



JS PARKER

OH NO NEVER LET THE SPIRIT DIE

JS Parker 81



Image credit: Mary Parker

Oh No Never Let The Spirit Die: The Legacy of J.S. Parker

PETER SIMPSON

*And you follow the road
And you get you back home.
Oh, no, never let spirit die
Oh, no, spirit don't ever die....*

Van Morrison 'Spirit'

It's easy to imagine J.S. (John) Parker in his Blenheim studio energetically laying down paint with his trusty palette knife while the music of Van Morrison ('Spirit' is from his 1980 album *Common One*) blasts through the speakers. It is three years since Parker died (1944-2017) but his rare spirit lives on in these robustly lyrical paintings from the last decades of his career.

It is no accident that *Plainsongs* – the title with which Parker identified most of his later paintings – has a musical origin since music of all kinds – rock, jazz, blues, folk, classical – frequently accompanied his practice. His paintings resemble 'Plainsong' – medieval liturgical music chanted in unaccompanied unison – in their frequent repetition of a few basic forms: rectangles, squares, straight lines, while avoiding monotony through a myriad different colours. Many of his subtitles also have musical connotations, for example: *Plainsong – Two Part Harmony – Blue*.

However, *Plainsong* also has several connotations other than musical ones. It is a quadruple pun alluding simultaneously to geography, personality and aesthetics as well as to music. Unpacking the various connotations of this term locates us firmly within the force-field of Parker's practice.

He lived much of his adult life on the Wairau Plains. The flat expanses and geometrical divisions of that landscape (and its Canterbury equivalent), paddocks, vineyards, roads and horizons, translated into abstract pictorial geometry, figure repeatedly in his work, as observed at different times of day or season and under various atmospheric conditions, as, for example, in *Plainsong Hymn to Light – Rose Evening*, or *Plainsong: Duality – For the Blue Air*.

A third sense of *Plainsong* is 'plain' as in ordinary, down-to-earth, straightforward – personality or sensibility traits which Parker embodied in both his person and his paintings.



Plainsong: Industrial White

Oil on canvas, 1525 x 1525 mm

2006

Consider, for instance, how he lays pigment on paper or canvas. He almost never used brushes; the oil paint is laid on robustly with a broad palette knife, resulting in choppy and uneven surfaces – not meticulously smooth, as in, say, Gordon Walters or Grahame Sydney, but tactile, visceral, rough-hewn, manifestly hand-made – a plain man's practice.

Not that Parker was slap-dash or unsophisticated. He had an honours degree from Ilam and was widely read in art history from Giotto to Sean Scully. These qualities emerge in a fourth level of *Plainsong*: the homonym 'plane' – a pun which draws attention to his unashamedly Modernist aesthetic, his awareness that painting is planar – concerned with the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane, not with mimetic representation, or perspectival illusionism. His thinking in this regard informs his remarks on the *Plainsong Duality* sub-series, four

of which (all painted in 2010) are in the exhibition: 'I included a strip on the bottom left corresponding to another strip on the top right – a composition sometimes referred to as an earth/sky element and torsion was achieved by how the strips were squeezed by the block next to them. The colour was influenced by harmonies found in the landscape or the balance between complementary colours'¹. This is the language of a dedicated abstractionist, carefully balancing forces of shape, colour, texture and environmental observation.

1. Remarks on *Plainsong Duality*, The Arthouse, Christchurch, 2010, brought to my attention by Mary Parker.

Illustrated Cover: ***Oh no never let the spirit die***

Oil on paper, 835 x 585 mm, 1981



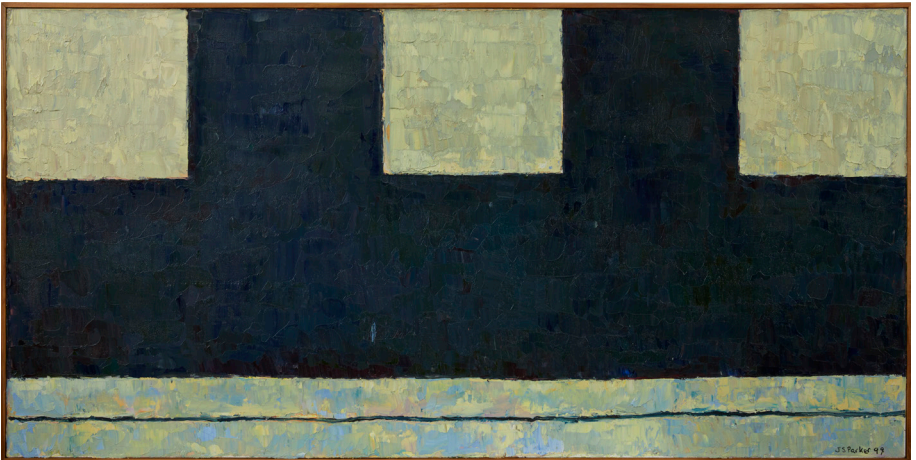
Grey Interior

Oil on paper, 1000 x 700 mm
2004



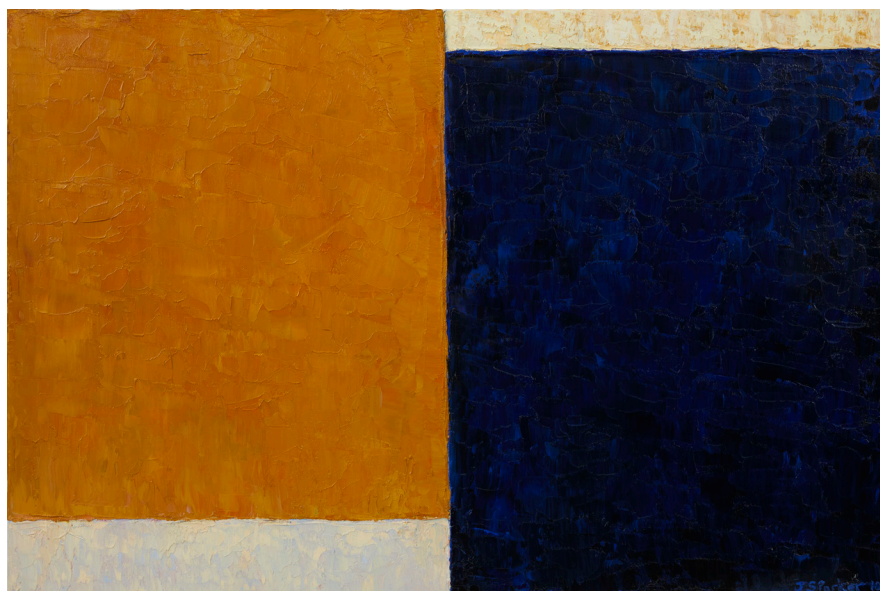
Plainsong: From Guernsey Road - Winter

Oil on paper, 990 x 690 mm
2007



Journey by Day

Oil on canvas, 910 x 1830 mm
1999



Plainsong: Duality - Blue/Ochre

Oil on canvas, 800 x 1200 mm

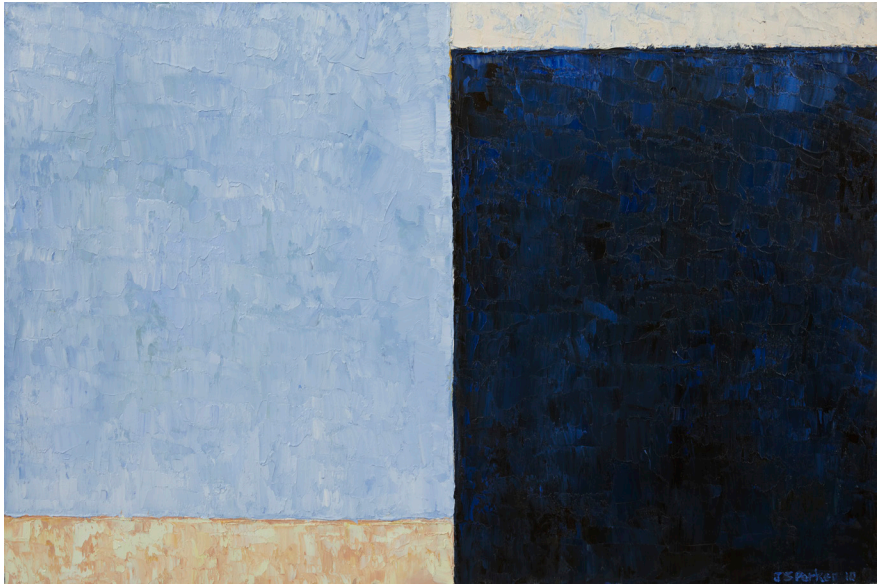
2010



Plainsong: Two Part Harmony - Blue

Oil on canvas, 1220 x 1520 mm

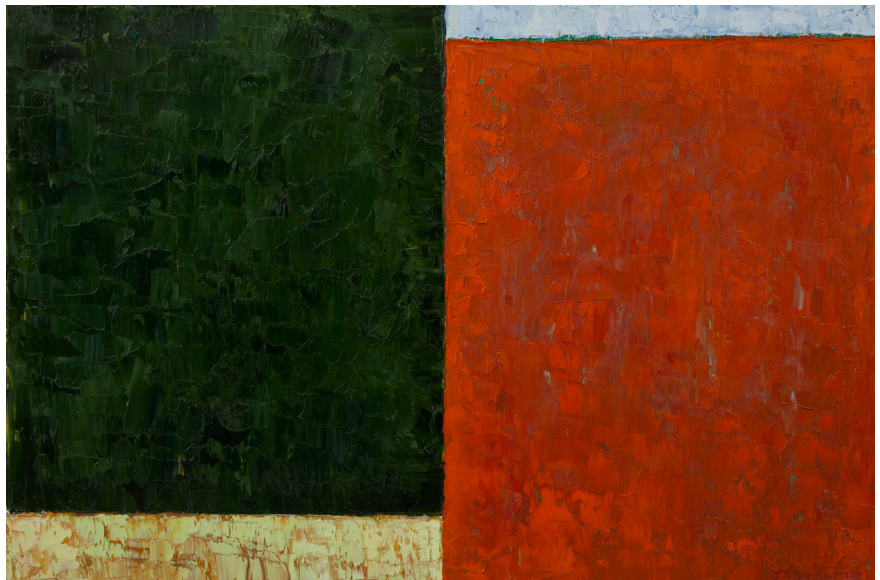
2007



Plainsong: Duality - For the Blue Air

Oil on canvas, 800 x 1200 mm

2010



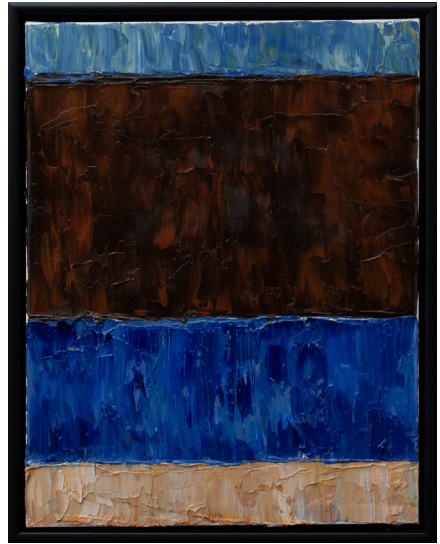
Plainsong: Duality - Green/Orange

Oil on canvas, 800 x 1200 mm

2010



Plain Song: Small Study - Blue & Marigold
Oil on canvas, 505 x 410 mm
2016



Plain Song: Small Study - Blue & Brown
Oil on canvas, 455 x 355 mm
2016



Plain Song: Small Study for Two Blues
Oil on canvas, 455 x 355 mm
2016



Study for Conditions of Evening
Oil on canvas, 500 x 400 mm
2009



Plainsong: Composition with Cross
Oil on paper, 1200 x 790 mm
1998

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