

Untitled

Patrick Caulfield
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Patrick Caulfield, who died yesterday aged 69, was one of the finest painters of his generation, yet - in an age in which critics were quick to classify - he defied easy definition.

His eclectic paintings displayed a technical mastery which allowed him to work in a variety of styles within a single canvas. In his mature work, trompe-l'oeil and photo-realism co-existed happily alongside simple graphic outlines, emboldened planes of flat colour and perspectival complexity. The paintings' unity was created by the power of Caulfield's imagination and his wry detachment.

This resistance to classification meant that Caulfield's work was not as widely known as that of some of his contemporaries, particularly those who saw media manipulation as an extension of their art. Caulfield was a painter's painter, an artist whose work revealed great depths when contemplated, and to those with an understanding of art, its history and possibilities, his work could resonate on a grand scale.

Patrick Joseph Caulfield was born at Acton, west London, on January 29 1936. During the war years his family lived at Bolton, where Patrick's father worked for the De Havilland aircraft factory. At the age of 15, Patrick left Acton Secondary Modern School and worked drilling gas rings in a factory before moving to the advertising department of Crosse & Blackwell, where he painted chocolates for display. He then did his National Service with the RAF.

Inspired by John Huston's film *Moulin Rouge*, a biopic of Toulouse-Lautrec, Caulfield commenced his career as an artist with evening classes at Harrow School of Art whilst stationed at RAF Northwood. He refused more glamorous postings in order to continue his classes and to ensure that he could spend time at the important exhibitions of the period, notably the Mondrian retrospective and the Tate Gallery's 1956 Modern Art in the United States, at which he saw the work of Edward Hopper and Stuart Davis for the first time.

Having admitted in his interview with William Coldstream at the Slade School of Art that he did not know the names of any important British artists, Caulfield won a place at Chelsea School of Art in 1956. "All the prettiest girls were at Chelsea," he said.

He studied under Jack Smith and Prunella Gough, and benefited from the guidance of the principal, Lawrence Gowing, who created an egalitarian atmosphere in which Caulfield thrived after the rigours of the RAF. Initially uncertain about his ability, he entered Chelsea as a commercial painter, but switched to fine art, while retaining elements of graphic design in his work.

Before moving on to the Royal College of Art, where he studied for a further three years, Caulfield used the money from two prizes he won at Chelsea to travel to Greece. Inspired by the crude images of Minoan frescoes as well as by the bright, hard colour and sharp outlines he found on Crete, Caulfield incorporated a decorative, more playful feel into his own work.

Whilst at the RCA, in the year below Hockney and Kitaj, he painted two major works which included the human figure. *Portrait of Juan Gris* paid homage to a hero, whilst *Greece*

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Expiring on the Ruins of Missolonghi after Delacroix was copied from a black-and-white print, with Caulfield attempting to render the image as a propaganda poster, which he felt had been its original intent. Thereafter he was to confine himself only to the suggestion of human presence - a space recently vacated, a chair at an angle, a table set. This was a conscious decision, born of the view that "Picasso had pulled the plug on interpreting the human form".

When Caulfield had completed his course at the RCA, Lawrence Gowing offered him a post as a part-time teacher at Chelsea, where he taught from 1963 to 1971. In 1964 he was included in the New Generation exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, in addition to making the first of his screenprints. The silkscreen process, which lends itself to large areas of flat, sharply defined colour, was ideal for the formal simplicity of Caulfield's compositions.

Although his paintings appeared simple, this was deceptive and rarely the desired effect. By his own admission there were periods when he sought simplicity and others when he sought complexity; his evolution as an artist was not a linear process. Caulfield's move from using board to using canvas in the early 1960s awakened his imagination, as the material is both lighter and more flexible, pregnant with possibility.

Having painted initially in a flat, linear mode, Caulfield became increasingly alive to the potentiality of paint to create light and shade, and his mature work allowed for more sculptural interpretation of the depicted scene.

In 1965 he had his first solo exhibition, at the Robert Fraser Gallery, and the same year was one of four artists representing Britain at the Fourth Paris Biennale, where he won the Prix des Jeunes Artistes despite a row concerning his screenprints, which the organisers did not consider "hand-made". The following year he had his first overseas solo exhibition, at the Robert Elkon Gallery in Manhattan, whilst the Tate Gallery became the first major public collection to buy his work when they acquired Battlements.

By 1971 Caulfield was in a position to give up teaching. The same year Penguin published a monograph on his work by the critic Christopher Finch, whose description of Caulfield as a "Romantic disarmed by his own sense of irony" was never bettered. With his increasing control of light and shade, Caulfield was able to invest the most vibrant monochromes with subtlety, allowing a richer complexity to inhabit his world of empty bars, sad cafés and bare foyers.

Caulfield was an urban painter, rarely venturing into the countryside from his studio, which was based initially on the fringes of Camden Town and, from 1995, at Archer Street in Soho. His subject matter was inescapably melancholy, but was always leavened by his humour and individuality; his ability to reconstruct the world from within the formal structure of his imagination rendered the most mundane objects and scenes memorable.

Primarily a painter, Caulfield enjoyed the challenges and variety provided by alternative commissions. In 1973 he produced 22 screenprints for a limited edition book, *Some Poems of Jules Laforgue* - he had encountered the work of the French poet at the RCA. He produced a tapestry, *Pool*, for his 1975 show at the Waddington Galleries, in which the deep azure of the rectangular pool is surrounded by a cheerful mosaic. In the early 1990s he designed a stained-glass window, *Paper Moon*, for The Ivy restaurant in London, and a

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large carpet for the atrium of the British Council building in Manchester. He was always in demand as a designer of posters, book covers and ceramics. On a grander scale were his designs for Michael Corder's ballet, *Party Game*, which was performed at the Royal Opera House in 1984, and for Sir Frederick Ashton's *Rhapsody*, his penultimate work in 1995, which subsequently transferred to Paris. When the curtain rose for *Party Game* there was a spontaneous outbreak of applause for the set before the dancers had even moved.

In the 1990s Caulfield had introduced greater complexity of design into his work, taking the juxtaposition of photo-realism and linear outlines as far as it could go. Paintings such as *Candle-lit Dinner* beautifully conveyed the atmosphere of the subject through the witty interplay of bulbous lights and fat, curving lines, bright monochromatism and lilting shade, the precision of the chicken set against a childlike background of big shapes, overlapping, drawing the eye of the viewer upwards and down and into the picture despite its perverse perspective.

In the late 1980s, in paintings such as *Glass of Whisky*, Caulfield had forsaken intricacy, imbuing his painting with a greater starkness. The glass appears almost surreal standing in its yellow shard against the brown background - even Caulfield's palette had been subdued to the overall design - upon which plays the artless geometry of splintered light.

In his late work Caulfield could move easily from the spare to the involved. *Trou Normand* (literally meaning "Normandy hole", and slang for the resurgence of appetite following a glass of Calvados) is almost a riot of interlocking colours. The light from the high windows reflects on the different surfaces and fabrics; and although there are no glasses to be seen, this is indubitably the closed world of the down-at-heel bar. By contrast, *Kellerbar* has light from a single source illuminating a bare pub sign and a painted china spatel which, in their magnificent simplicity, conjure images of another world.

He was a keen drinker, arriving at his "morning pub" at opening time for *Old Speckled Hen*, before moving on to double Irish whiskeys. After lunch and work, he went to the evening pub, before returning home to watch television. Glasses of red wine were a frequent motif in his paintings.

Patrick Caulfield created a unique style as a painter. Impervious to fashion, he was capable of assimilating the fluctuations of 20th-century art into his work, of learning from the modern masters but never merely aping them. His control of the overall design of a painting was reminiscent of Ingres, his palette toyed with Matisse and the Fauves, his reassembling of the world under his own rules reflected the spirit of Picasso and the Cubists; but he was his own man - wryly observant, figurative, photo-realist, abstract, always forging his own identity amidst the white noise of modern culture.

He was a Royal Academician; a Fellow of the RCA; winner of the Jerwood Prize (in 1995, with Maggi Hambling); and nominated for the 1987 Turner Prize for his show *The Artist's Eye*, in which he curated an exhibition of his favourite paintings in the National Gallery. He was appointed CBE in 1996, and enjoyed a major retrospective at the Hayward Gallery in 1999.

Patrick Caulfield married Pauline Jacobs, whom he had met at Chelsea Art School, in 1968; they had three sons. After the marriage was dissolved he married, in 1999, the artist Janet Nathan.