

# GEORGE CLAESSEN

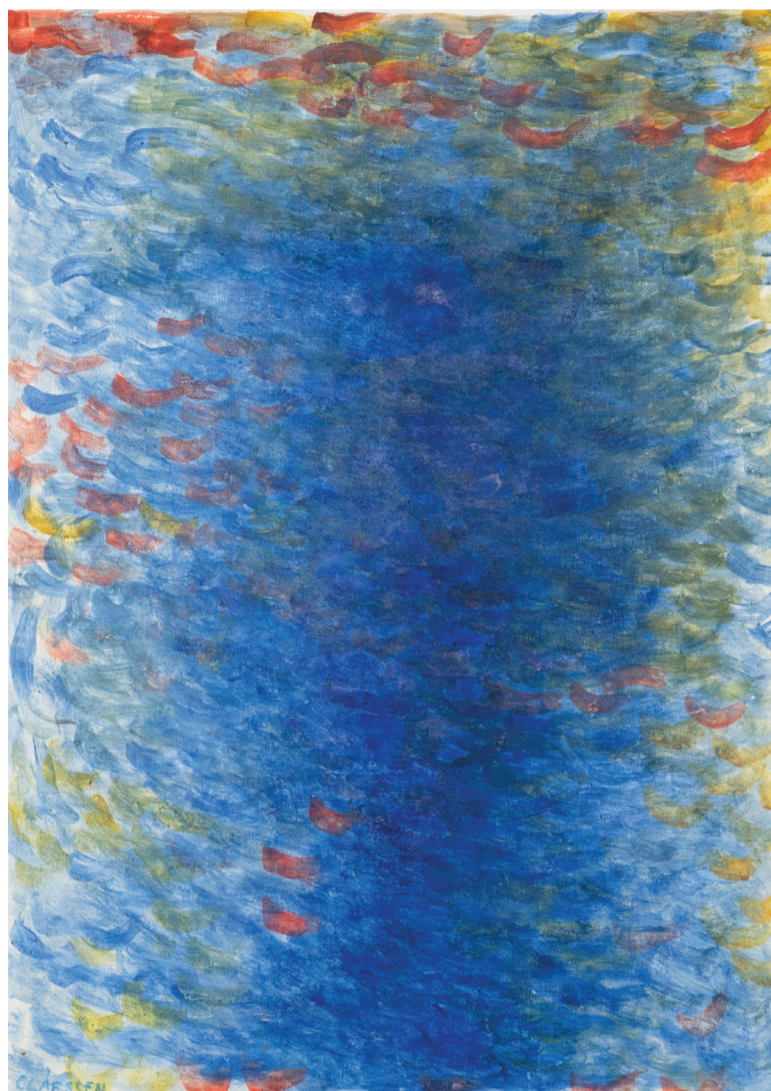
## *Poetry in Paint and Words*

by Alistair Hicks

Home at last – it must be heaven,' sighed Claessen as he saw Britain for the first time in 1949. He glimpsed the roof tops and spires of Gravesend from the ship that had brought him from Bombay. Since his days during the Second World War as a founding member of '43 Group in his birthplace Sri Lanka, he had travelled to Melbourne and then India for some three years as the British Empire crumbled. His painting and poetry are a headlong flight from the devastating destruction of the nasty cocktail of nationalism and colonialism. Claessen remained in Britain for the rest of his life. In his pictures he created a sense of belonging.

Claessen's art is aspirational: those spires seen at the end of a long voyage stayed with him. He was relieved to reach London. He recalled sitting on a bench in a Bombay park and thinking 'this is it – I am going to end my time here'. He arrived in a city that was not only undergoing rapid social and political changes, but was also the refuge of many artists from abroad. The School of London was emerging at this time fuelled by the restless energy of the likes of Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, R B Kitaj and Leon Kossoff. These men, in the circle of Francis Bacon, all primarily worked in opposition to the dominant avant-garde art form of the moment – abstraction. Claessen had nothing against figuration. Indeed, we include several of his architectural drawings, including those of spires, and portraits of those around him in his new home, but he found a regenerative spirit in abstraction. His paintings illustrate the healing qualities of abstraction as much as any of his more famous contemporaries.

'I did try to make another dimension,' said Claessen, 'another dimension which I thought had been overlooked and not known in a mathematical sense'. In some of his later abstracts, there is a sense of combining geometry and the spirit he was looking for, but he was still wary of trying to pin things down. In painting after painting he is asking



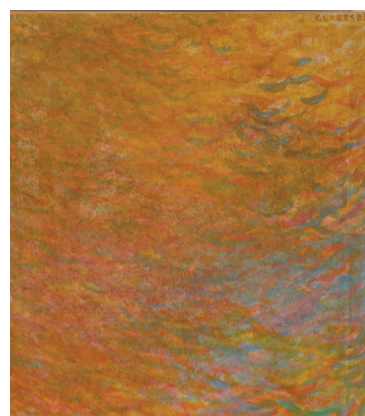
An Intimation of Infinity (1996), egg tempera on canvas

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the viewer to expand into the picture, to break out of the cage of our mathematical minds.

The '43 Group has defined Claessen's position in the story of art, but one must remember that this movement came into being in volatile and unlikely circumstances, and its international importance is only beginning to be fully recognised. Although George Keyt, the most well-known painter of the group, was not there on the 29 August, 1943, when Lionel Wendt held the first meeting in his house in Colombo, Claessen was. Claessen was also the first honorary treasurer of the group. The movement was not only a rebellion against the Ceylon Society of Artists, but a rare Modernist attempt at that time to use some of their own cultural origins as the building bricks for a new art. As the poet, Pablo Neruda, who had spent time working in the Chilean embassy to Colombo wrote, the group was creating a new culture 'torn between the death rattles of the Empire and a human appraisal of the untapped values of Ceylon.'

The '43 Group (the founding members of which included Ivan Peries, Harry Pieris, Geoffrey Beling, Aubrey Collette, Justin Daraniyagala, Richard Gabriel and LTP Manjusria as well as Keyt, Wendt and Claessen) was far more than just a collection of painters. Poetry was at the centre of all their art and almost all of them were practitioners of more than one art, reflecting Wendt's own wide vision: Wendt was a pianist,



Consort of Primaries (1969), oil on canvas

photographer, filmmaker and critic.

The group was created in opposition to Imperialism, but the turbulent times in Sri Lanka did mean that the '43 Group were not only diverse practitioners but also were dispersed across the world. Ivan Peries and Claessen both spent more than half of their lives in England.

Claessen made most of his work in North London, his home for the majority of his life. Back in Colombo he was a figurative painter. There were hints of the abstraction to come in *Church by the Sea*, 1944 and even *Nude*, 1944, but they were only hints. Even if the '43 Group were demarcating their difference from South Asian art, both contemporary and of the past, Claessen did not make the leap into abstraction till he was safely settled in London, where abstraction had become the currency of the avant-garde. Despite this, Claessen's abstraction, is a world entirely of his own. He made a home in his art.

Two world wars, the genocides of Mao, Stalin and Hitler, the demonstration of the horrors of nuclear destruction in Japan, certainly were enough to make intelligent people question the way 'man' was running the world. There was a thirst for a new way of thinking and seeing. Abstraction was one of the responses. Claessen's abstraction manages to be aspirational and nostalgic at the same time. They contain the dreams of the spires and heavens above but also one is aware of the rich, complicated and troubled

past. The artist admitted that the 1914 Colombo riots and fights between the Sinhalese and Muslims had a distinct impact on him.

Claessen is very successful in making a new abstract home for himself. Despite the political background there is a great peace in most of the pictures. While there are echoes of the spiritualism of Kandinsky, there is no heavy reliance on colour theories (ie which colours trigger which emotions). The world he creates is much calmer than Kandinsky's. He has built it up more like Cezanne's contemplation of Mont Saint-Victoire. Remember Claessen is a word smith! He treats paint like he treats the words in his poems. He is shifting them around like a child with putty.

Rather like Rabindranath Tagore, Claessen sees few barriers between words, music and painting. Ironically, for a man who fiercely denounced crude nationalism, Tagore wrote the national anthems for both India and Bangladesh. Claessen too fled the effects of nationalism but found his land with no borders inside abstraction. One can almost hear the sound of a calm sea in some of Claessen's paintings. They are generally peaceful, but we know what storms brew in the oceans. At the moment the little waves could be the result of a little pebble. The artist made a better world. He knew of the horrors out there, but was prepared to share his new enchanted waters with us all.

Any text on George Claessen has the risk of limiting his work, so I leave you with his words:

*'This knowledge completely vanished  
In a matter of a few moments,  
Utter Simplicity of truth  
Passed beyond my comprehension.'*

● Babel to Abstractions, an exhibition of George Claessen's works is on show from 19 October to 31 December, at Three Highgate Gallery, London, [threehighgate.com](http://threehighgate.com)

● An anthology of George Claessen's poetry is in the process of being published and will be available at the exhibition

● A film about the artist's life and work will be released in November



Revelation (1995), oil on board



Trinity Gate (1992), tempera on canvas