

Fresh twist: the spiralling images of a rediscovered painter

Neil Stokoe was a peer of Hockney, a protégé of Bacon — yet has remained under the radar



YESTERDAY by: Jackie Wullschlager

“I am the architect of my own non-existent career,” announces Neil Stokoe, who is 81 and, with flowing brown locks, innocent grey eyes, an amiable, nervous manner and a shambling gait, still looks like a hippy.

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Stokoe is also the architect, in enormous paintings, of chic modern buildings where twisting figures move around glass-and-steel structures of striking clarity and sonorous colour. Many of them centre on spiral staircases: monuments to psychological instability and “how we all go round and round in life, expending lots of energy, then return to ourselves”.

Depicted in broad, slashing strokes, wet-on-wet, a charismatic/vulnerable young man trips on a flight of purple-carpeted marble steps, seemingly about to tumble straight out of the canvas in “Descending Figure on a Staircase” (1994). This unsettling three-metre picture confronts you on entering Megan Piper’s exhibition *Neil Stokoe: Staircases and Figures*, a superb group of staircase paintings spanning four decades.

“I’m not sure whether it’s the moment of falling or recovering from falling — that’s what one feels about the world,” Stokoe says. “Francis Bacon said you should always be ready for the catastrophe in life. There are aspects of shambles, even in an unshambolic person and they often take place against a wonderful environment like the settings in the paintings.”

Stokoe speaks from experience. He joined the Royal College of Art in 1959 — the same golden year as David Hockney, Ron Kitaj and Allen Jones — and became a protégé of Bacon. Bursting on to the dynamic 1960s London scene as a painter full of potential, he managed the art market so maladroitly that he is entirely unknown today. Working intensively and reclusively for decades, between 1970 and 2002 he neither showed nor sold a single work.



Stacked in his west London studio home (he sold the furniture to make room for them), his pictures comprise a coherent, formally rigorous, distinctive oeuvre: a lively episode in British art history. Each figure and scenario is invented, composites of many different source photographs, but given conviction because Stokoe draws brilliantly, with a tactile grace, as if a sense of touch is transferred to the visual. He lived by teaching life-drawing for 38 years (students included Peter Doig) and sometimes by gambling, while making ever larger paintings. “I thought, I can’t sell small or medium-size paintings so I may as well paint bigger unsaleable pictures. I just wanted to get on and paint.”

Spiral staircases became a compelling motif, providing both original compositional frameworks and a metaphor for life. “Their great variety of shapes and forms almost make them the architectural equivalent of trees,” he says. One inspiration was the spiral staircase at the Royal College; another Degas’s use of the motif in “The Rehearsal”, his masterpiece of movement and voyeurism; a third Bacon’s “Crucifixion” images — like the cross, a staircase is “a formal device that naturally elevates the figure to the upper plane of the picture”.

Stokoe’s staircases are spectacular settings for unease and internal conflict in paintings at once decorative, beguiling and difficult. In the earliest such work at the Piper Gallery, “Spiral Staircase with Two Figures” (1982), set on a midnight-blue ground interrupted by a frieze of black-and-white stills, an effeminate, David Bowie-like poseur hesitates halfway down an open stairwell, painted with sand and pigment so that its crusty surface stands out. At its foot Stokoe has placed “a very masculine-looking woman”, a solidly built, stolid Asian whose implacable gaze and forward motion propels her towards us. There is no interaction between the two figures, who compete for our attention and create a sense of alienation, a mood of estrangement, ambivalence.



Stokoe started painting double portraits before Hockney, and shares Hockney’s ability to depict crystalline interiors as a complex exploration of pictorial space, with an affinity for the clean, graphic lines and sharp, bright hues of Pop Art. But he has a more tragic sensibility — “it’s probably due to my early reading, I read Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground* at 16 and never got over it” — which pulled him to Bacon.

In “Man Ascending Staircase with Lying Woman” (2013-14), a loft of exposed beams, oddly angled windows and open-plan spaces is illuminated from varied sources: a typical 21st-century scene. But the blurry standing figure, sweeping curve of the steel banisters, and a second figure, compressed and curled up on a mattress to the side, all derive from Bacon’s visual vocabulary and, like his images, are enigmatic and grand, implying narratives of parting, violence and angst. The air hangs heavy: “I wanted air as dense as water, a thickness but also transience”. Light falling on solid surfaces renders everything mutable and volatile.

These are ambitious, museum-quality paintings, yet Stokoe is absent from public collections and history books. He made Bacon “promise not to use his influence” in his favour, and he rejected interest from Tate curators. “I frustrated so many people who tried to help me, I was the most bloody awkward cussed customer.”



Enter here Megan Piper, 32, shining white knight to Stokoe’s generation: her agenda is to rediscover with young eyes notable, overlooked older artists. Stokoe contacted her recently “after reading Alfred Stieglitz: he said that if you’re on the ladder, your work can be assessed; if you’re not on the ladder, your work will pass down to your descendants and a maiden aunt will put it all on the bonfire. That made the hairs on my neck stand up, it sent cold shivers down my spine — and I rang Megan”. In 2015 Piper organised with London’s Redfern Gallery a show of [Stokoe’s early double portraits](#); almost everything sold.

What determines a successful career? Talent, vision, articulacy, luck — and perhaps an ability for self-promotion that some painters, working alone in their rooms, cannot cultivate. Certainly the current winner-takes-all art market, controlled by expanding global mega-galleries such as Gagosian and Hauser & Wirth, plus an institutional bias towards conceptual practice — no paintings on display in Tate Modern’s Switch House — operate against quietly developing careers connected to the integrity of the long figurative tradition such as Stokoe’s. As a result, many exciting painters today work beneath the radar. “I don’t want to sound pompous or portentous, but I find painting a deeply serious business,” Stokoe says. “Today much art seems to be an arm of the entertainment industry. I don’t feel part of that.”

Stokoe says he “benefited from the isolation — I could do exactly what I wanted”, but seeing his latest paintings, it is clear that the pleasure of some recognition and opportunities for showing offered by the optimistic Piper have spurred a late flourishing. The show’s newest piece, “Man and Woman on a Staircase” (2016), features a man in sunglasses and a woman in white minidress passing one another within a shimmering loop of striped metal steps, against a crimson saturated ground. A brief encounter of promise? “Red holds death and happiness, blood and *joie de vivre*,” Stokoe says, adding hastily: “I don’t think I’ve been happy since I was 18.” But this flamboyant work signifies energy and fluidity. “Paintings slip into my mind like slides in a kaleidoscope,” he admits. “I just worry I won’t be alive long enough to paint them all.”

‘Neil Stokoe: Staircases and Figures’, February 2-24. meganpiper.co.uk