

James Wood: Village Burial with Fire (1989)

Paul Klee used to refer to his own work as „abstract with memories” – I hope he will allow me to borrow the term, at least for this instance.

Here the memories are of a Hindu, princely funeral ceremony – for two months the villagers have been making preparations – hundreds have turned out wearing their most lavish and colourful clothes, and carrying offerings of food on their heads. First there is the noisy procession down to the river for purification of the soul, then a short ceremony, and then the vast funeral pyre is set alight.

At this moment it seems as though the whole village has exploded into music and dancing – soon, some go into trance. Gradually the physical form of the pyre disintegrates, and the spirit of the deceased is formally set free to mingle with the spirit world. In the evening, when the festivities have moved on to another place, some mourners lament beside the glowing embers.

James Wood