

# Capturing London's emotional tone

NICK HACKWORTH | **EVENING STANDARD** | Tuesday 15 March 2005 01:00 |



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**It is a broody, monochromatic vision of London set out in a style so bold and muscular it verges on abstraction. The 11 monumental canvases on show, the largest more than seven metres long, are the pick of John Virtue's work during his two-year stint as Associate Artist at the National Gallery.**

Whereas predecessors such as Paula Rego and Lucien Freud spent their time looking inside the gallery for inspiration, Virtue looked out.

From his studio's vantage point on the gallery's top floor, he faced eastwards, observing, sketching and painting the skyline dominated by St Paul's and the towers of the City of London and the winding Thames beneath.

He made Trafalgar Square a subject and also crossed the river to see his temporary home-patch with the advantage of distance. For one of Britain's foremost landscape painters, one with a love of the barren and remote, it was a radical challenge.

The response was suitably heroic, one that in the Romantic manner aimed at capturing London's emotional tone in paint. On his large canvases Virtue, now 57, has loosely sketched out the city's architecture and then buried it beneath painterly sweeps of black and white acrylic paint and expanses of black ink thrown at the canvas.

In the best pieces, such as Landscape No 706, the cityscape is a dense presence, barely articulated in its details, emerging from dramatic banks of cloud that read equally well as smoke, so that it appears as if a second Blitz has engulfed London. Here we are shown a tough, almost hostile environment, but one awesome in its size and its history. Without doubt his works have the measure of the city.

*Until 5 June. Information: 020 7747 2885. ■*