



SUMAC

by
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As a child, I used to go to sleep at night with a copy of John Constable's painting *The Cornfield* hanging over my bed. The *Cornfield* which is on display at the National Gallery in London was painted in 1826. Like many great paintings it can be interpreted in a number of different ways. Constable himself referred to it as 'The Drinking Boy' and in the bottom left-hand side of the picture we see a small brook. By the brook lies a boy on his stomach, he is wearing a red waistcoat, blue scarf and white shirt, his face immersed in the water he drinks. Behind him stand a dog and sheep being herded up a lane, ready to pass through a gate to a cornfield which gives the painting its title. Beyond the gate walks a man wearing a black hat, red scarf and white shirt, with two further men working a distant field in the background, on the horizon to the rear of them stands a church. The boy, the gate, the man in the field and the church are drawn along a straight

axis which gives us a cause to read this painting as a narrative of life which moves from childhood, to adulthood and then ultimately to death and the final resting place of the graveyard. The sheep remind us of the Christian flock and the brook of the cleansing act of baptism, whilst the gate appears to act as the threshold between the innocence of youth on the one hand and the experience of the adult world on the other. The gate itself hangs off its hinges, indicating that we lose something as we gain experience.

The lane is thought to lead from East Bergholt in Suffolk towards Dedham, with the church in the background being an artistic invention. Many of Constable's most famous paintings are based in and around this small rural area which lies just south of Ipswich, the same small area of English countryside where in 2006 the serial killer Steve Wright deposited the bodies of five women he had murdered, all of

whom had worked as prostitutes. Earlier this year I decided to produce a set of five small paintings depicting these deposition sites. The five pictures form the series SUMAC, the name given to the police operation undertaken to catch Wright. Each of the paintings is titled after a letter from the operation's codename and they are displayed in the chronological order in which the bodies were discovered. 'S' portrays Belstead Brook and 'U' the stream by Copdock Mill where the remains of Wright's first two victims were concealed, 'M', 'A' and 'C' the roads near Levington and Nacton where the bodies of three more women were later found. The

five paintings work to create a visual narrative along the lines of Constable's *The Cornfield* and begin by viewing the earliest two scenes close-up and in daylight, while the second two take a broader view and move towards sunset. The fifth painting draws back completely to reveal the night lit woods at Nacton. This creation of a narrative arc over a set of images is similar in approach to one I took when I painted the larger six foot by nine foot *Gas Chambers* series on the Holocaust. The scale of these paintings allowed the paint to be applied in an increasingly impasto manner while the size seemed appropriate for the subject.

opposite: M, Frame - 272mm x 171mm, Image - 63mm x 45mm, Medium - Oil on canvas board

left top: C, Frame - 213mm x 145mm, Image - 92 mm x 70mm, Medium - Oil on canvas board

left bottom: A, Frame -165mm x 154mm, Image - 70mm x 58mm, Medium - Oil on canvas board



The SUMAC series demanded a different approach and I made the decision to create them as a set of miniatures with each painting being framed by a roughly treated antique Indian shrine. I was drawn to the idea that these paintings would need to be seen intimately, experienced by the viewer on a one to one basis. I have aimed to paint these pictures as beautifully as I can, setting a contrast to the treatment of the locations as areas of waste ground for bodies which were treated as waste. The history we now attach to these places creates a shift in our perception from one of the previously ordinary and non-descript to one which is scarred by some kind of residual energy attached to violence. This is the same landscape Constable painted of rural life, re-framed by a tragedy which makes us aware that we view what we see through the lens of personal knowledge and experience.

As a child of eight I was abducted and taken to an area of waste ground by a paedophile and often wonder at the fact that I'm still alive after the event. I was too ashamed at the time to reveal all he did, but he was caught and sentenced to prison. This is a small incident compared to an event like the Ipswich murders, or the many other worse fates people face every day and it is this event which led me to consider the Ipswich murders as a subject suitable for painting. My approach to the SUMAC series is underpinned by a belief that all creative acts are driven by emotions which we rationalized at a later stage, a process which appears to reflect how many of our actions in society are driven by irrational feelings which we slowly make sense of further down the line. Art is one way we may attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible, with paint working as a metaphor for the potentially overwhelming nature of human emotions, while the physical constraints of the canvas act to hold them in place. Painting is deeply personal, yet what is most personal is also most universal.

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