

Enigma isn't so much a tool as a subject matter in Steve Young's paintings. The two questions we ask when we are in front of them are 'where are we?' and 'what is going on?' We know objectively that the landscape backdrop in much of the work is the shoreline of South Wales, but we also know that it isn't really where we are: he's thinking of somewhere else we are less familiar with. And having depicted his characters with a surprising level of detail, much of it from his daily life, he leaves it to us to decide who they are, and what they're up to.

It's a murky evening in *Moth* (2014) for example, in which we appear to be looking down from height onto a stage from a wing. The people on the stage aren't ignoring us: they just don't know we're there. There's something ungraspably cruel about the scene but we don't know why. Two little dancing girls, dressed like Degas ballerinas; a spotlight woman in her underwear, fixing her hair; across from her, two other women and a man, also seedily undressed, and a technician of some kind, probably adjusting the stage lighting. Are they getting ready to perform? Probably not, because they're so casual, self-absorbed and unprepared, and the stage has no house or audience. More than this, it couldn't have an audience: it looks out onto a bleak, scruffy landscape, with a rough sea impinging on it. It's not a landscape for lingering in either, but for passing through. The sense of isolation is frightening.

Not that the work always had this darkness about it. He had a wide emotional range, much of it having a joie de vivre born of a gentle positivism: innocence, domesticity, eroticism, celebration. But like *Moth*, virtually all of it has a Surreal sense of dream and contradiction. Symbolic complexity underpins *Stepping Stones* (1989), *Summer Evening* (1990), *The Art History Lesson*, *Alfresco* (1995), *The Plinth* (1999), *Dance Away* (2014), *The Egg 2* (2008), *On the Town* (2017), and others. In *Summer Evening* the main foreground figure has pulled a bottle of champagne out of an ice bucket and is pouring herself a drink. Two others cavort in drunken dance. In the centre, dominating the composition, a male figure on a large stepladder is hanging a string of coloured lights, and so we know a party is about to start. His hapless friends aren't helping and have already drifted into debauch. We don't know what the lights are for, or who is coming to the party. *The Egg 2* is a fête galante of elegantly clad women and strangely fragile men, at a delightfully bourgeois dinner party, at a table inexplicably on a beach by the sea.

We realise this is an art of situations in which we are always interrupting and never there at the start. The actors are already absorbed in what they are doing before we arrive. We get the sense that something has just happened, or something is about to happen, so our curiosity holds us and makes it difficult to look away.

This hypnotic power comes from a number of oppositional forces that shaped the artist's outlook. In fact, these were the stuff of the modernity we are all swimming in: the past in relation to contemporary life; mythology as a vehicle for interpreting reality; objectivity as a means of coping with subjectivity. Steve's art lives resolutely in the normative present, but describes it to us through references to past art; in every canvas we can see the accoutrements of day-to-day living – cork-screws, shoelaces, step-ladders – nestled amid mythologies from another universe; and always, objective knowledge was animated by the artist's personal view of things.

Steve was intensely well-read. His work reveals this through a deep but untrumpeting eclecticism. Like Poussin, he usually placed his situations in the open air; his compositions and treatment of nature have a lot to do with the Rococo, especially Watteau, Fragonard, and Lancret; Picasso's classicising provided a Modern example. Contradicting all that gentility, I was surprised when he told me he admired Julian Schnabel's calamitous Plate Paintings from the later 1970s. Technically, much of Steve's work has the feeling of coloured drawings, in which the graphic dimension generates the structure and space. This puts one in mind of Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas. Like Steve, these two painted what they found around them; but unlike him, they didn't use it to generate an empathetic mythology.

The paintings are the culmination of a phased development which in broad terms had three parts to it. An early period of meticulous geometric Abstraction which hovered somewhere between Constructivism and De Stijl. Most of the artists in those movements were keen to eliminate narratives – story-telling – in a search for an abstract universal language. We assume that this was at the core of Steve's thinking at the time, and it was an approach that earned him national recognition. The second phase, from the later 1970s, constituted a pretty abrupt rejection of these previous values. He moved back into overtly representational works – again, story-telling – with three-dimensional constructions covered in painted imagery. It was a kind of expressionist furniture that still defies categorisation. The imagery that developed in those works then fed his last and longest phase, his move into painting.

In this last, grand period, the artist took the things that were all around him, a place of unfettered happiness – family, work, teaching, friends – and used it to invent other places, the Arcadia and Hades that he kept inside himself. In so doing, he gave us a profound illustration of the world, and some of the most beguiling, and for me significant representational paintings of our times.

Paul Greenhalgh, April 2026