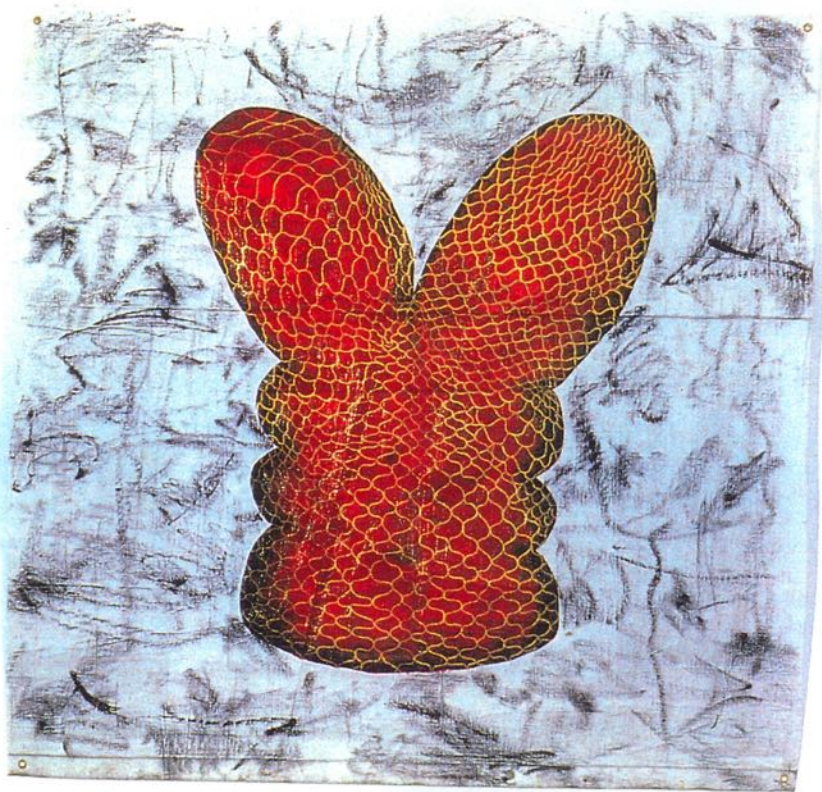


S T A T L S T E

STEPHEN EASTAUGH'S PAINTING
RESEMBLE A BIZARRE TRAVELOGUE
FROM AN ALTERNATIVE DIMENSION.

ASHLEY CRAWFORD DECODES
THE MYSTERIES BEHIND THE MAPS.



This page:

Offalperfume, 1997,
ink on tarpaulin, 58.5 x 58.5 in.

Facing page:

(top) **Ms Chemical and
Mr Smog get Married**, 1997,
ink on tarpaulin, 58.5 x 58.5 in.
(bottom) **Blue West One**, 1997,
ink on tarpaulin, 58.5 x 58.5 in.

E D

In Stephen Eastaugh's strange, organic abstractions, everything is up for grabs: Food, sex, religion, environment, clothing, the body and, most of all, travel. If there is a central link in this abstract oeuvre, it is that of experience, for if every one of Stephen Eastaugh's works has a story, it is a story firmly cloaked in his distinctly eccentric, individualistic approach to life. It is a narrative recounted in a language more akin to a private code than a literal, figurative rendering: A language of strange mysteries and intense experiences.

Eastaugh is by no means secretive about these yarns. Abstraction has been accused of confounding the uninformed viewer, but Eastaugh's is more of a fun ploy that he expects us all to join in on. The hints are there, both in shape and coloration, and in the titles, but he won't make it easy for you. You've got to search, learn his arcane *lingua* and come traveling to far-flung regions of the globe – to Kalaallit Nunaat and Bangkok, to Kashmir and the furthest reaches of Iceland.

Eastaugh's travels, and accordingly the basis of his art, began in 1982 with a long journey through Africa, Asia and Europe. The search for new places became an obsessive addiction sending him to the Lofoton Islands in Northern Norway to Ouagadougou in the Upper Volta.

Eastaugh explains: "After 15 years of moving around the planet, I have contracted the luxury of a nonstop, jetlag disease... or do I just enjoy being homesick? It seems that I have turned into a cosmopolitan, which means I am either one of no permanent home who is nowhere a foreigner, or one of no permanent home who is everywhere a stranger. The first definition is far too utopian and romantic, while the second is too sad and lonely. I try to live and make art on the border of these two poles."

Over the last two years, Eastaugh's work has dealt with both his own personal nomadism and the broader concept of the foreigner. "I'm exploring the thought that modern Western culture is the product of immigrants, refugees, exiles and tour-



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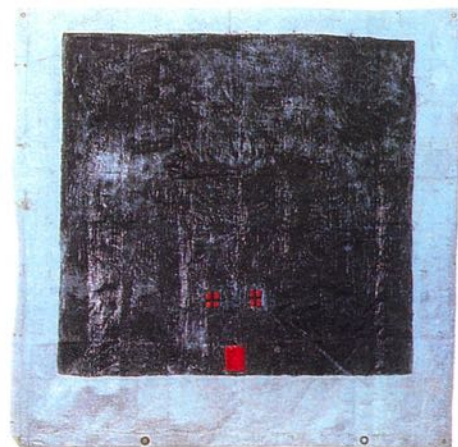
ists," he says. "Mass global movement of people over the past century has created a landscape of rapid cultural mishmash. Cities are ever-changing, stimulating and chaotic, simultaneously familiar and not."

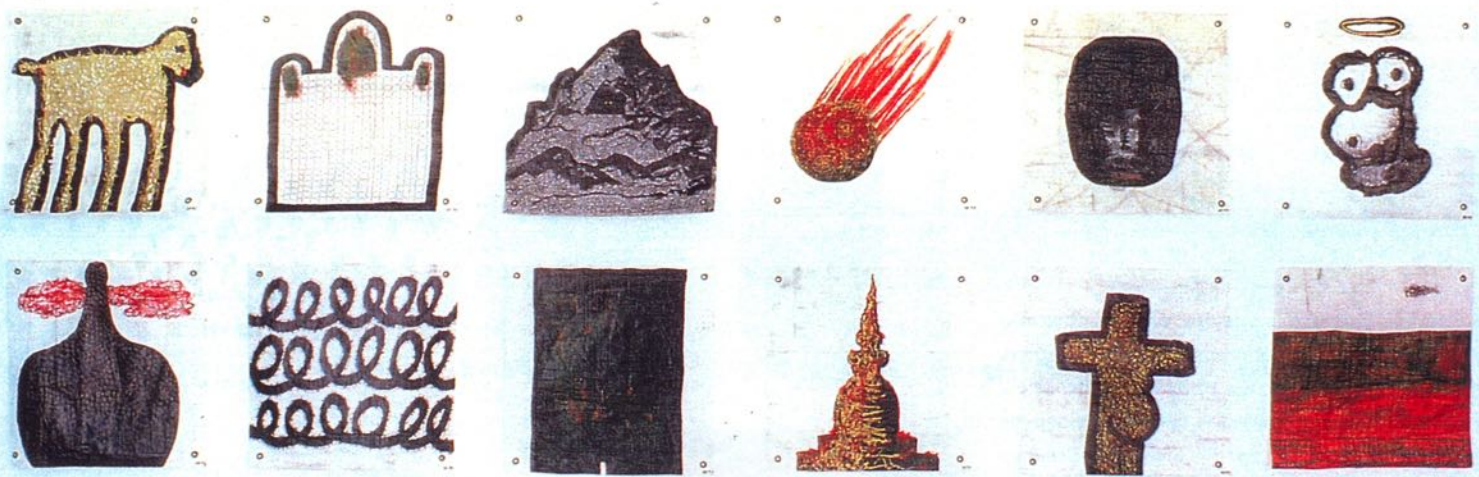
"The borders between here, there and elsewhere seem to have shrunk while homesickness grows and grows."

A brief tour of Eastaugh's most recent work allows a perfect insight into both the strange locales he has traveled to and a never-ending fixation with the state of both the planet and the species which dominates it.

The simple, almost minimalist image of *Blue West One* (1997) carries an odd, but easily explained, melancholia. The building shape, placed iconographically in the center of the painting is a now-deserted American military hospital used during World War II and the Korean War in Narsarsuaq in Southern Kalaallit Nunaat, Greenland. "It has a sad history of terminally damaged soldiers shuttled off to a secret hospital – they were unacceptable PR," Eastaugh says.

While the source may be quite literal, the image – essentially no more than two red windows and a red door against a dark-gray ground – could almost be read as a tragic face. As in all of his work, the interpretations are left largely to the viewer – with or without the "real" story, the impact remains. In *Blue West One*,





the sense of hopelessness and tragedy is almost palpable.

Home in the Megavillage (1997), is an existential search for the "elusive concept of home and house amid the megacity background. I was recalling shanty towns, *favellas*, slums I've seen on the outskirts of cities made by the mass movement of rural folks to centers. They're all constructed out of cosmopolitan materials, images, junk and hope – millions live in such places."

However, Eastaugh's "home" in this context is a bright, gaudy affair, an almost desperate attempt to brighten the family home against a background of thousands of tiny gray shanties. In this work, one of Eastaugh's ongoing artistic tools, braidwork, is used to maximum advantage.

"It's absolutely gorgeous, gaudy and lovely and rich. I've always been fond of braid as a decoration and a tool for abstraction. Originally braiding was the ethnic patterning of various peoples, their colors, shapes and symbols; now all of that is mixed up – you're not going to say that this piece of braid is from Southern Ukraine. Ukrainian braid is probably made in Taiwan now... but still uses the original folkloric patterns."

From home and house, Eastaugh moves onto relationships. In *Ms Chemical and Mr Smog Get Married* (1997), two blob-like shapes suggest toxic chemicals, dubious pills or abandoned offal while simultaneously suggesting a rather sad and tired couple. "A Bangkok picture," says Eastaugh. "It's about the masses of individuals in mega cities – how to find the individuals among the numbers and all the pollution. It's about holding society together

under enormous stress: My hazy view of marriage as a necessary social tool combined with my concern with over-population – what to do?"

Ms Chemical and Mr Smog have an almost Mike Kelley-esque sense of the abject. As is so often the case with these works, their meaning is ambiguous – does Ms Chemical stay at home and pop pills while Mr Smog trudges through the pollution to work each morning? It is not difficult to imagine offspring straight out of a David Lynch nightmare.

Offalperfume (1997) presents a toy discovered in a village in Turkey and even Eastaugh has his doubts about whether the image would be recognizable outside that one village – or even, given his approach, whether it would be immediately recognized *within* that village.

"I don't intentionally try to bamboozle people with a wacky, indecipherable symbol or image. It's just that the symbol or object that attracts me is ambiguous and odd. And it's going to be odd if I'm, say, showing pictures in Australia and I find a strange shape in Greenland or Turkey or somewhere: That jump alone will make the painting exotic – then of course I abstract it further, making it much more simplistic and graphic."



With 15 years of almost continual travel, it is surprising that Eastaugh remains wide-eyed and enthusiastic about the "exotic." But over the years, he has also developed a strong sense of social concern, always portrayed with a fatalistic sense of humor: It's there,

Above:
**Religious Disaster
Tours**, 1997,
ink on tarpaulin,
13.3 x 13.3 in. each

"TO SIMPLIFY EXPERIENCE
VIA THE VISUAL MEDIUM
I TRY TO DISTILL THE
RAW FEELING DOWN TO A
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in your face, but what can the individual actually *do* about it? Eastaugh's response, it seems, is that of documentation, thorough and obsessive. But, one wonders, is his abstraction of experience an attempt to cloak the horror? *Bombwallow* (1997), executed in Laos, is a response to a fact he learned about the Vietnam war: One planeload of bombs was dropped onto the countryside every eight minutes, non-stop, for nine years. "It's unimaginable today with water buffalo wallowing in mud and people napping in the afternoon heat. The non-confrontational Buddhist attitude confronted with that much horror! I couldn't digest it."

But the slightly twisted humor is back in full force in the Religious Disaster Tours series (1997), a travel-agent's nightmare of, as Eastaugh describes, "pilgrimages and package tours to hermit caves, ex-Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, Anne Frank's house, Kashmir temples. You'll find solo travelers and tourists at all these spots," he says with a look of mixed understanding and mock-horror. This series is Eastaugh at his most "figurative" but also at his most ascerbic: A sacrificial animal lies bleeding from mouth and anus; a dark house ("any house with a long shitty history," says Eastaugh); a bloody window in a mosque, a blazing meteor; barbed wire; a desert soaked in blood; a tragic lone hermit in a mountainscape. In Eastaugh's panels, the touristic fascination with the arcane history of religion and fanticism becomes a dark but humorous farce, a dalliance with disaster. Pilgrims and tourists beware. One suspects that the only flights to these locales are via the worst plane in Aeroflot's fleet, booked by an Iranian sadist.

Eastaugh's most powerful work remains the abstraction of personal experience as opposed to his detached documentation as a witness from a distance, where the experience is his own flesh, danger and emotion intermixed. "To simplify experience via the visual medium, I try to distill the raw feeling down to a rich sauce of patterning or a strong kernel, an iconic image, from which a plethora of feelings can grow."

In *Border Region* (1997), Eastaugh portrays the challenges and

essential fears of the first major physical step of any relationship. Bordering on the literal, his painting is an immense portrayal of Dali-esque lips puckering up for the first kiss. A second look, however, reveals a rugged, sharp-pronged mountain range. Eastaugh describes it as "a symbolic border between two people... often as different as two continents. Mountains often mark geographical borders which are difficult to cross physically, but the views are usually worth it."

A 1989 work suggests the same sense of promise and threat. *What To Do With the Body?* is a strange hybrid between the sharp edge of a knife with a mottled tongue as handle. It was inspired by one of Eastaugh's most bizarre experiences. In June, 1983, he blundered into a military takeover at Ouagadougou, in Upper Volta. The coup led to the name of the country being changed to Burkina Faso with, as Eastaugh says, the aid of a few tanks and a little bloodshed.

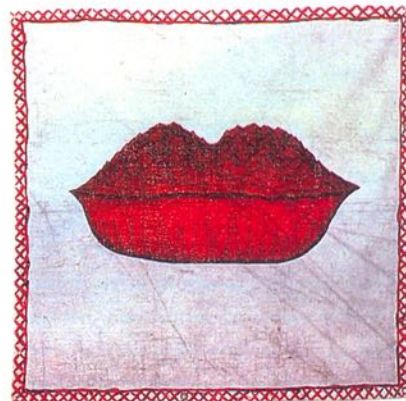
"A crazed local with frothing eyes began following me about and threatening to kill me with his very ornate and very sharp-looking knife."

One night, sitting in a bar amid prospects of murder and a bloody coup, Eastaugh was approached by an exotic and beautiful woman who informed him bluntly that she wished to marry him. "She proposed to me, oozing out friendly desperation... she

wanted to get out of her country."

After she left, Eastaugh's murderous "friend" took her seat and began eating Eastaugh's food, reminding the artist of his intention to "cut me to bits."

"I've not had a more extreme conversation since then," Eastaugh confesses, looking uncharacteristically serious. The resulting painting, *What To Do With the Body?* is an unsettling affair, a pink mass raised over a blood-red background, part the sensuous tongue of the exotic stranger, part the



Above:

Border Region,

1997, ink on tarpaulin,
58.5 x 58.5 in.

Left:

**Home in
the Megavillage,**

1997, ink on tarpaulin,
58.5 x 58.5 in.



"I DON'T HAVE THAT MUCH FAITH IN IT"
 "I DON'T HAVE THAT MUCH FAITH IN IT"
 "I DON'T HAVE THAT MUCH FAITH IN IT"

sharp blade of the exotic would-be murderer. Life and death. Marry me, kill me.

But it is in these experiences, these extremes, that Eastaugh thrives. He lives simultaneously in homesickness and rogue curiosity, sensuality and deprivation, indulgence and the hard slog of his work, a never-ending spiral of abstracting both his life and his images. As he describes it, his travels are both an "over-burdening of individuality – selfish, egocentric, hedonistic; and an emptying of self – homelessness, solitude, compassion and humility."

It is perhaps no wonder that the result is so compelling; the twists and tears of a life led obsessively chronicling the strange and the sad, the funny and the obscene. For the last two years, however, Eastaugh has settled, seemingly happily, in Amster-

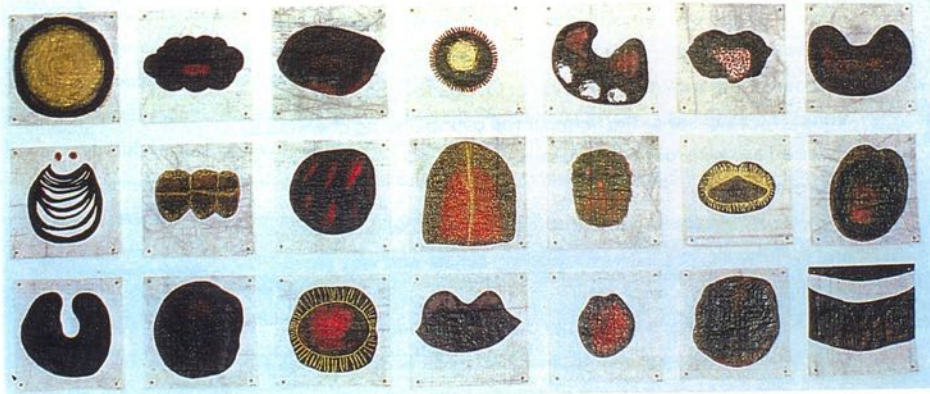
Eastaugh has also taken the opportunity to steer clear of the art world. "Over the past few years in Amsterdam, I've actually avoided seeing any shows. I just wanted to focus on what I was trying to do rather than get too much stimulus from other art forms. I was more in a mood to get stimulus from my own personal experiences."

"I've popped into the Stedelijk to see one or two pictures, in fact the best thing I saw was a show by the poet Joseph Brodsky. It was odd being in an art gallery and there's these marvelous fucking poems on the wall, just marvelous visual imagery out of his wording."

Eastaugh's excitement about Brodsky is understandable. He loves a story. His favorite music includes the surreal narratives of The Fall and Captain Beefheart, where oblique language

builds a compelling tale. Eastaugh agrees with a reading of his imagery as an almost personalised alphabet, yet one infused with ambiguity: "It is a highly personal language. I can't actually say, 'this symbol is love or death' – it's too ambiguous and this is the beauty of picture making. I don't have that much faith in language. Sure, you can relay marvelous amounts of information between people via language, but there are always mistakes and misreadings.

Left:
Dumbshow Series,
 1997, ink on tarpaulin,
 15.5 x 15.5 in. each



dam. His wanderlust has temporarily subsided, and for the first time in almost 15 years the artist has stayed still, giving him time to reflect on the chaotic meanderings of his travels.

"Originally the idea was Scotland, because I'm fond of the landscape. I did locate there, but for a number of strange, odd reasons I had to move on. So I moved to Amsterdam which was good because it's English-speaking, small, it has fine folk, it's very attractive, very pretty."

Moving to the picturesque and safe center of Dutch culture hasn't affected Eastaugh's work in the least. "I think the work I've produced in Amsterdam would have been produced pretty much anywhere else. For at least two years, I was playing with the concept of cosmopolitanism. I used braiding to play with those ideas, and I would have done that anywhere."

You can never tell someone one hundred per cent what you're doing or what you feel."

Perhaps the unknown is stronger than the known.

Eastaugh's perhaps misplaced fear of articulation is commented on directly in the Dumbshow series, a group of macabre mouthpieces in twisting grimaces and grins: "Art as the mouthpiece," more articulate than the artist believes himself to be.

What lingers after viewing these works, and meeting the artist, is the strange sense of a reality not ours. Eastaugh's works are secretive, clouded, the subject matter obscured by his iconography. Eastaugh himself is open, happily discussing the source of each work. But the "reality" remains elusive, the experiences essentially abstracted through a sensual prism which remains very much Stephen Eastaugh's own. **■**