

HIGHGATE
SOCIETY

No. 245 WINTER 2023

£1.50 (free to members)

buzz

■ "Only a Woman"

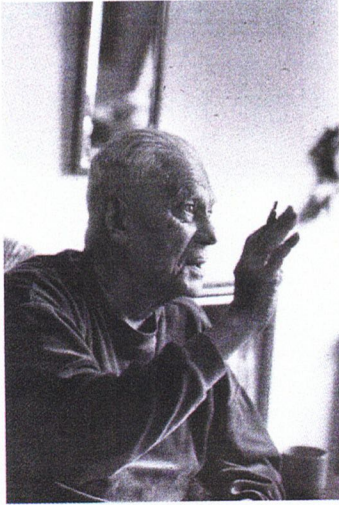
■ Winter Scenes

■ Wood That Works



George Claessen: Babel to Abstraction

by Janet Kumar



Portrait by Herbie Yamaguchi

Thankfully Highgate Village maintains its historic identity while embracing new ideas and events. In the changing face of the high street, some shops and services have turned themselves into cultural destinations enhancing the existing life of the village. A fairly recent addition is Three Highgate, an art gallery and cultural hub that opens its doors to visiting artists as well as to art projects from other creative fields.

The current exhibition is a major retrospective of the abstract artist and poet George Claessen. The artist's daughter warmly welcomed me into the gallery, a calm and light space, perfectly suited to the display of Claessen's gloriously colourful abstract paintings on the walls. The show is a fascinating introduction to the life and influences of this local artist, who was born into a Dutch Burgher family in Sri Lanka and experienced the decline of colonialism and the search for the country's original cultural identity. He later travelled to Australia and India, and then to London, where he lived and worked in the Dartmouth Park area for more than 50 years. His life spanned most of the 20th century and his work was greatly influenced by the political and cultural turmoil of those years.

Claessen was a self taught artist and poet; the birthday gift of a paintbox while he was working as a draughtsman in Colombo sparked his interest in painting. This became a passion that, along with his poetry, allowed him to explore the themes and sensations he realised in his works. Throughout his career he expressed in his art and poetry a unique lyrical language based on his emotional and mystical outlook. He was among the founding members of the '43 Group, a Modern Art movement established in Colombo in August 1943. The group included Sri Lanka's greatest artists, poets and photographers; their works embraced modern European artistic forms over traditional Sri Lankan forms, whilst retaining and using some of their own cultural origins as the building blocks for a new art.

When Claessen arrived in London in 1949 he felt immediately at home, some of the earliest works in the exhibition are drawings of the city's rooftops and spires, figurative works, as well as the portraits of those around him in his new home. Most of the works he had

created in Colombo were figurative, but after settling in London, where the dominant avant-garde art form of the moment was abstraction, Claessen began to evolve his own calm and poetic abstract expressionist style. As the exhibition curator, Alistair Hicks, viewed it, Claessen "treats paint like he treats the words in his poems. He is shifting them around like a child with putty."

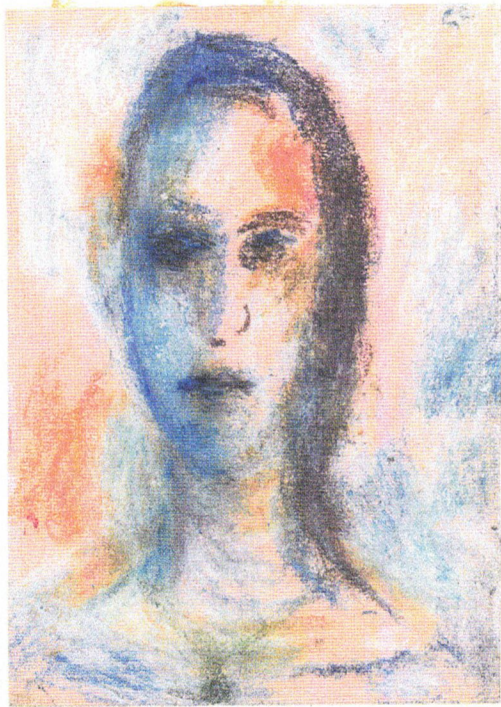
Claessen exhibited in London several times and was a member of the Hampstead Artists Council and the Islington Art Circle. He also exhibited work internationally until the 1970s, showing at Venice Biennale in 1956 and at the Saõ Paulo, Brazil, Biennale of 1959, where he won an award, while still working as a draughtsman until his retirement.

In addition to the retrospective perspective of Claessen's work, Three Highgate Editions, the publishing arm of the gallery, released a new collection of his poetry to coincide with the exhibition, entitled *Collected Poems of a Painter*. Three Highgate has also partnered with award-winning documentary film director Rob Lemkin to produce a film delving into Claessen's life and artistry. More information can be found at www.threehighgate.com

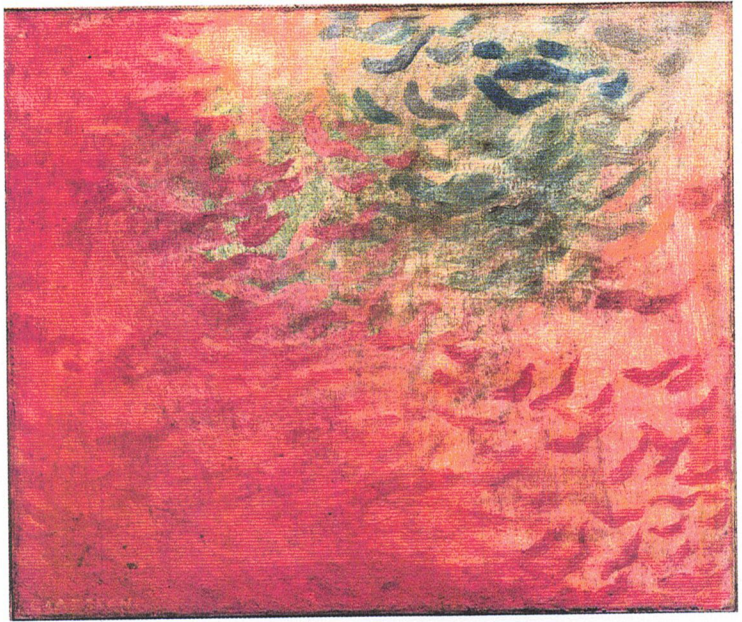


Mystical Equilibrium, 1975

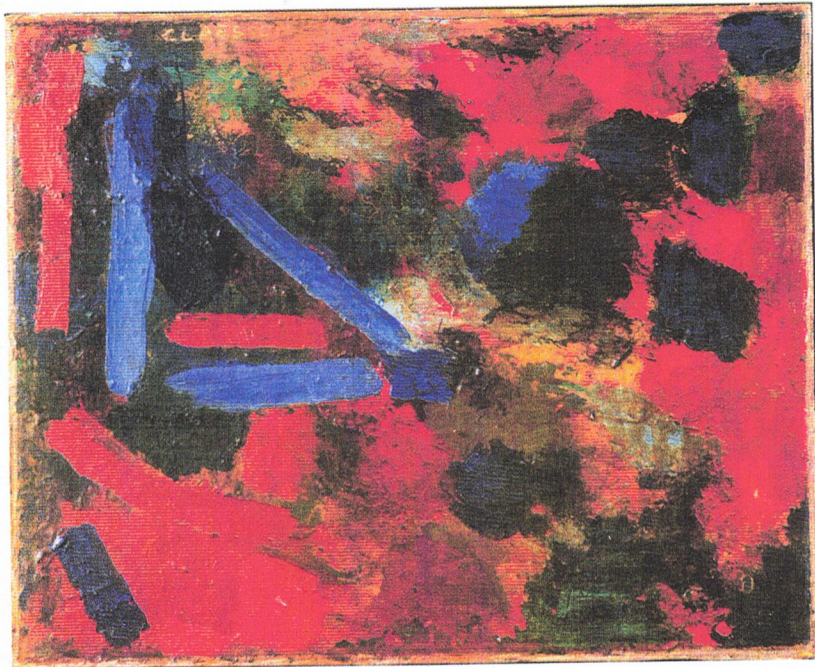
© George Claessen Estate. Courtesy Three Highgate



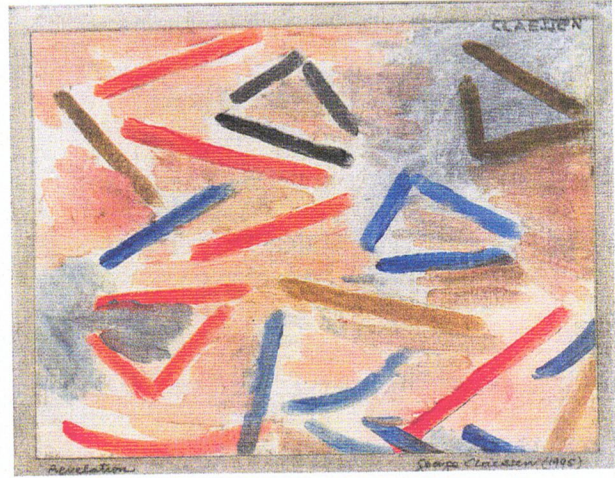
A Presence,
1969



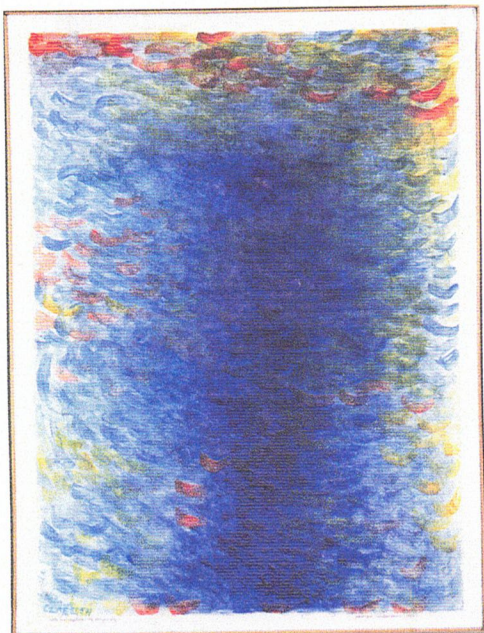
Infanta, 1991



Rectangle, 1985



Revelation, 1995



An Intimation of Infinity,
1996



Abstract, 1998

George Claessen Paintings
© The Estate of George Claessen
Courtesy Three Highgate