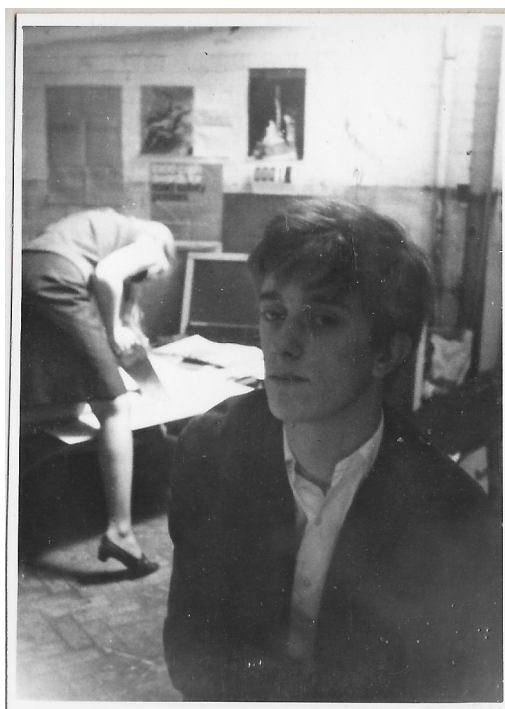


Byam Shaw Art School - 1962 to 1965 PM Prue Cooper



Diana Armfield and Bernard Dunstan

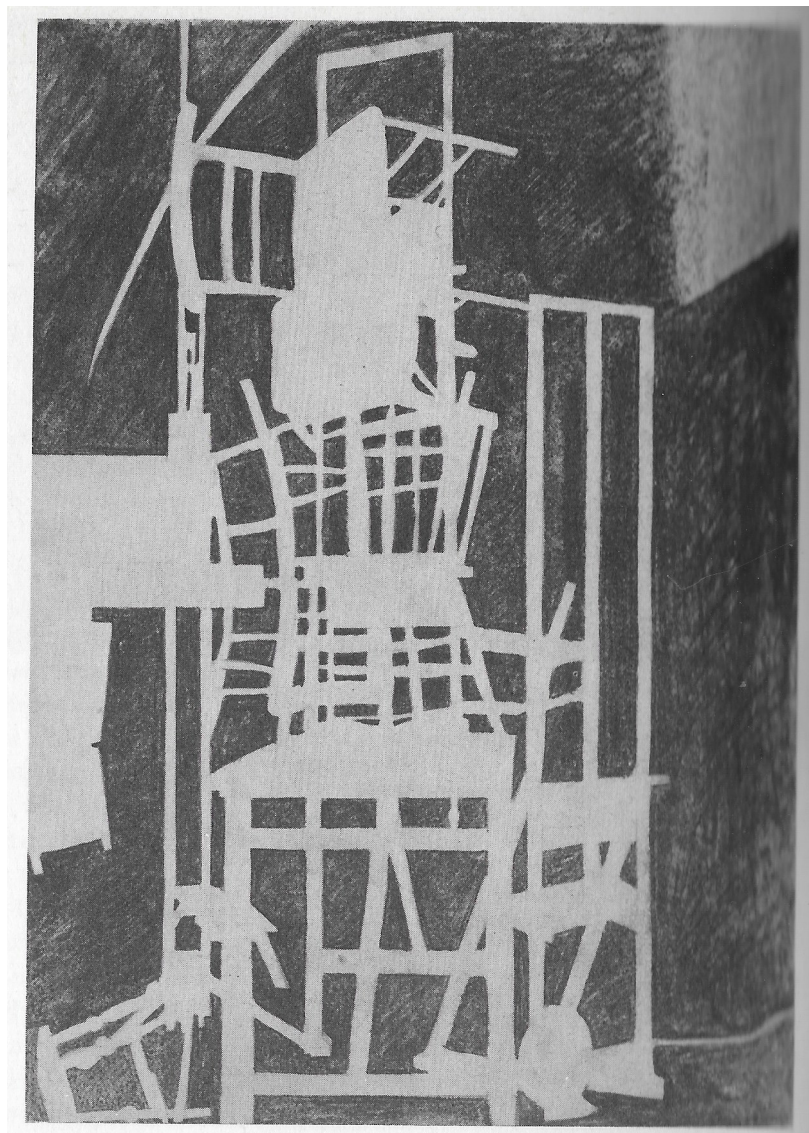
I chose to go to art school, because I thought it would be cool and I could wear black stockings and impress boys. I could draw fairly well and couldn't wait to leave school and its idiotic rules behind. But the choice of which art school was my parents', and my father decided that Byam Shaw would be suitable since the students there had clean fingernails. I got an LCC grant.



Students

I was extremely lucky that I started studying there at the same time that Maurice de Sausmaurez took over from Miss Ovens as Principal; before his time the place had been run as an alternative to finishing school for young ladies, which might have explained why under de Sausmaurez the use of watercolours was absolutely banned. (And why I was allowed to go there).

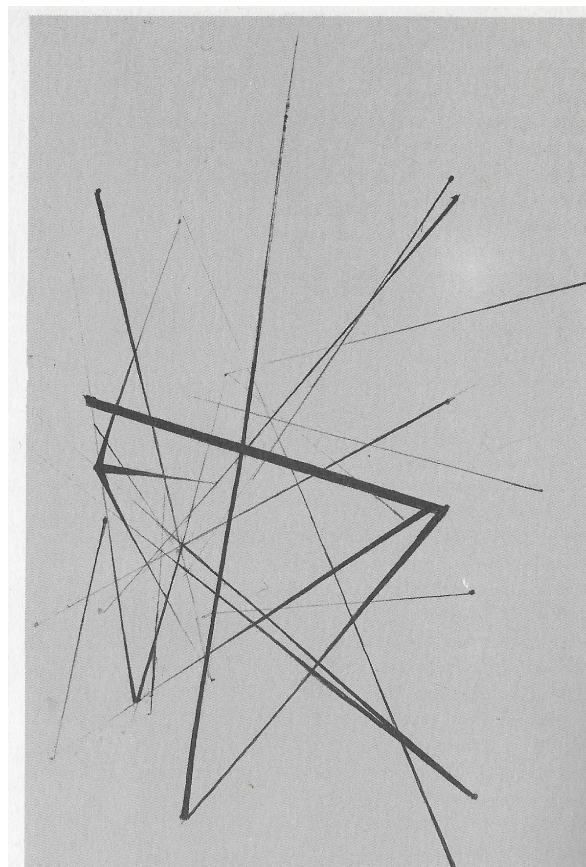
For the whole of the first term we drew the plaster casts of famous sculptures, with a 2B pencil, day in and day out, with no let-up. The art teacher at school had taught us that proper artists held their pencils sideways, using the side of the lead; that prompted a crushing telling off on day one. Drawing casts was arduous but a brilliant training in analytical observation, and after our first term we graduated to life drawing, and also to days out with Diana Armfield, (then mainly a designer of wallpaper) who took us to draw in museums, building sites, airports etc etc, and encouraged us to see pattern in what we looked at, rather than being ploddingly literal, and also to see things as they really are, rather than as a stereotype. Her husband (Bernard Dunstan) also taught us, but she was the better teacher by far.



Observation and 'dynamic pattern'

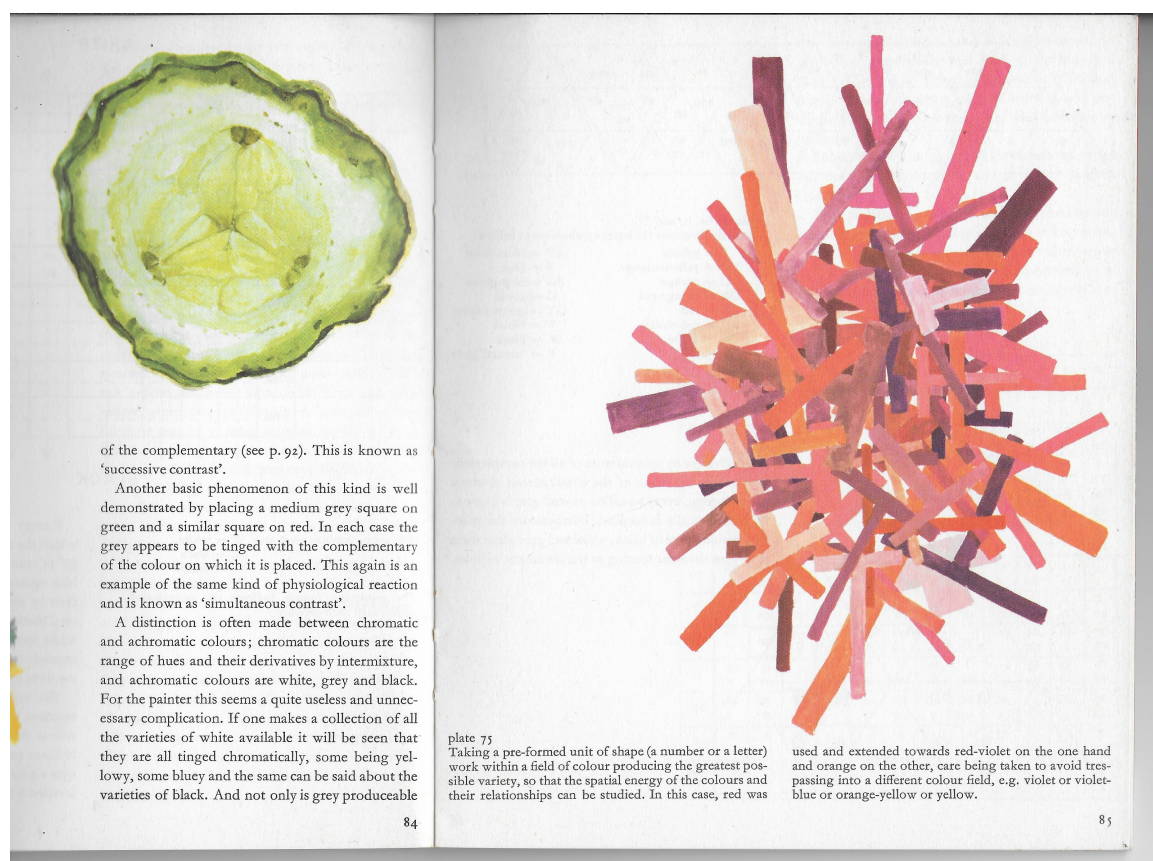
On Tuesdays we were taught by John Flavin, who devised brilliant and imaginative exercises to make us look and observe, and to make us understand how colour can work, how perspective, tone, texture etc can work, and how to make us think about what we were doing. While I was there De Saumarez wrote his book *Basic Design: The Dynamics of Visual Form*, illustrating it with the work students had produced on a Tuesday. At the time, I had no understanding of the theory - freeing students from preconceptions about the nature of art (I had none), but I found the practice completely absorbing; these ways of looking and working were completely revelatory (I had been brought up to believe that understanding art meant knowing that Constable always used a little dab of red). Thinking about negative spaces, for example, is now so mainstream as to be hardly worth mentioning, but to me it was a completely new and amazing concept.

Once Flavin roped three or four bicycles together in a bunch, strung them onto a pulley, hauled them up to the studio skylight, while we lay on our backs on the floor to draw them, so we would not be able to fall back on drawing our notion of 'bicycle' but would have to draw only what we were certain we could see. Once he painted contour lines all over the life model (blushing scarlet as he painted) for us to draw only the contour lines. Or we had to paint, on a large sheet of paper (A2), a slice of cucumber, with every colour variation intensely analysed and recorded. The understanding of the dynamics of form, colour, texture, imbalance etc was the aim, but also scrutiny and rigorous decision making. This last particularly necessary for one exercise which required us to leave our easels on the ground floor and draw the life model on the top floor; the climb up and down and up and down all day concentrated the mind pretty effectively.



'Spacial relationships freed from perspective'

The teaching was nonetheless what would now be called academic. Printing was introduced in my third year, which seems a logical step from John Flavin's Tuesday classes, but there was an unspoken sense that it wasn't quite proper art. Two students went on to St Martin's, but the message was clearly spelled out – there you would learn to wait for inspiration to descend, but without first learning the skills to execute your ideas, you would be powerless.



Understanding colour

Rodney Wilkinson, Peter Garrard, and John Wilkinson taught drawing; Jane Dowling taught painting. She left to marry Peter Greenham, a much better-known painter, but without her original vision. Bernard Dunstan also taught painting, but though he was immensely likeable, was less able or willing to engage with each student's strengths and draw them out; he and Diana were always hospitable and friendly. Peter Garrard and Maurice De Sausmarez were both members of the AWG.

Around the time I left, I read that Roger Fry said he knew he'd never be a great painter as he never forgot to have lunch. Shorthand, of course, for something more complicated, but I identified with that, and have never painted since. Making stuff that is to be used is what makes sense to me, but at Byam Shaw crafts were never mentioned as a serious option for a career.