

Stephen Allwood

b.1959

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An air of strange calm fills Stephen Allwood's painting *Cross, Study*. There is a sense that time has slowed to a grinding halt. We can see this most clearly in the aspect of the foreground figure who is depicted frozen in mid-stride. Partially obscured by this summery-looking man in shorts and T-shirt is a small group of sketchily painted figures, indicated by overlapping limbs in movement.

This quality of 'frozen time' suggests that Allwood, who is a keen photographer and uses photography as an inspirational starting point, took a photograph that later formed the basis of the painting. Photography allows the artist to isolate specific areas and emphasise certain relationships by editing out superfluous detail. Compositionally this painting focuses the eye on two areas that form a tight geometric structure. The small group in the foreground creates a vertical axis while the crowd of people form a horizontal bar.

When you look more closely at the horizontal element you can make out human figures emerging from a bank of loose brushstrokes; figures which are simultaneously contained by the rectangular bar form. This sense of containment is emphasised by the way the figures seem to have been made to fit the shape: heads and feet align uniformly at the top and the bottom of the rectangle.

Because these contained figures have been treated in such a loose painterly manner they become near-abstract shapes that interact with the white dribbles of paint from the creamy sky above. Allwood's muted, almost monochromatic, palette of browns and creams emphasises this abstract quality. You will notice that the artist has also stripped the space around these two groups of any pictorial detail: there is no footpath or landscape that might situate the figures in a 'real' environment.

The foreground group, by contrast, is larger and has therefore been rendered with a little more detail, which serves to balance the larger mass in the background. Because they are less abstracted you can more easily see the figures as individuals. They stand out from the crowd, literally. When you consider both elements together – the horizontal bar representing the crowd and the vertical figures representing the individual – the cross form underpinning this work not only becomes more obvious, but its symbolic role comes into play.

The cross remains a recognisable and potent symbol in contemporary culture, yet Allwood's use of it does not appear overtly religious. By alluding to the individual and the crowd, *Cross, Study* suggests the ways in which these different states of being intersect, creating social patterns and meanings, even if we are not necessarily aware of them.

Robyn Pickens

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