

The background of the entire page is a rich, textured oil painting of a garden. It depicts several children playing on a light-colored path that winds through a lush landscape. On the left, a child in a blue shirt is running. In the center, a child in a yellow dress is visible. To the right, a child in a purple shirt stands near a large, leafy tree. In the foreground, a child in a red dress is running towards the left, and another child in a blue dress is running towards the right. The garden is filled with various plants, including tall, conical evergreens, flowering shrubs, and a large, mature tree with dense green foliage. The overall style is impressionistic, with visible brushstrokes and a warm, dappled light filtering through the trees. The sky is a mix of soft blues and whites, suggesting a bright, sunny day.

# PAINT AND MEMORY

New Paintings by

JOHN A. PARKS

Gallery 532 Thomas Jaeckel New York

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*A Painted Childhood*

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Cover: *Hide and Seek*, 2012 Oil on Linen 19" x 30"

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JOHN A. PARKS

NOVEMBER 8TH - DECEMBER 15TH, 2012

532 GALLERY THOMAS JAECKEL  
532 West 25TH STREET NEW YORK 10001



## Artist's Note

Several years ago, rather late at night, it occurred to me that painting directly with my hands must surely be the most direct, the most visceral way to connect with the viewer. I was intrigued with the idea of ditching the elaborate habits that had accrued with my brushing skills, my long life as a painter. The first finger paintings were wild, uncontrolled but thrilling to make. The difficulty of placement and the awkwardness of dragging the paint created extraordinary and unexpected situations. A whole new world of suggestion and intuition opened up. I was also unprepared for the delicacy I was able to get with this approach, the exquisitely tactile surface that arises when you physically feel and work every tiny part of the painting with your hands. Recently I made a further step into the unknown. Looking to paint childhood memories I decided to work from memory alone, setting aside any sort of reference. This was far more difficult than I imagined. Working from memory my drawing abilities contracted to old, and yes, childish stereotypes. Nonetheless I have never been more excited at the easel, more intrigued to find out what was going to happen next. The memory, it turns out, is fractured, its contents fragmentary and fleeting, its recollections shifting and unreliable. And yet, with the suggestions of chance movements of the paint and quiet reflective hours in the studio, there began to emerge, almost of their own accord, the raucous schoolyards with their shouted games, the wet parklands of Northern England where we played and picnicked, the simple villages through which I cycled with my friends, the sibling quarrels, the sweetshops, gardens, churches, castles and flowerbeds, in short the entire world of something quite lost rising again through the simple act of taking some paint on the end of my finger and applying it to a canvas.

John A. Parks



## A Painted Childhood

To go right back to the beginning, where it all began, without the aid of photographs, or any external support, visual or textual, without even the aid of the paintbrush and a lifetime's training in teasing out the nuanced textures of flesh and foliage, to dip one's fingers in color and put directly on the canvas how it was, or rather, today's impression of what it must have been, this is the task John Parks, my dear brother, appears to have set himself in this extraordinary series of paintings.

Immediately one is struck by the contrast between staid, quiet very British settings, institutional or idyllic –school and swimming pool, seaside and gardens - and the manic dynamism of infant life, colorful, joyous and cruel. There is scarcely any individuality here, each child is a color, a gesture, a wild movement; at the same time we have an intense awareness of gender, of girls and boys, of society's imposition of skirts and pants, pinks and blues; "Boys and Girls" has couples paired and tussling in blissfully ignorant anticipation of affections and catastrophes to come; "Maypole" is a whirl of pink femininity tangling colored ribbons while two boys look on, unusually motionless, evidently tense and possibly perturbed by this rosy but very strenuous apparition. In "Hide and Seek," "Swimming Baths," "Cycling," and "Tag" a mad collective energy of competition and conflict is precariously channeled into organized games that are always on the edge of mayhem.

These are noisy paintings. We can hear the shouts and cries. The extravagant vitality of open mouths, flung limbs and twisted trunks suggests the child's impatience with clothes, constraints, and confined spaces, his or her essentially animal

life. Never have little dogs seemed so at home in paintings as scurrying here between the racing legs of this remembered infancy.

Racing legs. One hesitates to introduce a note of biography, but it makes no sense not to remind the viewer that my brother went through an experience that would make racing around difficult for some long time. Struck by polio aged four, he was left with a magnificent limp, and though he always threw himself into the fray with energy – I remember bold strokes with the cricket bat - he would never be as fast and free as the others. So it's perhaps not surprising that so many of the pictures focus on the pleasure of wild movement, the child's total absorption in the body flung into action. I have also wondered if the experience hasn't influenced the curious point of view in these paintings; we feel close to the action, but are we actually in it? Again and again as I gaze at these pictures I feel I am being invited to find what is my place in each of these excited groups, the way you look at old school photos and struggle a little to recognize which child is you. Perhaps you are not going to find yourself at all. The children seem so absorbed in themselves, their groups so self-sufficient and self-contained, unaware of and uninterested in everything outside their magic circle. But perhaps this is the distance of age.

Let's try to pin down the act of memory John is making here. He was born in Leeds, in England's north east. His father, our father, was a clergyman and as such obliged, at least at the beginning of his career, to move around every few years. So the family went to Manchester, where John caught polio, then again to Blackpool, on the north-west coast, in the hope that after the filthy metropolis the bracing sea breezes might have a positive effect on his health. John was here from seven to twelve before the family moved definitively to London. He has never revisited Blackpool. Aged 24 he departed for the USA where he has lived ever since. These children playing, then - yelling and fighting and dancing and swimming – are play-

ing in John's mind and very likely have been playing there for decades, their intensity suggests the importance that physical action might have to someone whose health had been profoundly threatened. No sooner do we arrive at this reflection than we're struck by the complete absence of any sentimentality or melancholy in this act of evocation; these are not images of longing or regret, but rather of intense and fascinated curiosity: what was this mad experience we call childhood? Might we perhaps recover it, or at least explore it, by dipping our fingers in color the way tiny children do?

Color and its application are crucial. No one color is particularly intense; rather we have soft blues and purples, pinks and greens, a softness complemented by that absence of sharp definition inevitable in finger-painting. Together, these choices create a sense of distance that, combined with the theme of childhood, could all too easily have given way to the mawkish and saccharine. But the lively juxtaposition of the colors, and the strenuous movement of the figures, or rather the use of color to create movement, as in the little girls' raid on the candy store in "Sweet Shop," create quite a different mood. It's not nostalgia we have here, but celebration; the very liveliness of the paintings has cancelled any sense of loss. These pictures are fun, now; thinking of whatever it was going on, then.

Inevitably, one tries to place these pictures in the trajectory of John's work. The long series of garden paintings, at once so lush and wry, spaces so desirable you always felt they must be threatened by some danger just outside the frame, was followed by the group that John referred to as "Havoc;" here danger was made manifest as all the pompous monuments of Britishness, from the statue of Joshua Reynolds outside the Royal Academy to Piccadilly Circus, the double-decker bus and the red jacketed guards at Buckingham Palace, fell victim to some terrible distorting energy, some painterly upheaval that accentuated both their monstrosity and their charm.

In their different ways, then, both those series of paintings were galvanized by the opposing energies of constraint and vitality, conjuring places of refuge and danger, repose and drama. Now the childhood pictures offer an ingenious remix of the same tensions. Many of the locations are not dissimilar from those earlier gardens, but here they are being asked to contain the havoc of playing children. Meantime the pressures, positive and negative, of British customs are everywhere evident; the school buildings, the children's uniforms, the color-coding for male and female, the ubiquitous flower beds. Beyond the comedy and the sheer visual pleasure, all kinds of anthropological observations urge us to remember how completely our infancy was fashioned by institutions that remained quite indifferent to all our shouts and strife. Quieter than the other paintings, "Train Set" is a fantasy evocation of the big table in our boys' bedroom that mixed an electric train set with war games and models of those planes the British were convinced had won the Second War for them. Like all kids we played at killing and being killed and though the terrifying conflict was absolutely safe for us we claimed a borrowed glory from the heroism of our parents' generation. Unable to compete squarely in the running and jumping, when the playground was reduced to a board game, John was always the fiercest of competitors.

Boards, maps, paintings. The overlap and the distance between map and territory, between two dimensions and three, a painting and its original subject, for example, might be another way of framing the tension between a safe, withdrawn contemplation of the world and a more perilous engagement with it. So alongside the childhood series, John has included three aerial views of London that contrive to combine both map and territory. Seen from a distance we have a beautifully controlled and elegant recall of those mappish schemes of central London we know so well, a lively pattering of streets and felicitously distributed red buses with neat jigsaw pieces of river, park and palace. All is control and possession. But as we move up close we realize that this is not an ordinary two-dimensional street plan, but a map come alive, a painting of stuff

happening; not perhaps the frenetic children at play, but all kinds of curiosities and distortions of perspective that remind us that with any real involvement we will quickly lose our grip.

In “Cycling,” the racing boys on their bikes are far too large against the backdrop of terrace houses behind. In “Sweet Shop” the girls are far too small in proportion to the counter. In “The City of London,” a bus outside St Paul’s seems to dive down a hill to the right while the buildings across the street tilt on a slope to the left. Still and beautiful as they may seem, nothing is stable in John’s paintings, and memory always a joyful struggle to retrieve or create just a moment of clear vision from the furious flux.

Tim Parks

October, 2012

*Tim Parks is the author of “Medici Money: Banking Metaphysics and Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence.” He has published 14 novels including “Europa,” which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1997.*



*Boys and Girls*, 2012 Oil on Linen 18" x 28"



*Tag*, 2012 Oil on Linen 14" x 22"



*Hide and Seek*, 2012 Oil on Linen 19" x 30"



*Maypole*, 2012 Oil on Linen 17" x 26"



*Swimming Baths*, 2012 Oil on Linen 19" x 28"



Sweet Shop, 2012 Oil on Linen 19" x 31"



*Picnic*, 2012 Oil on Linen 19" x 31"



*Train Set*, 2012 Oil on Linen 20" x 31"



*Gardening*, 2012 Oil on Linen 20" x 32"



*Marbles Game*, 2012 Oil on Linen 16" x 20"



*Playground*, 2012 Oil on Linen 20" x 32"



*Cycling*, 2012 Oil on Linen 20" x 32"



*Grammar School*, 2012 Oil on Linen 13" x 18"



*Fight*, 2012 Oil on Linen 20" x 32"

# Map Paintings

## London

The map paintings of London will deliver a more valuable experience to the viewer, I hope, than the average street plan or even an Internet service. I have always believed that maps were, above all, a gift to the imagination. Ever since I was a child and cycled many miles with my friends out into the countryside armed with the famous Ordnance Survey Maps in search of battlegrounds, railway viaducts, lost valleys and remote streams, I have been in love with them. Not that my maps of London are all inventions - far from it. The streets are laid out quite accurately and all the buildings are really there. I have twisted and toyed with them for my own pleasure and for ease of viewing. I have taken liberties with the scale of buses and I have played many games with viewing angles and the delicious actions and reactions of paint. But in the end the pictures are a tribute to London itself with its quilt of green parkland, stately and not-so-stately buildings, and the endless throbbing mayhem of a metropolis.

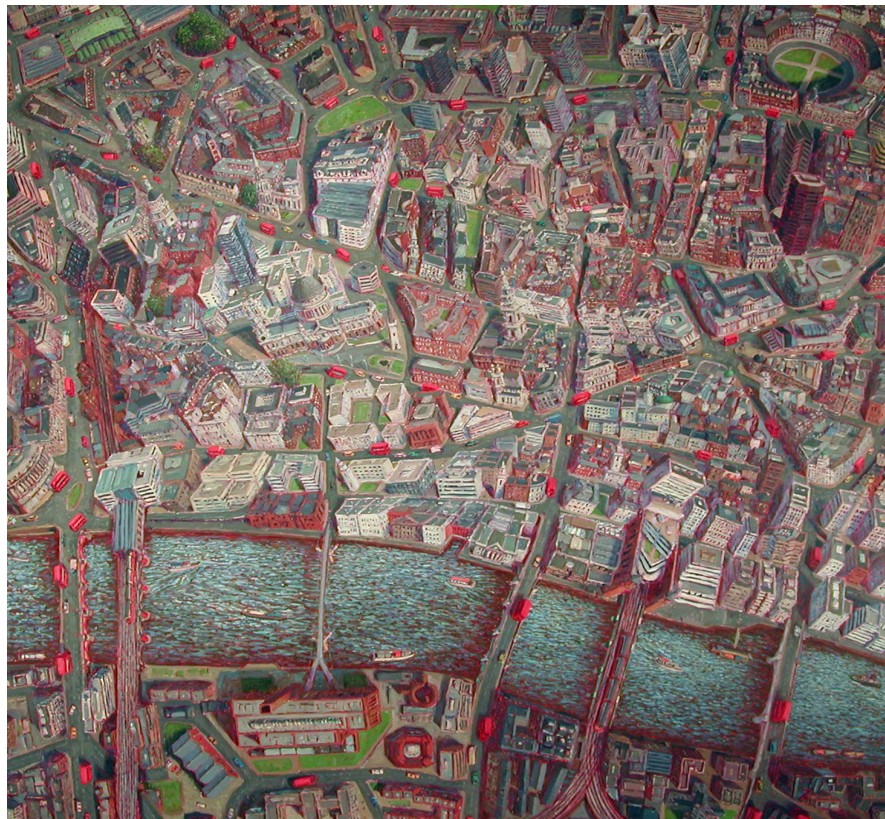
John A. Parks



Westminster, 2004 Oil on Canvas 50" x 50"



*South Kensington*, 2004 Oil on Canvas 50" x 50"



*The City*, 2004 Oil on Linen 50" x 50"

## John A. Parks

Born Leeds, England 1952

### Education

1973-76 Royal College of Art, London. MA(RCA) in Painting.  
1970-73 Hull College of Art. BFA.

### Solo Exhibitions

*Paint and Memory*. 532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel, New York, 2012.  
Southern Vermont Arts Center. Retrospective, 2008.  
Allan Stone Gallery, New York, 2005.  
Cricket Hill Gallery, New York, 2002.  
Coe Kerr Gallery, New York, 1992.  
Louis Newman Gallery, Beverly Hills CA, 1991.  
Coe Kerr Gallery, New York, 1991.  
Allan Stone Gallery, New York, 1987.  
Allan Stone Gallery, New York, 1984.  
Allan Stone Gallery, New York, 1982.  
Segal Gallery, Boston, 1979.  
Allan Stone Gallery, New York, 1978.

### Selected Group Exhibitions

Art Wynwood, Miami, 2012.  
*Made in the UK: Contemporary Art from the Richard Brown Baker Collection*  
Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, 2011.  
Miami Art Basel, Art Fair, 2006.  
Armory Art Fair, New York, 2006.  
*London, Paris, New York*. Beadleston Gallery, New York. 1998.  
Royal Academy, London, 1975.

### Selected Collections

The Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design.

### Awards

National Endowment for the Arts Grant, 1988.  
British Institute Award for Figurative Painting, 1974.  
Fulbright Travel Grant, 1974.  
Pears Portrait Commission, 1976.

### Selected Articles and Reviews

Workshop Magazine, Winter 2006. Full length feature.  
Pulse Magazine, June 2005. In-depth interview.  
New York Sun, June 2005. Review by John Goodrich.  
American Artist Magazine, April 1992. Feature profile.  
ArtSpeak, 1984. Feature article.  
New York Times. 1982. Review by John Russell.  
Arts Magazine, November 1976.

### Selected Publications by the Artist

*The Drawings of Lucien Freud*. Drawing Magazine, Fall 2004.  
*Rubens' Drawings*. Drawing Magazine, Spring 2005.  
*Winslow Homer*. American Artist Magazine, May 2006.  
*Samuel Palmer*. Watercolor Magazine, Spring 2006.  
*John Ruskin and his Influence on American Art*. American Artist Magazine, June 2007.  
*The Paintings of William Bailey*. American Artist Magazine, March 2011.  
*The Paintings of George Bellows*. American Artist Magazine, September, 2012.  
*Drawings from the Courtauld Collection*. Drawing Magazine, Fall 2012.  
*Paint and Longing. The Paintings of John Alexander Parks*. Introduction by Tim Parks.  
Published by Blurp Press and iBooks.

### Teaching

Member of the faculty of the School of Visual Arts, New York since 1979. Various visiting assignments and workshops.

### Website

[www.johnaparks.com](http://www.johnaparks.com)





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Hours: Tue - Sat 11- 6pm  
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*Cricket*, 2012 Oil on Canvas 13" x 18"

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