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David
Urban

Seven Paintings
that changed my life
by John Bentley Mays

Display until March 15



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Night and Day

When John Bentley Mays invited a suite of David Urban's new paintings
to his home for an extended visit, he courted a relationship filled with peril and reward

Like a religious conversion or an erotic escapade with a stranger, this story about living with a group of canvases by the Toronto artist David Urban describes what can happen when boredom and curiosity touch, mix and detonate. I did not first see these works in an exhibition. Nor, before they came to stay, did I look at them in David's Parkdale studio. I'd asked to borrow works made especially for the space I live in; beyond that, I laid down no guidelines. Hence, I had no idea what was coming that morning last May when David appeared at the door with the paintings, hauled them in, and hung them in the place I share with my wife, teenage daughter, cat, deck garden, computer, hobbies and obsessions.

The cycle of abstract canvases David created for the occasion is called *Bordertown*, and consists of seven works dedicated to the memory of the American jazz saxophonist and composer Julius Hemphill, who died in New York last spring, while the paintings were being made. Viewed as formal steps in this young artist's surging progress, they are emblems of his deepening resolution to work flat out, reeling in the world's ambiguous, distressed colours and forms as it suits him, disregarding fashion in favour of a vivid passion for our shared life on the streets, the experience of being downtown.

The Red Canvas (Destroyed Version) 1995



Infant 1995



Bordertown 1995



Most of the paintings are big, hectic oblongs criss-crossed by linear imagery that at times could be wildly abstracted grey or yellow expressway interchanges floating in shallow pictorial space, or melting sewage conduits, or soft heaps of bowel. If a picture is not going right, Urban tends to bandage the botch with thick, rumpled patches of paint, then whack, scrape and dot the dressing. Despite this heavy invention and re-invention in the series' four largest works, and in one somewhat smaller one, Urban rarely crowds or clutters even a corner of canvas. Our minds are allowed free passage along the underpasses and down the laneways of big-city contemporary experience.

The other, smaller pictures in the series are rough in appearance, like squares of skin deeply incised with a knife or sharp wooden brush handle, sharp and intense. While the four larger paintings embody the pumping, impersonal character of city culture, the culture touched and transfigured for Urban by the music of Julius Hemphill, the smaller ones express a more concise grief: the small lacerations that the death of a much-admired artist can leave on the soul. In part, it was such willingness to let himself be moved to the gut by art that ultimately nudged me to ask David for paintings to write about.

But something else was at work, something harder to wrap my head around, at least at first. It had to do with his peculiarly radical independence of mind. With a disregard more casual than I've discovered in most artists, David had let himself become a lightning rod for whatever jolts of beauty and contradiction hit him. These jolts came as smokily sultry or searing lines, and as jagged streaks in the music of Hemphill, Randy Weston, Geri Allen and other contemporary black jazz artists, David's passion for years. Then there was David's other passion: the indictment of lazy thinking delivered by American Modernist poets from Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams and other mid-century formalists, to Louise Glück today. The attraction for David, it seemed, has always been the line, in its infinite variety and power: the breath-line in a sax riff, the poetic line, efficient and strong as an I-beam, and, of course, the wonderful, wild painterly line from Jackson Pollock through Philip Guston.

I was to live among these paintings for the next four months, jotting down thoughts about them now and again, and only gradually coming to understand the real reason I had borrowed them. At first, I tried to catch their changes in words, as the sunshine and cloud-shadows falling through the skylights changed, and as they gradually transfigured what it meant to live in the place they now occupied. My writings, as well, were attempts to capture the times when the canvases seemed to wander out of consciousness and into the city's background mutter of forgetfulness, only to emerge again,

insisting on being seen anew. Or, as I discovered halfway through, not just seen, but also *heard* and *read*. It was towards the end of their stay that I realized their power to injure.

this all began last year, when I had become very bored with the hit-and-run practice of art criticism. The classic journalistic method of critical writing, of which my newspaper work in *The Globe and Mail* is an example, took shape in the popular press of fin-de-siècle Paris, when art was hot fashion news, as it is not now. Critics, including such great ones as Baudelaire, were expected to be the eyes and ears of the stylish new consumers of art. Today, even though the social dynamic behind it is gone or obsolete, the reviewing of visual art follows much the same pattern. You dash into the gallery, look at the precisely lit and carefully hung artworks for as short a time as it takes, exchange pleasantries with the artist if he or she happens to be around, then dash back to your desk to write the review, with the guillotine of a deadline hanging over your head — a review, incidentally, that almost always takes more time to write than you took to look.

For most of my career in mass media, I have done criticism this way, and hardly ever felt discomfort while doing so. But increasingly in recent years I have come out of galleries with a sense of being cheated out of *watching* contemporary art. The difference is like that between a one-night stand, with its distinct and undeniable pleasures, and a relationship sustained over decades. Both (and other) sorts of encounters have a place in the general economy of desire, and anyone who loves art, I suspect, can recall numerous instances of brief and life-marking encounters, as well as those more enduring. Among my longest-term relationships, for example, is the one I've enjoyed for almost forty years with Rembrandt's defiant 1658 self-portrait in New York's glorious Frick Collection. As I have changed, the painting has changed. Or, to put matters another way, the exact components of the situation that has long existed between the Rembrandt and me have been continually shifting, revealing, and concealing with the passage of time. When I was a teenager, I saw a grandfather, eloquent, old and wise, and admired Rembrandt's expressive, reassuring humanism. Twenty years on, when I was learning about the construction of works of art, it was the architecture of the painting that compelled me. But it was only after I'd moved over into middle age, and run the usual gauntlet of mid-life disappointments and losses, that I came to understand the defiance in the picture. For here is the elderly Rembrandt — flat broke, having lost his fortune, his showy house and his reputation — portraying himself as an emperor, sceptred and triumphant. You have to live with a painting for a while,

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They came to **my home in a factory** and went up in the open space we call the living room — although this term is somewhat inaccurate, since the upper story of the loft is hardly articulated as a room at all. Another reason it's not a living room is that I don't live there. It's the home of a large television set. And while my wife and our cat watch TV, I don't.

and just live in the world for a while, before art unfolds all its meanings.

But such shifts in interpretation, whether in a long human relationship, or between the self and a picture, are so commonplace they hardly need emphasis here. If gallery-goers have learned anything from the art of the last twenty-five years, it's that a work is seen least fruitfully as an eternally stable *object*, always the same whenever and by whomever it is contemplated. A painting or sculpture is almost always better understood as one element within a volatile *event* of perception, an event rich in ricocheting questions and subversions. Whatever we designate as good art, when you think about it, achieves its goodness by blooming before our eyes from stagnant object to active work, crowbarring open our caskets of imagination and pleasure, of thought and creative doubt. The Rembrandt self-portrait was playing that attractively disruptive and provocative role in my mental life when I was thirteen years old, and also thirty, and fifty — though, when I was thirteen, I did not yet have the words to describe the event of Rembrandt's picture, or the issues of mortality, failure and the will to overcome that began to emerge in that event at the Frick — and ever since.

David Urban's debut exhibition at Toronto's Sable-Castelli Gallery in the spring of 1994 wasn't the only thing that made me restless with my practice of art criticism, but it was a peculiarly memorable one. A native of the vast middle-class Toronto suburb of Mississauga, David, then twenty-seven, had finished undergraduate studies in art and English at York University in 1989, and a master's degree in creative writing at the University of Windsor in 1991. It was around the turn of the decade, however, that the poet and painter inside him locked horns — with the painter ultimately coming out on top, and sending him off to finish his art training at the University of Guelph. At the time of his Sable-Castelli exhibition, he'd not yet completed his degree. Yet almost all of the eleven oils that he showed there spoke with a kind of foot-in-the-door authority uncommon in art by fledgling painters. Each rectangular canvas gave heraldic, abstract expression to the dark feelings, terrors and memories of beauty that flew low through his mind. Each spoke.

It was not a perfect show. David felt he had to hammer home his sense of aloneness, and he did so with the traditional imagery of, say, a melancholy, solitary burning candle, patched into a matrix of twisting, cable-like abstract forms. His cautiously mapped oblongs, traversed by lines drawn on large oblong fields and dotted with abrupt little images quoted from the world — a red candle, a handful of capsules, mysterious bundles — were at times too luxuriously painted, too literally evocative of lights in the dark, and cures for what ails you. That having been said, these physically distressed, bandaged, crisscrossed paintings were

remarkably strong. David himself gave me the hint that opened their inner workings when he called them mirrors. And so they were (and are), though not like ordinary mirrors, reflecting inertly what's put in front of them, or fun-house mirrors, creating a distorted and disordered image of ordinary reality. Rather, they mirror inner states only, with the heavy tubes surging, then going limp, the sagging ladders and loose rivets, scrawls and illogical drips and damaged colours adding up to images of the starving mortals we are at base. Since I was writing in the usual way for my newspaper, I did not have to confront the keen troubling that these paintings brought down on my soul. I was in, and I was out. But what would I write, I was wondering around this time in 1994, were I to live with them night and day?

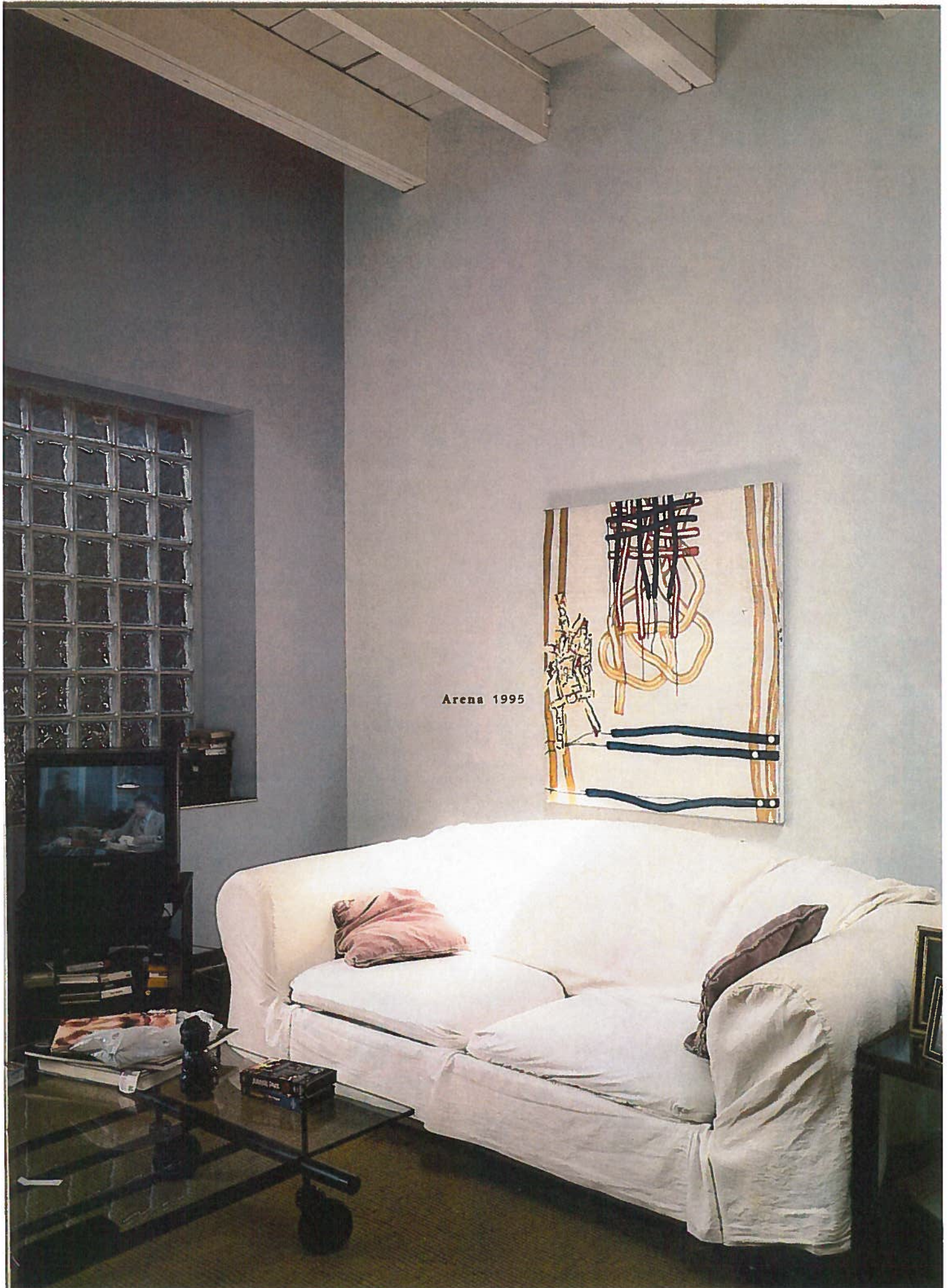
they came to my home in a factory, and went up in the open space we call the living room — although this term is somewhat inaccurate, since the upper story of the loft is hardly articulated as a room at all. Another reason it's not a living room is that I don't live there. It's the home of a large television set. And while my wife and our cat watch TV, I don't. Thus, my time with David's paintings was quiet, fragmentary, solitary, and undertaken during the times when the TV set was off, and with only the sounds of rain on the skylights or the distant thrumming of tires on streets seeping into the large, bare room.

Old habits die hard; and so it was that I found myself surveying the pictures quickly, as I would in a gallery, jotting down words about the drooping pipes and lines, scrub-outs and patches, spongy pinks and worn brick-reds and other colours and forms that adorned each surface. At first, that is, the works played no role in my life. While *in* the living room, they were not yet *of* it.

As I recall, that first changed late one early summer afternoon, when the diffuse grey-blue light of the rainy sky seemed to bleed away the light underlying fields of colour in the larger paintings, allowing the collapsing grids and ladders, the hard linear loops, and the dark drips draining off up and down and sidewise, to bulge forward sharply and begin a complicated conversation with one another. As the light faded, I found myself within a single poem of these lines, related in myriad ways — visual forms unmatching and clashing, but producing a hard, beautiful music as they did so. Then I switched on the electric lights high on the walls over the pictures. Abruptly, everything changed. The rhyming stopped. The illumination raked down over a small, thickly painted patch on the work David had titled *Self*, and I found myself thinking of wounds and burns, transplants and scabs — the injuries that are as much a part of life as they are of art.

[Continued on page 81]

Arena 1995



[Continued from page 66] Perhaps the tendency to allegorize is a human failing; perhaps it is basic to what we are. Be that as it may, during the summer I had *Bordertown* and watched it swinging between familiarity and strangeness, the paintings began to breathe with a peculiar life. The sadness of Julius Hemphill's short life played itself out in the moonlit room, or when it was lit only by candles. On days when the noon sunshine, falling through a skylight, illuminated a canvas with a hard trapezoid of brilliant light, the painting would sometimes seem to shout its defiance, the outrage of beauty and music and poetry against the stern, grey sameness of the world. As the paintings changed within the changing lights and darkneses of their room, I felt I gradually learned the inner truth of a line from Stevens I once quoted, too glibly, in connection with David's work: "in an age of disbelief, when the gods have come to an end, ... men turn to a fundamental glory of their own and from that create a style of bearing themselves in reality." That, David Urban had done.

Of course, the event of living with David's paintings was not comprised solely of looking at the pictures. It was also defined by the hours I spent listening to the jazz CDs he had loaned me. For into the mind that had made the pictures, and thence into the pictures that framed this event of their reception, had come the music, life and death of Julius Hemphill. Born in Texas in 1938, Hemphill made a sound at once transcendental and improvisational, as staunch as civil engineering in the arch, stress and ratcheting of its melodic lines, and possessed of an almost caustically penetrating beauty. I'd never heard of Hemphill before, or of any of the other musicians David listens to. In fact, I asked to borrow his recordings of them simply because he talked about them, and had dedicated the suite he made for me to the memory of Julius Hemphill. (The more beautiful of the small paintings is entitled *Threnody*, and is, precisely and painfully, just that: a heavily lacerated and gouged song of lamentation, resiliently beautiful despite the pathos of destruction it exudes.)

So one afternoon, I dropped David's Hemphill recording into my compact-disc player and clicked it on. A few hours and several repeats of the album later, I clicked it off. I can't say I understood David's paintings better after that day of listening, or after the days of listening that followed. But from then onward, the paintings worked differently than they had before. I don't mean they worked better or worse. Rather, they began to work on me in troubling ways I felt but could not frame in words. And at the same time, I began to work with them, letting them be heard — hearing the freedom and pathos David heard when he painted them, writing his lament for Hemphill (as well as his own determination to resist the world that ignored Hemphill) in the stressed line and impure colour, the break, rhyme, and complex rhythm of his paintings.

Now we art critics often like to call art "troubling" or "disturbing," so I think it's imperative that I explain precisely what was disturbing in my experience of David's painting, particularly post-Hemphill. Without going into all the bio-

graphical details, let's just say that a lifetime of chronic depression's unpredictable ups and downs — especially deep-down downs — has made me a creature particularly fond of rigidly enforced order. This twist to my personality has always disinclined me to drugs, rock and roll, Elvis, the Beatles, Pop Art and hippiedom. I almost totally missed the Sixties. On the other hand, it inclined me strongly to ordered high-cultural forms such as the music of Richard Wagner, Arnold Schönberg and Anton Webern, the liturgy of the Church, the paintings of Agnes Martin and Robert Ryman.

But while I'm happy enough to listen to Webern and look at Martin, I have never been happy with my intense inner drive to do so. One reason should be obvious: the taste is a misguided one. Neither Webern nor Martin are really artists of law and order, but of the radical freedom born of their craft. Another reason is that my inclination to rigidity is, in fact, a way to manage an abiding fear of the freedom, intimacy and wildness that never cease to entice me. Occasionally, I've been able to let writing get the better of me: in 1985, for instance, when I let Gertrude Stein teach me her exuberantly perverse, sane and exquisite way of writing operatic libretti. The last half-decade, however, without my being wholly aware of it, has been one of a slow self-wrapping in a kind of cotton muffling protection against the likes of Stein and her spectacular world-loosening experimentalism. All that was behind me, I told myself. No more of that. I was safe with journalism.

Then came the summer of 1995, David's paintings, the music, and the blooming within my house of a wild spirit that troubled safety. Contemplating David's paintings, listening to the ravishing art of Julius Hemphill and other jazz musicians I had never known, thinking about the taut, incisive contemporary poetry David reads, I found myself being interrogated by this art, day and night. "I am still not ready to write about his work: it pierces, hurts," I wrote in my diary late in the summer. "It asks me to become a different I from the one I am now; more free, more vulnerable to blackness, the oppressed who have resisted with their superb art (in jazz) a heartless, homeless oppression, and the constructed whiteness of which I am a part. David's paintings are the undoing of such privileges, the opening to a freedom compounded of pity and resistance... to poise in the midst of things, to being wounded and emptied, thus redeemed from the graver, killing wounding of rigidity..."

I am not sure where the experience of having lived with these artworks will take me in my own art, which is that of words, though a return to the centre of the quiet cotton armour — snatched into tatters by the paintings and the music and the conversations with David — is now unthinkable. David's art has struck a healing wound to the cramped enclosure of the soul, enabling a slow opening to new resilience, and to more valiant styles and creative bearings in the world. As I write these words, the paintings are still here. By the end of the week they will be gone; but the provocation they have stirred in me will not be gone, then, or for a long time. ■