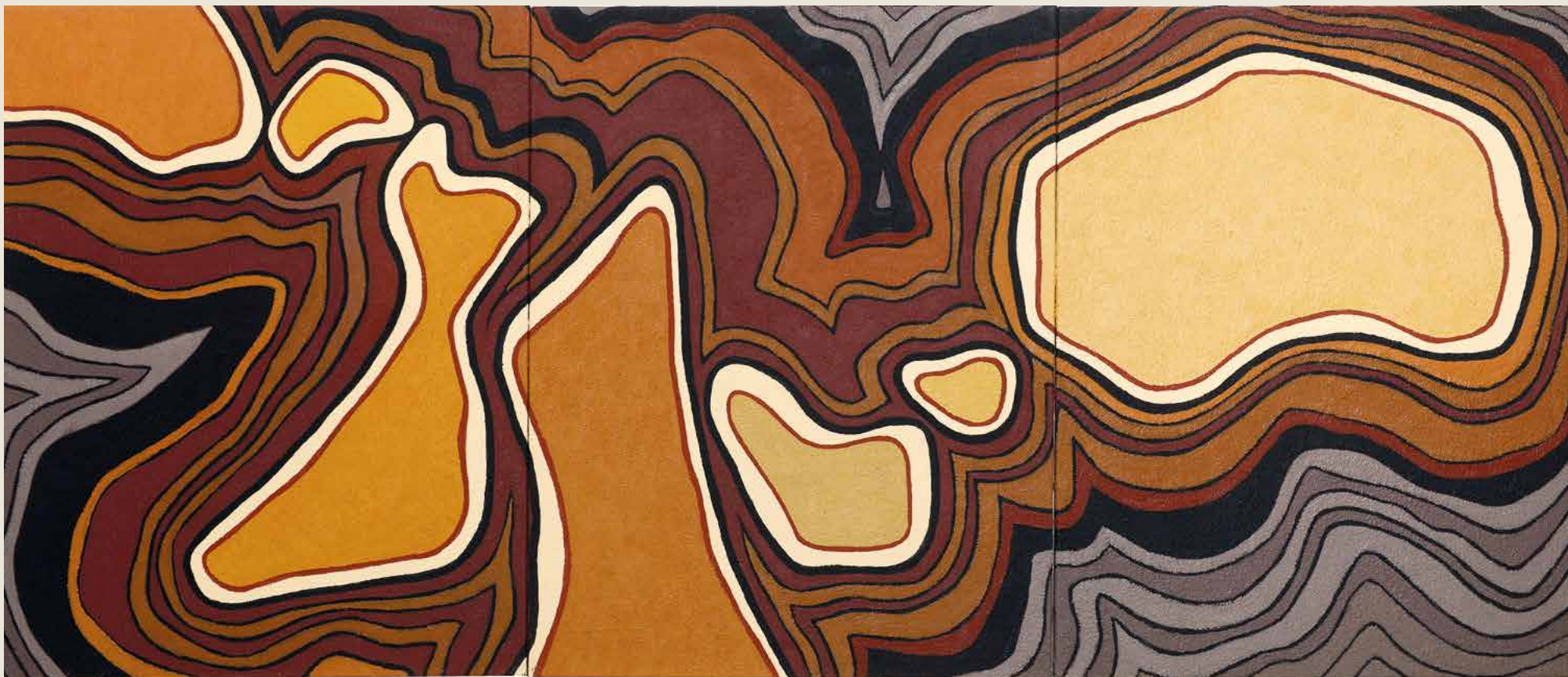
The viewer's relationship with these large canvases changes with proximity, as smaller areas of detail capture the landscape on a more intimate scale.

Alongside these large works Hitchens has, since the 1990s, created a separate body of work using shaped and textured canvases, often singly and on a smaller scale (Gallery 2).

left
Layered Land, 2002,
oil on canvas, 117 x 91.5 cm / 46 x 36 in (detail)

Gallery 1

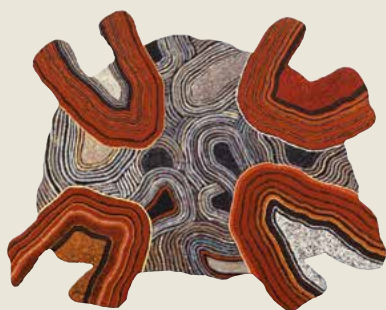
'Departure' – Recent Paintings, 2000 onwards



Contour Sequence, 2004,
oil on canvas, 117 x 91.5 cm / 46 x 36 in



Land Quest, 2017,
acrylic on canvas, 127 x 127 cm / 50 x 50 in



Four Fields Gathering No. 2, 2006,
acrylic on canvas, 99 x 122 cm / 39 x 48 in



Four Fields Gathering No. 3, 2006,
acrylic on canvas, 99 x 122 cm / 39 x 48 in

Gallery 2

'Land Quest' and Related Works, 1990s / 2000s

The decade after 1990 saw fundamental changes in Hitchens' work and in his approach to the subject of landscape.

He dispensed with many features of his earlier work and turned his attention to exploring landscape through its essential elements, such as stones, sand or wood. Structures were reduced to the basic forms of line and circle.

A group of collages and paintings based on stone circles belong to this period. A cluster of works explore cup-shaped forms based on partly opened circles, partly enclosed centres or hollow forms in wood. The device of outlining an area repeatedly with parallel lines draws both on soil formations and more transient patterns created by the plough.

Another innovation of this time saw Hitchens depart from the use of conventional square-cornered canvases. His paintings reveal the influence of other, three-dimensional art forms, such as land art and sculpture. The selection of works in this gallery includes examples of distinctive, irregularly shaped and layered canvases.

As Hitchens' approach to his subject changed, so too did his practice, with the transition from painting in the landscape to working as a studio artist. Indoors, the shifting arrangement of the studio and its collection of found, assembled and created objects has since become a source of inspiration in itself, as well as a living installation (Gallery 0).



Opening Links, 2000,
oil on canvas, 77 x 203 cm / 30 x 80 in

Gallery 2

'Land Quest' and Related Works, 1990s / 2000s



Field Interweave, 2009,
acrylic on canvas, 113 x 206 cm, 44½ x 81 in

Gallery 3

'Through the Blue Day' – Far Wood and other Landscapes, 1970s / 1980s



Through the Blue Day, 1984,
oil on canvas, 61 x 213 cm / 24 x 84 in

The main focus of this room is the Far Wood series of paintings, which make up a large part of John Hitchens' work from this period.

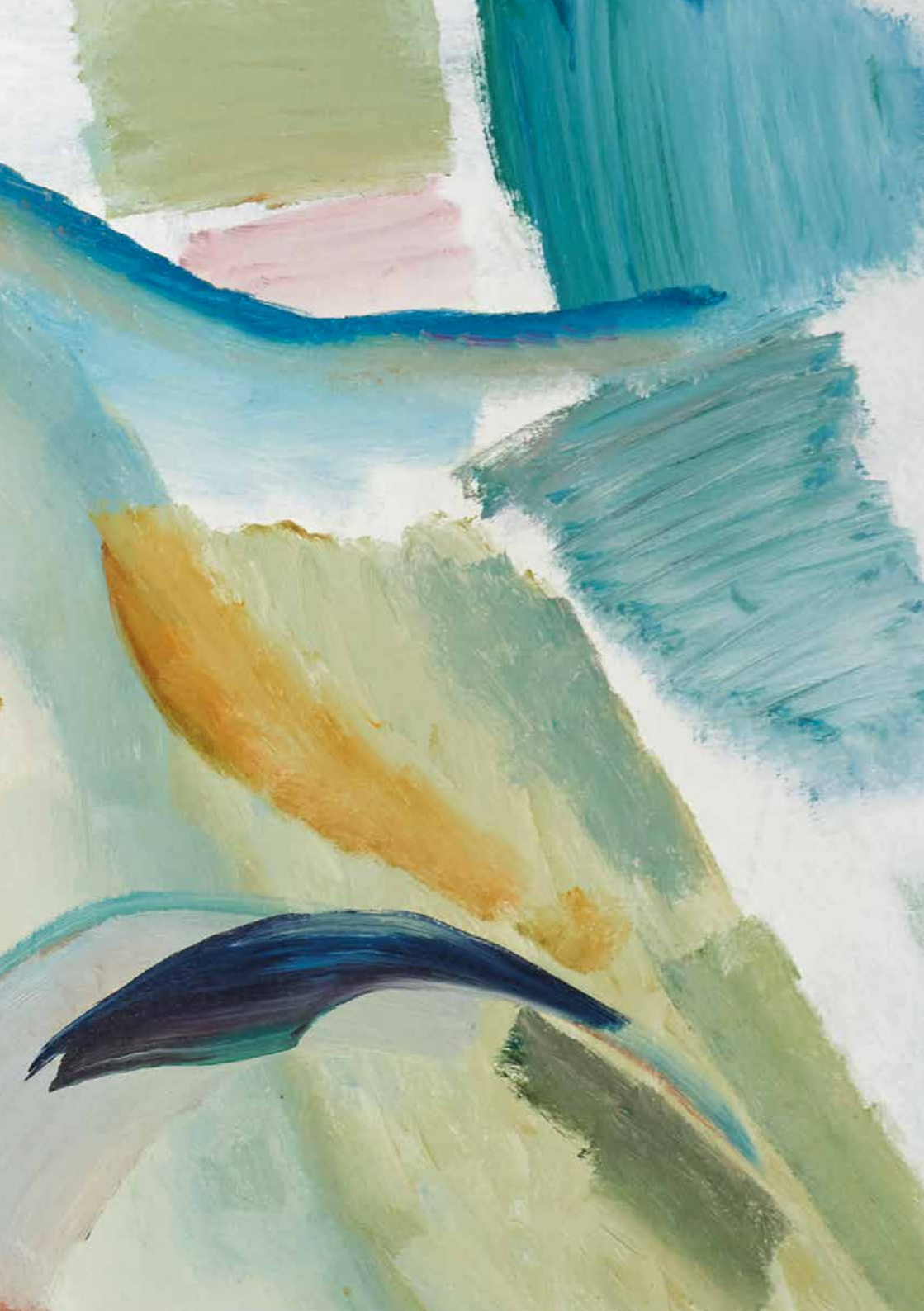
Far Wood, with its dense vegetation, lies near the artist's Sussex studio. Locations further afield gave rise to a contrasting group of paintings in the course of the

1970s. Painted at Selsey and various locations in Scotland, they show Hitchens interpreting other landscapes in the British Isles, such as the wide, sandy beaches of North Uist.

The Far Wood landscapes of the 1980s are characteristic of Hitchens' approach at this time. He was beginning to

dispense with skylines and cloud formations, and his paintings were becoming freer in their construction and brushwork. Towards the end of this period, the Great Storm of 1987 hastened these developments by introducing new and unfamiliar forms to Hitchens' subject matter.

A large number of smaller paintings featuring the Wealden view from Duncton Hill, and scenes in Wales and the Scottish Highlands, date to the same period. These had to be omitted from the exhibition but are represented in the artist's monograph, published concurrently by Sansom & Co.



Gallery 3

'Through the Blue Day' – Far Wood and other Landscapes, 1970s / 1980s



Sollas Sand, 1969,
oil on canvas, 50.5 x 76 cm / 20 x 30 in



above
Church Norton, March Sunset, 1970,
oil on canvas, 43 x 151.5 cm / 17 x 59¾ in

left
Through the Blue Day, 1984,
oil on canvas, 61 x 213 cm / 24 x 84 in (detail)

Gallery 4

'South Downs Blue Hill' – Early Paintings, 1960s / 1970s

right
South Downs Blue Hill, 1964,
oil on canvas, 40.5 x 91.5 cm / 16 x 36 in

below
Poppy Arrangement, 1967,
oil on canvas, 63 x 76 cm / 25 x 30 in

below right
Summer Corn, 1971,
oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76 cm / 25 x 30 in



'South Downs Blue Hill' is one of the earliest works in John Hitchens' retrospective. Painted in 1964, it shows a view of the South Downs landscape close to his Sussex studio – an environment which has been a defining influence throughout his artistic life.

1964 also marked the year of Hitchens' first solo exhibition in London, at the age of 24. It was mounted by the Marjorie Parr Gallery, where many of his subsequent solo exhibitions were held.

Following the gallery's closure, he was represented by Montpelier Studio, also in London.

This part of the exhibition shows several examples of Hitchens' early landscapes, featuring open spaces, hills, the sea, and cloud formations.

Flowers were another theme of this period. The resulting group of paintings includes examples of abstraction, reducing flowers to spaces of colour, as well as later, more naturalistic works.

Main Hall



Studio view, 2016 with 'From Sombre Lands, Orchestral'

Two recent paintings resulting from John Hitchens' collaboration with American composer Peter Dayton are displayed in the Main Hall:

From Sombre Lands, Orchestral, 2016,
oil on canvas, 183 × 366 cm / 72 × 144 in

Grounds, 2018,
oil on canvas, 84 × 366cm / 33 × 144in
(see page 2)

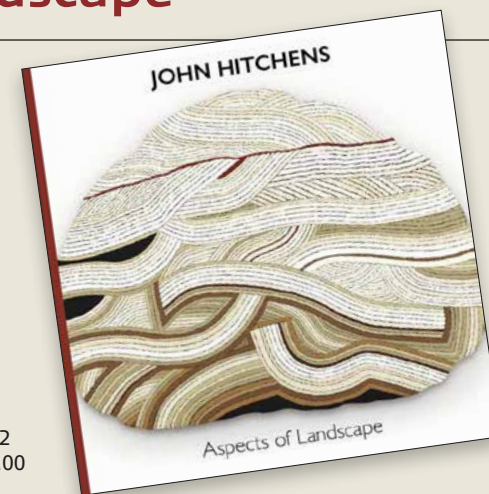
See also the composer's website:
www.peterdaytonmusic.com/grounds-string-orchestra

(A newly released record of the composer's work
is on sale at the gallery.)

Photographs on pages 2, 3 and 18 © Anne Purkiss

Published on the occasion of the exhibition:

JOHN HITCHENS *Aspects of Landscape*



Sansom & Co., ISBN: 978-1-9114-0-50-2
Hardback, 297 × 300mm / 300pp / £45.00

Aspects of Landscape is the first monograph dedicated to the work of John Hitchens. In artworks created over a period of more than five decades, Hitchens explores different ways of seeing the landscape of the British Isles, seeking inspiration in the natural forms of its hills, woodlands, fields, seas and skies.

Hitchens achieved early acclaim in the 1960s and '70s, when he was represented by the Marjorie Parr Gallery and Montpelier Studio in London. A series of successful exhibitions led numerous public and private collections in the UK and overseas to acquire his work. His painting has since evolved in style while remaining rooted in the landscape of the South Downs and the woods surrounding his studio.

The book presents the full span of John Hitchens' career to date: a journey leading from early, descriptive paintings towards more minimalist and abstract interpretations of nature, progressively reducing its forms to lines, circles and patterns. In recent years, Hitchens has developed a visual language notably distinct from other contemporary abstract painting.

This new study opens with a foreword by the art critic and curator Andrew Lambirth and is introduced by Professor Michael Tucker. Caroline Collier, previously a director at Tate, contributes a biographical essay informed by long acquaintance with the artist.

13 MARCH – 27 JUNE 2020

Opening Times:

Mon to Fri: 10am – 3pm, Sat: 10am – 5pm,

Sun: Closed, Bank Holidays: 10am – 3pm.

Free Admission



Southampton City Art Gallery, Commercial Road, Southampton SO14 7LP

Emma's Field, 2015, oil on canvas, 103 x 230.5 cm / 40½ x 90½ in