

# Alan Johnston: Beside the Way

Murdo Macdonald

Alan Johnston's work lets you think. It does not force a position on you. Rather it allows you to come to a position. Philosophers have pondered the nature of the artist and artwork for centuries with the usual amount of progress. But perhaps it is the pondering rather than the progress that is the point. This is what both artists and philosophers do. If we have not pondered, is progress really progress? Perhaps true progress is reflected by more time to ponder. With considerable humour Wittgenstein draws our attention to the nature of pondering and progress when he notes in his remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*: 'I read: "philosophers are no nearer to the meaning of 'Reality' than Plato got." What a strange situation. How extraordinary that Plato could have got even as far as he did! Or that we could not get any further! Was it because Plato was so extremely clever?' Well, not really. But he expounded a methodology of pondering for us. Yet it is remarkable how few people understand the underlying meaning of the word 'methodology'. The etymology makes it clear that it is a discourse on method, rather than a method, or indeed a set of methods. It is a discussion. And more than that, a discourse (ology: from the ancient Greek 'logos') beside (met: from the ancient Greek 'meta') the way (hod: from the ancient Greek 'hodos'), not the way itself. Perhaps a good analogy would be a conversation during a picnic beside a path. Perhaps in the groves of academe. Perhaps the conversation might turn, for the sake of argument, to whether Alan Johnston gets nearer to the meaning of the word 'reality' in his work than all the philosophers working since Plato? In so far as Johnston's work is made in a physical medium, one might argue he has an immediate advantage over those philosophers in the reality stakes. But this would be to agree too much with the physicalist assumptions of that other Johnson who claimed, by kicking at a stone, to have refuted Berkeley's questioning of the existence of an independent external world. In fact, however substantial Alan Johnston's works are, every one of them is a question posed to reality. Johnston's work comes into play where Hume and Berkeley meet. A picnic for those two philosophers beside the way would have been an interesting one on which to eavesdrop. Hume might have been trying out his ideas of colour and shape as being interdependent notions abstracted by mental comparison. Maybe he had little cubes and spheres of white and black marble with him to make his point. Perhaps he laid these out as an aid to his thought experiment (no doubt beside the remains of a joint of beef and a bottle of claret). Berkeley might have been content to let Hume talk, while relaxing in the sun, confident in the assumption that their picnic was being sufficiently perceived to keep it in being. Alan Johnston's work can be seen in relation to both these philosophers. On the one hand he has been directly inspired by Hume's beautifully told thought experiment about the nature of abstraction. On the other Berkeley's notion that 'to be is to be perceived' seems to be complemented in Johnston's thinking by the notion of 'to perceive the mark is to bring into being'. The mark enables the surface to be perceived as surface, and yet in the same instant transforms it into figure and ground, height and depth. In the first movement of the pencil in each of Johnston's works the dimensions of spacetime are implied and questioned. Small wonder that another of Johnston's key intellectual reference points is that master of the brushstroke, the Zen Buddhist monk and painter, Sesshu.