

## Nigel Cooke *Oceans*

November 11, 2020 – January 14, 2021  
Quai des Bergues 15-17  
Geneva



Image: Nigel Cooke, *Oceans*, 2020 © Nigel Cooke, courtesy Pace Gallery

Geneva — Pace Gallery is honoured to present a series of recent paintings by Nigel Cooke in his first monochromatic exhibition. Featuring five large-scale works and new works on paper completed over the past year, the exhibition marks Cooke's first in Switzerland and will be on view from 11 November 2020 to 14 January 2021 at Quai des Bergues, in Geneva.

Over his twenty-year career, Cooke has used ambiguity and fragmentation as strategies in his painting, collapsing the distinction between genres such as abstraction, figuration, landscape, and still life. The paintings featured in this exhibition display a significant stylistic shift in the artist's oeuvre, with a more performative and kinetic approach to gesture.

These new works, all executed in tones of blue, are at once meditations on the sea and responses to characters in Homer's *Odyssey*. Not only is the ocean central to Homer's story, as it tests the characters and brings them together, but also to the artist's weekly studio routine. Regular sea swimming has informed the energy of these paintings, both physically and psychologically, whilst at the same time prompting thoughts on Homeric characters Telemachus, Athena, Calypso, and Odysseus himself:

"Taking to the sea for exercise means you are having to respond to nature directly every day, and in the end, this started to feel like a metaphor for painting. At the same time, coping with the intensity of the elements in new ways called me back to Homer, thinking again about ideas of separation from family, inner resourcefulness, and transformation, what we're going through now, as well as adventure. These kinds of thoughts fed into my *Midnights* series via Homer earlier this year, so I wanted to bring the elemental experience of the ocean into the work even more directly, with a similarly restricted palette but on a much larger scale."

The focus on blue exclusively gives the oceanic colour an almost sculptural quality, as variants in weight, brightness and movement in the paint become more pronounced. In this, the paintings draw on the legacies of American Abstraction, British Figuration, Spanish painting, Chinese silk painting, more specifically artists such as Francis Bacon, Claude Monet, and Francisco Goya.

The dynamic activity of ballet also served as an important resource for Cooke and can be seen as a complement to the intrinsic pictorial energy the new work derives from the ocean. The lyricism of ballet becomes a gateway to both mythic characterization and a new kind of elemental seascape:

“The physical transformations that take place in the dancers as ballet unfolds, as the story is condensed into the abstractions of muscle and sinew, have been very important in developing these works. The way a dancer can literally change themselves and tell a story is deeply connected to how my compositions move; they become both seascapes and figures, predators, and prey, melancholic or lustful. Although a lot of the drama of the ‘faces’ I make is based upon the transformations of humans and entities in the Odyssey, it equally comes from the ballet, particularly the Bolshoi and the principal dancer Olga Smirnova. For me the ocean is the connecting tissue here, a force that threatens us from outside, but that also lives in the mind and in the eternal stories we tell.”

—Nigel Cooke, October 2020.

Executed with a masterful application of paint, these new quivering compositions weave metaphorical qualities and environments together, creating a complex interplay of vigour, chance, and intuition. This exhibition highlights the shift in Cooke’s practice away from representational motifs towards more abstracted, dynamic systems with their own nature and inner logic. As the paint gets thicker and brighter, the artwork builds up to grace and lightness, force and beauty, to reach lyrical and Romantic moments.

Furthering the radical advancements in his practice, Cooke executed the paintings on raw canvas. The natural linen endows the paintings with a unique brownish ground and a textured weave vibrantly contrasting the hues of blue hereby spotlighting the energy of the water. This material quality also impacts his mark-making as washes develop into thickets of dark staining.

With this exhibition, Cooke pushes the boundaries of painting and explores the interdependency between absence and presence, the mind and the natural world, thereby creating a body of work that is rhythmic and living, poetic and vigorous.

**Nigel Cooke** (b. 1973, Manchester, United Kingdom) is known for evocative works that merge the painted forms of constructed and natural worlds with individual consciousness. Combining representation based on careful observation and impressionistic, poetic imagery, the hallucinatory realms of his paintings stage scenes full of pictorial and conceptual discontinuities. Cooke’s richly colorful compositions collapse distinctions between abstraction, figuration, landscape, and still life. In his visually detailed and symbolically complex works, figures are not individual portraits but composites—combinations of perception, invention, and allusion. Cooke’s work is included in the public collections of British Council, London; Astrup Fearnley Museet for Moderne Kunst, Oslo; Sammlung Goetz Collection, Munich; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Hammer Museum, Los

Angeles; Honart Museum, Tehran; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Southampton City Art Gallery, United Kingdom; and Tate, London.

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