

Humphrey JENNINGS (Walberswick 1907 - Poros 1950)

The Purple Yacht

Pencil, black chalk and watercolour on oatmeal paper.
Stamped with the Jennings studio stamp (not in Lugt) on the verso.
314 x 240 mm. (12 3/8 x 9 1/2 in.)

Relatively few paintings and drawings by Humphrey Jennings are signed, dated or titled by the artist, and only a handful of his works are today in public collections, including the Tate. Like his paintings, Jennings's drawings display some similarities to the work of the Italian Futurists, and are characterized by a spare, almost Oriental, use of line. As Kathleen Raine recalled, 'Sometimes he would paint some apparently naively simple, realistic object – like a matchbox; or, approaching the problem from another point of view, only a few brushmarks, of infinite delicacy of touch and subtlety of colour, on canvases largely left bare – so left because every brushmark must be made with meaning, deliberately placed according to a complex imaginative operation, involving both conscious thought and instinctive sensibility…French in visual perception, English in his sense of the poetic image, Chinese in his philosophy of how an action (painting in particular) should be performed, he sought simultaneously for three kinds of truth; in his mature work, so it seems to me, all these are achieved.'

This watercolour may be dated to around 1949, and would is a study for a small oil painting on canvas by Jennings, of identical dimensions and dated 1949-50. The finished painting is sold with the drawing.

Provenance:

Anonymous sale ('Works from the Studio of Humphrey Jennings'), London, Christie's South Kensington, 12 July 2006, lot 171.

Artist description:

One of the leading documentary filmmakers of the 1930's and 1940's, Humphrey Jennings was born in the Suffolk fishing village of Walberswick in 1907. After completing his studies at Cambridge, where he designed sets and costumes for a number of amateur theatrical productions, he continued to work as a stage designer and began also to paint. In 1934 he began working as a director of short documentary films at the GPO Film Unit in London. In 1936 Jennings joined André Breton, Herbert Read and Roland Penrose on the Organizing Committee of the International Surrealist Exhibition held at the New Burlington Galleries, and became a founder member of the anthropological movement known as Mass Observation. With the outbreak of war, Jennings continued to work for the GPO Film Unit, now under the direction of the Ministry of Information, creating such inspirational documentary films as London Can Take It, Heart of Britain and Words for Battle. Later in the war Jennings scripted and directed the films Fires Were Started, about the National Fire Service, and The Silent Village, about the massacre of the citizens of a Czechoslovakian village by German troops in 1942. In July 1943 he filmed the invasion of Sicily, and in 1944 wrote and directed a documentary film on the song Lili Marlene. At the end of the war he traveled throughout Germany shooting a film about life in the country under the Military Government, released in 1945 as A Defeated People. Jennings's postwar films included The Cumberland Story, a depiction of the mining industry, and Dim Little Island, about life in postwar Britain. He died in 1950 from a fall, while scouting locations for a new film on the Greek island of Paros, and is buried in Athens.

Although best known as a filmmaker, Jennings was also active as a painter, draughtsman, photographer and poet. As an old friend, writing shortly after Jennings's untimely death, noted of him, 'He always regarded himself as, before everything, a painter; film-making was of secondary importance and the writing of poems an occasional mode of expression; and it is significant that Humphrey himself said, early last year, that he had just begun to be sufficiently satisfied with his work to feel that the time had come for an exhibition. He had mastered his style.' As early as 1929, before he had started working at the GPO Film Unit, Jennings had written in a letter to his wife, 'I should hate doing films really…simply I want to draw.' In 1937 a one-man exhibition of his paintings was held at the London Gallery.