

George Claessen: Babel to Abstraction Seventy Years of Art and Poetry

Press Coverage 2023

eLanka

George Claessen: Babel to Abstraction George Claessen (1909-1999)

16th October 2023

George Claessen: Babel to Abstraction marks a major retrospective exhibition of the renowned late artist George Claessen's multifaceted work, the first presentation of his work in London for 18 years. Presented by London gallery Three Highgate, which is in the vicinity where Claessen himself lived and worked, the works on show span over 70 years and reflect his extraordinary career as an artist and his commitment to abstraction, stating "Every hue and nuance from a prism comes."

Born in Sri Lanka and later moving to London in 1949 where he lived for the rest of his life, George Claessen (1909-99) was a self-taught artist and poet whose art was characterised by his mystical outlook and beliefs. As the British Empire crumbled, Claessen's painting and poetry can be regarded as a headlong flight from the devastating destruction of nationalism and colonialism.

'Home at last – it must be heaven,' he wrote as he saw Britain for the first time in 1949, glimpsing the rooftops and spires of Gravesend from the ship that had brought him from Bombay. Settling in North London for the rest of his life, those

spires seen at the end of a long voyage stayed with him, creating in his art a sense of aspiration and of belonging.

Claessen was a founding member of the 43 Group, a 20th-century modern art movement established in August 1943 in Colombo, who embraced modern European artistic forms over traditional Sri Lankan forms while also using some of their own cultural origins as the building bricks for a new art.

Poetry was also at the centre of all of the '43 Group's art and almost all of its members were practitioners of more than one art, allowing for a wider vision. In the 1960s, Claessen joined the New Vision Group in London, which consisted of artists committed to abstract and avant-garde art in its many iterations.

Throughout his career, Claessen expressed in his art and poetry a unique lyrical language based on his emotional and mystical outlook. It is for this calm poetic abstract expressionist style that Claessen is most celebrated. As the exhibition curator, Alistair Hicks, views it, Classen 'treats paint like he treats the words in his poems. He is shifting them around like a child with putty.'

He started to draw and paint aged 29 after joining the Colombo Port Commission as a draughtsman, an occupation he continued until his retirement. It is notable that it was not until he was safely settled in London that Claessen fully made the leap into abstraction — a place where abstraction had become the currency of the avant-garde. Yet his abstraction is a world entirely of its own — he made a home in his art.

Claessen found a regenerative spirit in abstract art – indeed his paintings illustrate its healing qualities. 'I did try to make another dimension,' he said, '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 the viewer to expand into the picture, to break out of the cage of our mathematical minds.

Classen exhibited his work internationally until well into the 70s, while working as a draughtsman until his retirement. He showed at Venice Biennale in 1956 and at the Saõ Paulo, Brazil, Biennale of 1959, where he won an award. His solo shows included Velasquez Gallery, Melbourne, 1947; Archer Gallery, London, 1950; New Vision Centre Gallery, London, 1962; Stanhope Gallery, London, 1975; Gallery 706, Colombo, 1993; Frank T Sabin Gallery, London, 2000; The Gallery Cafe, Colombo, 1999 and 2018: and Paradise Road Gallery, Colombo, 2021.

Art enthusiasts

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In addition to the retrospective of Claessen's work, Three Highgate Editions, the publishing arm of the gallery, will release a new collection of his poetry to coincide with the exhibition. Entitled Collected Poems of a Painter, it features 86 of George Claessen's poems and a foreword by Alistair Hicks. Three Highgate and George Claessen's Estate have also partnered with Emmy/Sundance award-winning documentary film director, Rob Lemkin, to produce a documentary film delving into his life and artistry. The film is scheduled to premiere in November to tie in with the exhibition run at Three Highgate.

'George Claessen: Babel to Abstraction' has been curated by Alistair Hicks, an independent curator and writer and former Senior Curator at Deutsche Bank, in collaboration with the founder and director of Three Highgate, Irina Johnstone. Alistair Hicks has recently curated Paula Rego shows at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover, and the Pera Museum in Istanbul. He is the author of Global Art Compass; Urban Mirrors; New British Art in the Saatchi Gallery; and The School of London.



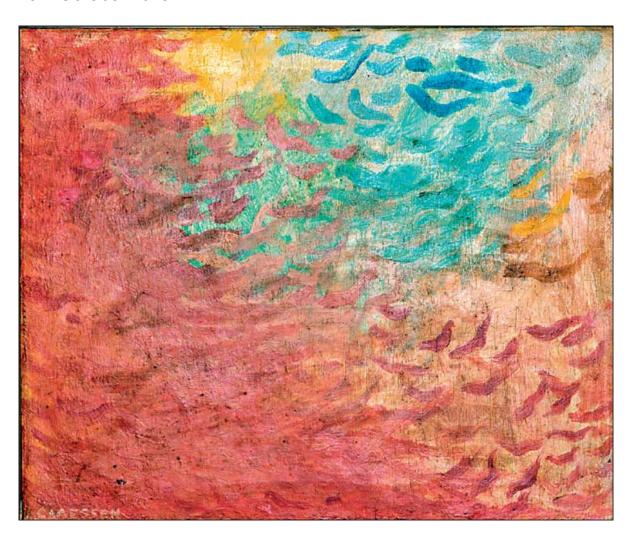
Source: https://www.elanka.com.au/george-claessen-babel-to-abstraction/

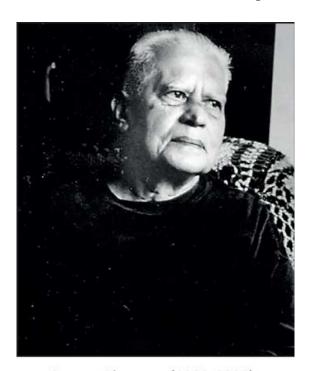


Sri Lankan born George Claessen's retrospective exhibition in UK kicks off on 20 October

'Babel to Abstraction' 70 years of art and poetry

19th October 2023





George Claessen (1909-1999)

Sri Lanka-born George Claessen's retrospective exhibition 'Babel to Abstraction' will be held in London beginning 20 October.

The three-months long exhibition will be held at Three Highgate, 3 Highgate High Street, N6 5JR. Opening times are Thursday to Saturday from 2.00 p.m. to 6.00 p.m. and on Sundays from 12.00 p.m. to 4.00 p.m. All other days by appointment, by prior contact to Irina Johnstone info@threehighgate.com +44 203 795 7200

Three Highgate is an art gallery and creative hub based in Highgate Village, an iconic part of London, perched at the top of Highgate Hill and teeming with history and culture. The gallery is run by the owner and Director, Irina Johnstone, and places special emphasis on development and promotion of both emerging and established artists with a unique and poetic vision.

Whilst George Claessen is popular among art enthusiasts and collectors in Sri Lanka and his exhibitions are a sell-out, he is relatively unknown in the West and rest of the world. With the growing interest in South Asian Art in the West there is a revival of interest in Claessen, particularly his abstract expressionist work. It is argued that he may be the first Asian abstract expressionist painter. Dr Shamil Wanigaratne's monograph: "George Claessen, Artist, Sculptor and Poet 1909-1999", published by Paradise Isle, is currently the main source of information about this genius.

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Three Highgate and George Claessen's Estate have also partnered with Emmy/ Sundance award-winning Documentary Film Director Rob Lemkin, to produce a documentary film delving into his life and artistry. The film is scheduled to premiere in November 2023 to tie in with the exhibition run at Three Highgate. More information can be found at www.threehighgate.com.

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The George Claessen: Babel to Abstraction marks a major retrospective exhibition of the renowned late artist George Claessen's multifaceted work, the first presentation of his work in London for 18 years. Presented by London gallery Three Highgate, which is in the vicinity where Claessen himself lived and worked, the works on show span over 70 years and reflect his extraordinary career as an artist and his commitment to abstraction, stating "Every hue and nuance from a prism comes."

Born in Sri Lanka and later moving to London in 1949 where he lived for the rest of his life, George Claessen (1909-99) was a self-taught artist and poet whose art was characterised by his mystical outlook and beliefs.



George Claessen, Nieuwe Kerk Delft, 1978 © The Estate of George Claessen Courtesy Three Highgate

Claessen was a founding member of the '43 Group, a 20th-century modern art movement established in August 1943 in Colombo, Sri Lanka who embraced modern European artistic forms over traditional Sri Lankan forms while also using some of their own cultural origins as the building bricks for a new art. Poetry was also at the centre of all of the '43 Group's art and almost all of its members were practitioners of more than one art, allowing for a wider vision. In the 1960s Claessen joined the New Vision Group in London, which consisted of artists committed to abstract and avant-garde art in its many iterations.

Throughout his career, Claessen expressed in his art and poetry a unique lyrical language based on his emotional and mystical outlook. It is for this calm poetic abstract expressionist style that Claessen is most celebrated. As the exhibition curator, Alistair Hicks, views it, Classen 'treats paint like he treats the words in his poems. He is shifting them around like a child with putty.'

He started to draw and paint aged 29 after joining the Colombo Port Commission as a draughtsman, an occupation he continued until his retirement. It is notable that it was not until he was safely settled in London that Claessen fully made the leap into abstraction – a place where abstraction had become the currency of the avantgarde. Yet his abstraction is a world entirely of its own – he made a home in his art.

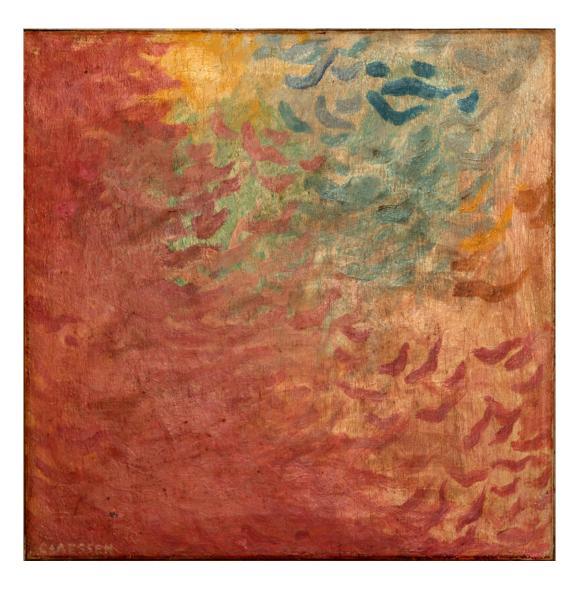
George Classen exhibited his work internationally until well into the 70s, while working as a draughtsman until his retirement. He showed at Venice Biennale in 1956 and at the Saõ Paulo, Brazil, Biennale of 1959, where he won an award. His solo shows included Velasquez Gallery, Melbourne, 1947; Archer Gallery, London, 1950; New Vision Centre Gallery, London, 1962; Stanhope Gallery, London, 1975; Gallery 706, Colombo, 1993; Frank T Sabin Gallery, London, 2000; The Gallery Cafe, Colombo, 1999 and 2018: and Paradise Road Gallery, Colombo, 2021.

Source: https://www.ft.lk/entertainment-art/Lankan-born-George-Claessen-s-retrospective-exhibition-in-UK-kicks-off-on-20-October/10405-754205



BABEL TO ABSTRACTION: SEVENTY YEARS OF ART AND POETRY

George Claessen 20th October 2023



George Claessen: Babel to Abstraction marked the first presentation in the UK for 18 years of the renowned late artist George Claessen's multifaceted work. This major retrospective exhibition was presented by the London gallery Three Highgate, which is near where Claessen lived and worked. The exhibition began today, the 20th of October, and will continue until 31st January 2024. The works on show span over 70 years and reflect his extraordinary career as an artist and his commitment to abstraction, stating, "Every hue and nuance from a prism comes."

Born in Sri Lanka and later moving to London in 1949 where he lived for the rest of his life, George Claessen (1909-99) was a self-taught artist and poet whose art was characterised by his mystical outlook and beliefs. With the fall of the British Empire, Claessen's work began paralleling the destruction of nationalism and colonialism echoed in the landscape around him. 'Home at last – it must be heaven,' he wrote as he saw Britain for the first time in 1949, glimpsing the rooftops of Gravesend from the ship that had brought him from Bombay. Settling in North London for the rest of his life, those spires seen at the end of a long voyage stayed with him, creating in his art a sense of aspiration and of belonging.

Claessen was a founding member of the '43 Group, a Modern Art movement established in August 1943 in Colombo, consisting of Sri Lanka's greatest artists of all time including, Aubrey Collette, Lionel Wendt, Geoff Beling, Harry Pieris, Richard Gabriel, Ivan Pieris, George Keyt, Justin Deraniyagala, and L.T. P. Manjusri. The 43' Group embraced modern European artistic forms over traditional Sri Lankan forms while also using some of their own cultural origins as the building blocks for a new art. Poetry was also at the centre of all the '43 Group's art and almost all of its members were practitioners of more than one art, allowing for a wider vision. In the 1960s Claessen joined the New Vision Group in London, which consisted of artists committed to abstract and avant-garde art in its many iterations.



George Claessen, Notation in Yellow and Black, 1975. © The Estate of George Claessen. Courtesy Three Highgate.



George Claessen, Nieuwe Kerk Delft, 1978. © The Estate of George Claessen. Courtesy Three Highgate.

Throughout his career, Claessen expressed in his art and poetry a unique lyrical language based on his emotional and mystical outlook. It is for this calm poetic abstract expressionist style that Claessen is most celebrated. 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.'

He started to draw and paint at age 29 after joining the Colombo Port Commission as a draughtsman, an occupation he continued until his retirement. It was not until he was settled in London that Claessen made the leap into abstraction - a city where abstraction had become the currency of the avant-garde. Yet his abstraction is a world entirely of its own - he made a home in his art.

Claessen found a regenerative spirit in abstract art - his paintings illustrate its healing qualities. 'I did try to make another dimension,' he said, 'another dimension which I thought had been overlooked and not known in a mathematical sense.' In some of his later abstracts, there exists a sense of combining geometry and the spirit he was looking for, but he was still wary of trying to pin things down. In every

painting, he compels the viewer to expand into the picture, to break out of the frame of their mathematical minds.

George Claessen exhibited his work internationally until the 70s while working as a draughtsman until his retirement. His works appeared at the Venice Biennale in 1956 and Saõ Paulo, Brazil, Biennale of 1959, where he won an award. His solo shows included Velasquez Gallery, Melbourne, 1947; Archer Gallery, London, 1950; New Vision Centre Gallery, London, 1962; Stanhope Gallery, London, 1975; Gallery 706, Colombo, 1993; Frank T Sabin Gallery, London, 2000; The Gallery Cafe, Colombo, 1999 and 2018: and Paradise Road Gallery, Colombo, 2021.

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To learn more about George Claessen, check out ARTRA's Edition 63 on the 43' Group.

Source: https://artra.lk/visual-art/babel-to-abstraction-seventy-years-of-art-and-poetry



George Claessen: Babel to Abstraction Seventy Years of Art and Poetry 22nd October 2023



left to right: George Claessen, Notation in Yellow and Black, 1975 and George Claessen, Nieuwe Kerk Delft, 1978. Both © The Estate of George Claessen. Courtesy Three Highgate

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Location: Three Highgate, 3 Highgate High Street, N6 5JR.

Dates 20 October 2023 – 31 January 2024. Opening times Thur and Sat 2 – 6pm; Sun 12 – 4pm.

All other days by appointment. Contact: Irina Johnstone info@threehighgate.com +44 203 795 7200

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For information in Sri Lanka contact the Fareed Uduman Art Forum on 0777329596.

Source: https://island.lk/george-claessen-babel-to-abstraction-seventy-years-of-art-and-poetry/



George Claessen: New exhibition in London 1st November 2023



George Claessen

George Claessen: Babel to Abstraction - a major retrospective exhibition of the late artist's multifaceted work is now on in London. Presented by Three Highgate Gallery in London, which is in the vicinity where Claessen himself lived and worked, it is the first exhibition of his work in London in 18 years. The works on show span over 70 years and reflect Claessen's extraordinary career as an artist.

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George Claessen, A Presence, 1969 © The Estate of George Claessen. Courtesy Three Highgate



left to right: George Claessen, Notation in Yellow and Black, 1975 and George Claessen, Nieuwe Kerk Delft, 1978. Both © The Estate of George Claessen. Courtesy Three Highgate.

Source: https://sundaytimes.lk/online/features/George-Claessen-New-exhibition-in-London/5-1143842

George Claessen: Babel to Abstraction

By Janet Kumar



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















GEORGE CLAESSEN

Poetry in Paint and Words

by Alistair Hicks

ome at last - it must be heaven,' sighed Claessen as Lhe 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 avantgarde 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 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







Revelation (1995), oil on board

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 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 its 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
- 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



Trinity Gate (1992), tempera on canvas