

## Preface

I've had a kind of sneaky romance with poppies for some time.

I never expected to be a flower painter, but over the last few years I've increasingly taken pleasure in looking at the way flowers behave. In Oldham, where I'm from, there are not many wildflowers, really, in the streets. The first time that I consciously recall seeing abundant wildflowers was when I was about sixteen and I first moved to North Devon. Walking down a lane in Raleigh Hill, I saw that the whole side of the bank and the high hedgerows which so often form those Devonian country lanes were scattered wonderfully with wild primroses – that particularly pure kind of just one colour – and they made a pale yellow hum, with individual forms as well as constellations and little groupings rising out of the field of colour.

The new works in this book are very much about the nature of paint. On the surface of it, they're paintings of poppies, but they're a bit more urgent than poppies are generally – aggressive, some of them. I wouldn't want to spend the night with some, but others I've fallen in love with. They're studies, experiments in watercolour, and they're part of an on-going expedition, trying to find and create a database of imagery, interactions.

I tried to see if I could capture not so much how a poppy looks, but that feeling that they have. Sometimes it's one of very delicately balancing their beauty on the top of those tender, tender stems, and somehow that's something that watercolour really is capable of capturing the feeling of – the way the stems drip with great speed out of the flower down to the ground, and you don't see how one could hold them up until you happen to touch a poppy, and it's like luminous gossamer; a petal that dissolves in your pocket when you've picked it, an angel's wing material. No textile company could approach it; we can't come within a mile of creating such a powerfully, intensely coloured diaphanous membrane as that. It feels like life itself. And it lasts for no time.

Other times they're like talking things, communicating things. If there are two or three of them together, because of

the way they move, they have little gatherings – a bit like the gatherings you used to see of men in Italy and Portugal, and can see still a bit in the south of Spain, where you'll just get a bunch of blokes on the street, usually old blokes my age, and they're just hanging out with their caps on and talking. And poppies are like that, except beautiful. They have a pre-Raphaelite, kind of loquacious beauty about them; somehow they are simultaneously celebratory and melancholic, a melancholia that's separate from our association with the Somme and remembrance.

When I'm making these works, new worlds, constellations, relationships, start occurring between them, and I get carried away. I feel like a bit of a marionettist, choreographing some story across the sheet. Making them is meditative and intense, an intensity that brings a sort of peace, a calm where your brain isn't racing, it's just surfing along with everything that's going on around. When I've been painting these and I get into that frame of mind, particularly if I can just carry on and on and on, night after night after night after night, they become like meditations – they feel, when I do them, like little prayers, and these tableaux play out.

Vespers comes from the Greek *hespera*, meaning evening – they are evening prayers. A poppy can be playful or convey remembrance, but a vesper can be a prayer of joy, it can be exuberant, it can be defeated, it can be ignored, and it's all being expressed through these. And art may not be on the face of it as important as the issues of the day, but they're like a wish – me trying to do something that is beneficial to an abstract world, a bigger thing than me. You have these moments sometimes where you just wish that you could share something; it's much more difficult to enjoy something fully if you're not sharing it with somebody else. They are devotions, a repeated action of putting down the best of yourself to share, and they feel like a prayer – well, as near as, you know, a post-Darwinian Realist can get to saying a prayer.

Brian Clarke in conversation, London, January 2020

