



# Paintings by John Jones

## Exhibition preface by Quentin Bell

I will start with a boast. It was my idea to bring John to the Department of Fine Art in the University of Leeds, there to be our master of painting. The University never made a finer appointment. I saw in him the leader of loyal opposition to myself; he was to oppose and modify the increasingly reactionary ideas with which, with advancing years and hardening of the aesthetic arteries, I found myself infected. He seemed ideally equipped for the task. He came, it was true, from safe well-planted groves in Academe - Bristol and the Slade but he had and has a natural sympathy with the wilder tracts of twentieth-century art; he lived on the best of terms with the wildest of the wild men of Leeds and later he was to become the intimate friend of those heroes of our time, the Reinhardts, Oldenburgs and Rauschenbergs across the ocean. With enviable dexterity he manipulated not only the formidable apparatus of traditional oil painting, but also sensitised tape and film, seemingly familiar with every kinetic gadget ever invented. But for all this, and despite the fact that he indulged in what he himself called the 'high jinks' of our age, he was not one of those who seem to regard abstract form with the zealous zeal of an ayatollah; nature and education had provided him with a bottom of good sense, which in a loyal opponent, is essential. Nor was I wrong in my judgement, the arrangement worked very well.

What is more to the point, the duality of his artistic character has also worked well in his paintings. At first sight, indeed, there is no sign of 'high jinks' in the works here before us. In subject matter they are sober: still lifes, nudes, portraits, all of them apparently naturalist rather than psychological and showing an interest in very little save nature and good painting and art itself. When questioned he refuses to even bear the slight burden of content with which I have attempted to saddle him. Thus the still life, 'Studio Still Life', with its quotations from Piero Della Francesca, from Toulouse-Lautrec and from Bonnard all keyed in to relate to a central area which cannot help but remind one of Cézanne, seems to announce an entire confession of artistic faith. He will not have it; but then it is as much as I can do to persuade him that he has a wonderful gift for the understanding and statement of intervals, a proposition which seems to me so manifestly true that I am inclined to think that I am probably correct in my attribution of a programme which may be unconsciously stated.

But where then are the 'high jinks'? Have they vanished leaving no trace? I think not; one of the remarkable things about these pictures is that although they are very thoughtful, very careful even, they do at the same time show a kind of freshness and spontaneity of feeling which is rare in painting of this kind; he is never dull, never bored by any part of the picture. In fact most if not all of his works have been painted at high speed, they provide an excellent illustration of the phrase 'deliberate haste' and it is this no doubt which gives them their manifest air of sincerity. But is it not precisely this which constitutes the great virtue of the American Resurgence of the past decades? The genuine emotion rapidly, impetuously, cast upon the canvas seems, to me at all events, to be the most valuable element in even the wildest exertions of the wild west. To have captured that magic velocity and then to have applied it to a genre which encourages the most hesitant, and sometimes the most tedious, consideration of exactitudes, seems to me a great and notable achievement.