

Art market focus



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Deathbed paintings by the St Ives artist that time forgot



Roger Hilton was one of the leading abstract painters of the post-war generation of British artists who were centred in St Ives – Britain's answer to the American abstract expressionists. But while critically admired, Hilton somehow slipped off the ledge. Even now, he warrants one of the shortest Wikipedia entries of the St Ives school, while in the market, his prices lag some way behind those of Patrick Heron, William Scott, Peter Lanyon and Alan Davie.

Hilton's biggest problem, though he might have regarded it as a creative stimulant, was booze. It made him irritable and cantankerous and difficult to deal with, and it finally killed him, in February 1975, at the age of 63.

For a couple of years before that, though, while he was virtually on his deathbed and crippled by severe peripheral neuritis, Hilton showed that he was still capable of changing direction, producing more than 1,000 exuberant figurative paintings and drawings – a stream of both dark and joyful works in materials that were completely new to him. More than 100 of these works, most from the estate of his widow, Rose, who died in March,

and never seen before, are to be shown by Sotheby's in London from Thursday.

In October 1972, Hilton had been confined to bed on the ground floor of the cottage he shared in Botallack, near St Ives, with Rose, their two sons, two dogs and a cat. Photographs show a set-up not unlike Tracey Emin's *My Bed*, with overflowing ashtrays and empty whisky bottles, food packages, burned-out candles and medicines sprawled around its perimeter.

Because he could no longer paint oil on canvas, a friend, the printer Reg Watkiss, brought Hilton some lithographic paper to draw on. That Christmas, he purloined a box of poster paints (also known as gouaches) that one of his sons had received as a present. In a 1973 diary entry, he listed the advantages of this new medium: "It is cheap... convenient... (and) I can do it from my bed." He was consciously entering "a new phase", he wrote. "I have reached the stage now of simplifying."

A natural left-hander and with a low bedside table, he swapped hands when one or other elbow became too tired or sore to lean on. Birds, boats, wheels, caterpillar shapes and monsters, but mostly the undulating curves of the female form ("all tits and bums", as the art historian Margaret Garlake once



put it to me) populate these multicoloured, free-flowing images. They poured from his imagination, his energy stimulated by nicotine, pain and fear, and assuaged by a constant supply of whisky. "Nowadays, I'm always sad," he told the *Western Morning News* in 1974, but you wouldn't know it from the colourful, light-hearted art he made.

In the summer of 1974, Hilton overruled his doctor's plans to take him to the Maudsley hospital, which treated alcoholism as a psychiatric problem, and took a £1,000 advance on sales from his art dealer, chartering

a small aeroplane to take him and his family to Antibes for a holiday. Here he painted in bed in the mornings, was taken to the seaside in a wheelchair in the afternoons, and then to the local café in the evenings. His work never looked livelier.

The artist Michael Canney visited Hilton a few weeks before he died. "I asked him how he could possibly produce such cheerful work under these circumstances... I can't remember the exact words," Canney wrote later, "but with a dismissive gesture, he said, 'There's nothing else left – what else have I got?'" Rose

Childlike but profound: two of Roger Hilton's late gouaches, Untitled 1973 (left) and 1974 (right)

said he was singing childhood nursery rhymes and songs before he died, including: *Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a Bow-Wow*. The last gouaches have something of this innocence about them."

Childlike in their simplicity they might have been but, as with Picasso's late works, Hilton's poster-paint works were not childish. They were popular, too: while his earlier abstracts were having difficulty selling in London, an exhibition of his late gouaches at the



Orion Gallery in Penzance sold two thirds of the works at the opening.

The Sotheby's exhibition is co-curated by Kenny Schachter, the American collector and dealer, who owns 14 of them. A close follower of contemporary art, Schachter thinks Hilton's deathbed gouaches are so edgy and "proto-punk" that they speak more to the contemporary art audience now than they did then.

Prices at Sotheby's will range from £3,000 for a drawing up to £13,000 for a gouache, which is not excessive. At auction, the best of these late gouaches have sold for up to £15,000.