



Calder's Ascension 2017 oil on canvas 53" x 57"

Calder's Ascension

This entrance to Victoria Tube Station in London is a particularly busy conduit of human activity. It's an environment that has evolved over time for the movement of people. Without recourse to politically correct social engineering, it is where the haves are thrown together with the have-nots and peoples from all over the globe jostle to find their destination. It's not a place that I like, but I have painted it many times. I have spent years painting Terminus Place (as it is rather ominously known) in the quiet spaces of my Yorkshire studios.

Prior to returning to Victoria for a morning's gathering that resulted in *Calder's Ascension*, my last recollections of this place were manifest in a large painting titled *Artist Descending a Staircase* made in 2012. It was the final piece in my show *From Victoria to Arcadia*, spread over the Marlborough and Dulwich Picture Gallery in London. This painting was, at least at first glance, ostensibly realist, though it was built around my movements as I descended down to the ticket concourse at Terminus Place.

Since that show, the work has developed in pace with my curiosity about painting the world from different perspectives as well as painting my world of reveries, memories and desires. During that time, the unknown has become far more important than simply depicting the known.

Of course the very idea of the unknown can be deeply disturbing. Approaching the abyss is more commonly associated with gothic notions of terror than utopian escapism. Equally though, the fundamental need to find an alternative to our mundane actuality has always underpinned much of Western Art, be that Classical or Romantic. My interest in this was evident in the title of my show from 2012, even if my *arcadian* constructions at that time had a subtlety that were largely overlooked by a wider audience. The need to transcend a mundane realism was expressed even if the work itself had not sufficiently lost its grip on reality.

I stopped painting Victoria because much of it had become a building site. Land Securities were demolishing much of the area that features in my etching *Arcadia*, and when I finally saw the pseudo-modern architecture that they had erected to replace these last vestiges of London townscape, I was reminded of a set from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. The next morning my wife Gaynor and I met some friends in a café in the old arcade that still remains and I started to take some photographs.

If the new architecture of Victoria had triggered thoughts of a dystopian landscape, my disturbance was further confounded when the people that we had arranged to meet, the writer Michael Paraskos and his partner Emma Hardy, elected to breakfast in a different café from my choosing. It is always my intention to paint in response to what I find, and not what I might plan, but I knew from the outset that the vivid orange walls of the café in which I found myself were going to be challenging.

But that is the nature of my new work and this painting in particular. In simple terms, it is a synthesis of different spaces and their inhabitants in Victoria; the inside of the café, the arcade, a walkway around the perimeter of the bus station and one of the entrances down to the ticket concourse of the tube station. It is a synthesis that might have two possible outcomes, incoherent chaos or a new irrational order. The former might reflect the actual chaos of this environment. but there is no point reiterating what already exists, the latter is idealistic and purposeful in not being confined by a realist agenda.

But a unique and irrational order is not something that can be conceived at the outset. It is only achievable if the process in the studio allows something new to emerge. Furthermore, it is only achievable if there is a conviction that it is actually possible. This is not simply a belief that painting per se will always be a utopian distillation, but a very real and pragmatic conviction that it is, for example, possible to paint Emma ascending the staircase and leaving the underground *as* others enter and descend the stairs. Here I am referring to the figure(s) on the right edge of the painting. "As" means both *simultaneously* and *interchangeable with*, and in either case, this is not just as a visual trick, but a very plausible (but impossible) reality. This is a concrete example of my conviction that in pushing the paint around I could find a solution to a synthesis of motifs and ideas that have no apparent solution. I can do so, because I believe it is possible to do so, and the end result, the sum of all these visual inventions, is a new state of being which defies explanation. It is the optimism of a Modernist spirit and of Modernist invention where I often work without even knowing the question that is being posed and stumble into answers that lead to further enquiries.

It's not easy, nor is it easy to believe in art in an era of Post-Modern cynicism. Those buildings erected by Land Securities are functional but they do not have the spiritual functionalism of

Modernism. They only work in terms of mundane aspirations, in terms of being part of the mundane dialectics of today. They are vacuous despite borrowing many of the tropes of Modernist architecture.

It is not enough for me to borrow from the legacies of Modernist painters. To transcend the banality of Terminus Place, it is not enough to couch it in the high aesthetics of Modernism (nor the Classical aesthetics of Poussin). The architecture that now replaces the original buildings around Victoria has neither the idealism of Modernism nor the human history of its predecessors. Coupled to a desire to astonish, there has to be an absolute engagement with the plasticity and narratives of a place in order for something transcendental to emerge. That something cannot be found just through aping known aesthetic devices from chapters of art history when artists took the job of being creative a lot more seriously than they do today. So *Calder's Ascension* is clearly not a Cubist painting, nor a Surrealist painting. It is laced with a tension between naturalistic description and abstract sequences, not that I would acknowledge either realism or abstraction as operating here. There is only a true painted response.

The invention in painting always resides in its structure, not in the things that it shows but how they are shown. Except through inventing a different structure, reality will alter to the point where its definition slips. So painting is never just a formal exercise, it is always about creating a new subject. That new subject is *Calder's Ascension*, which is the name given to this arrangement of coloured marks that hopefully comes to life.

A sequence of events, thoughts and actions, both on location and in the studio, cannot explain the title, anymore than they can account for the mysterious actuality of the painting. That would confuse the act of creating a painting with the act of communication through verbal and visual language. The former demands that we reach beyond what is already known, the latter that we trade on common ground.

Process, progression, travel are all integral to reaching beyond. I have often described my physical activity of drawing and painting, but there is also a mental stream that shifts the consciousness of the subject from one state to another. In both cases, that progression is aided with an admission of lateral thought, the unexpected and serendipitous happenings. In discussing this subsequently, it is obvious that there is no clear, rational route to the final outcome.

The idea of Victoria now looking like a set from *Blade Runner* stuck with me. But then that title took on a new meaning.....blades running, blades descending perhaps?

In the café with bright orange walls, Emma, Michael and Gaynor were perched on pointy egg-shaped stools and around pointy egg-shaped tables, each one of a different colour. The stools and tables were like coloured blades, and in the studio they became more like the blades of an Alexander Calder mobile. Blades in suspension, perhaps now blades ascending. This mundane environment of Terminus Place, with all of its dystopian echoes could find salvation in my painting through the Modernist reach of suspended and drifting forms in space. It could be liberated from its common and subterranean ground by the aspiration towards a carefree Modernism. *Calder's Ascension* is my return to Victoria with a new spirit of invention. Gone are the dark Baroque tonalities, here forms become evasive, translucent, spiral, drift and zigzag as pastel colours buzz and float.

Nigel Calder is the author of the book “Violent Universe” which is about plate tectonics. That the surface of our earth is formed from abutting plates under enormous tension has always fascinated me as an analogy to painting. The dynamics of a painting result from the relationship between one form and the next placed on the surface of the canvas. To maintain this tension, a painting must preserve its concrete flatness, recognising that this will then create pictorial space. We always have space, and we always come back to the surface. *Calder’s Ascension* reinforces a surface crust of paint through using heavy lead-based pigments wherever possible and never diluting it. It has a tangible, sedimentary weight and dryness that is very different from the previous paintings of Victoria.

The painting is difficult to reproduce. Neither the surface qualities can be shown, nor are there digital equivalents for many of its colours. Now working with a palette of over 30 pigments, many chosen not just for their hue but distinctive properties, the millions of resulting mixes completely defy any reprographic algorithm. Many of the colours are mixed from pigments that are not typically used. For example, many of the blues are mixed from colours that are mislabelled as secondary colours (greens and purples), as are the reds and yellows. It is the first time that I have been able to mix fresh yellows without yellow pigments. The starting pigment for many of the oranges is a vivid bright green. Such peculiarities are as extreme as the faces that fold into new characters in the centre of the painting (and scrutinised by an image of Pan), or the bird that takes flight at the top of the stairs.



These are delicate, subtle and idiosyncratic happenings, but unlike the earlier paintings of Victoria, this painting announces that it is different at first glance, even if those differences remain enigmatic.

