

## Surviving the Dark Ages

My studio is a former billiard room in an 18<sup>th</sup> Century Manor House in the North Yorkshire countryside. Typically there are several large canvases waiting for my attention and I decide which one to work on and what should be done at the start of each day. Being a painter is about listening to the needs of the paintings as they progress.

I have always made drawings and paintings. Long before I could read I could draw. Instinctively, I know that painting is about trying to construct an astonishing world. As a child I was fascinated in how artists created these worlds and realised that I had so much to learn about all that had come before me. So I began to study art history. As a teenager I would go to the museums in London and could visually recall all the paintings in the National Gallery at the time I applied to study art at university.

By the age of 18 I had accumulated a vast body of work which showed my enthusiasm for art from all periods and an ability to draw. This was in 1981. I had excelled as a child, but was refused entry onto all the art that courses that I applied to, apart from a small art department on the Welsh coast at Aberystwyth, miles away from any major city.

Actually there was an exception to this. In an interview at one London college I was told by its professor that I could really draw, and as it was such a rare ability, he was obliged to offer me a place. But with this came a warning not to accept it as he would make my life hell. It was an early lesson that my interests and abilities were undesired and that it was not going to be easy to pursue my love of art.

And that has largely been my experience ever since. The art world is not for the most part, a meritocracy. Yet there is a platform for those with sufficient determination and talent, and I have been fortunate to meet some remarkable individuals, beginning at Aberystwyth.

David Tinker was its head and a talented painter and sculptor. Although I am known as a realist painter, I am interested in good painting irrespective of style. David was an abstract painter and from him I learnt skills such as mixing colour, to understanding what constitutes a great work of art. David was an intuitive maker. He knew that being an artist was about going into the studio to make something remarkable. It was a celebration of ingenuity, creativity and humanity. I felt in him a kindred spirit.

Although I suspect artists will survive despite our pervading culture which seems hostile to their needs, students do need a cushion from such hostility. David was an important mentor. His experience and love of art protected me against negative attitudes that often coloured the teaching of art and art history at that time, and still dominate today. The fashion for regarding art as just the product of society, without any special qualities, is at odds with what I know art to be, and David was always there to remind me that these lecturers didn't understand what defined art as great. That was their shortcoming, not ours.

When I went on to study for my masters at another university, I encountered similar attitudes, and I now know the rarity of David's insight. In this environment I was labelled as being particularly obstinate and was finally ostracised from the department studios. At that time I had just returned from a trip to New York to interview Richard Estes and was attempting to make paintings based on drawings and photographs of my immediate surroundings. It seemed, and still does seem, a very natural way to make art. What could be more appropriate for a visual artist than to study their

surroundings and then return to the studio and distil from all this experience its essence and complexity and turn it into something original?

Throughout my time at university I studied as much art history and theory as I did painting. I still study every day. I don't regard myself as an art historian but as an artist who recognises that true creative freedom belongs either to the innocent or those who understand their history. Those who only have a vague awareness inevitably reiterate familiar clichés without knowing it.

David Tinker had a comprehensive knowledge. I remember talking to him about the merits of David Wilkie's draughtsmanship which we agreed was not good. How remarkable that an advocate of modernist painting would have pondered the drawing skills of an English painter from the early part of the 19th Century.

And I share that diverse interest. My work is informed by a deep affection for paintings by Titian as much as Braque and de Kooning. It has been both humbling and a privilege to exhibit alongside Canaletto in the National Gallery, Edward Hopper at the Kunsthal in Rotterdam, Poussin at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, Richard Estes at the Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid and Frank Auerbach at Marlborough.

It also demonstrates that there are individuals in the art establishment that are willing to support and defend painters who demonstrate an independence of mind. The continuation of painting is dependent on the active participation of individuals. For my part, from students to curators, writers, fellow painters, collectors and dealers, it is important to make them welcome in my studio.

As to the mainstream art establishment, I could highlight its shortcomings, but there seems little point. The English art critic David Lee has been publishing "The Jackdaw" for years, exposing all the ills of the art world. This only takes us to the point of recognising the need to move on.

Painting is difficult. It's a bit mysterious. The assumptions that we make about painting when we are young tend not to hold up the more we paint, the more we read and the more we look. Since the 1960s artists and art historians have been keen to apply literary theory to art, but I have come to understand that painting is not language. Neither is painting craft. At least regarding painting as either craft or language hasn't led to anything astonishing.

Useful for me is a recollection from my school days. My classics master taught us that to understand the Ancient Greeks we had to recognise that faith was entwined in their history. Their reality and our history of them must take into account the role of their gods. And so it is with painting. Artists throughout the centuries share a belief in an ideal. Painting is not about our world but resolves it into something remarkable. Quite how artists achieve that resolution remains an enigma, and inevitably they fail to achieve such an ideal which returns them to the studio time and time again. But it is a belief that this ideal exists and might be obtained that keeps painters striving forward.

So to discuss painting in terms of how well it describes our world, or illustrates the issues of the day is to misunderstand its orientation. For a realist painting to become a work of art it cannot just mimic our world. Yet for many years I have been described as a photorealist painter, based on the assumption that my work is about documenting my surroundings with the objective clarity of a photograph.

The painting "Terminus Place" undoubtedly reminds us of the location on which it was based, Victoria Underground Station, but the space that we see before us in the painting does not exist. It couldn't be photographed or painted from life as it is an invention that allows me to arrange

different views, people and textures. The reality is busy, disorientating and unpleasant; the painting is my attempt to resolve all this as a new visual experience. The style of painting is clear, ordered and credible.

It is not photorealist because it is not a copy of a photograph, though it may well have affiliations to photorealism in its clarity. Several years ago I discussed my work with some of the leading photorealist painters. I talked about wanting to paint pictures that were based on my movement through the world, seeing around corners and ordering all that I witnessed with the formal invention typical of artists like Poussin. They all agreed that this was not possible.

Photorealist painting accepts its creative compromise. Its premise is that to make paintings that are extremely realistic, the artist must be committed to imitating a photograph. In doing so, a degree of creative freedom is abandoned. Despite some notable exceptions from the past, painters do not have the skills to make a painting that is truly convincing without being tied to a very mechanical procedure.

There is much debate concerned with the merits or limitations of such painting, but it is a compromise that is accepted by its practitioners. Louis Meisel's new book on Photorealism gives us a chance to review the best examples made over the past decade. Titled "Photorealism in the Digital Age" it acknowledges how painters now use digital technology to help fabricate their images.

I have known Louis since the 1990s, and he invited me to be included in this book. We discussed the difference in my approach which for him was all the more reason to be included. A credible realism that is based on human experience, and structured on drawing has offered a few younger painters a new way forward, and I am pleased to continue to encourage painters like Nathan Walsh, one of my former students, who is also featured in Louis's book.

That encouragement is to trust in one's own creativity rather than relying on technology, learnt formulae and conventions. The appeal of painting is its plasticity, offering infinite possibilities. I can draw a line or put any colour anywhere on the canvas, but only if this freedom is embraced. And that is the hardest challenge that faces any painter. Painting must be mastered, but it only becomes art when all that has been learnt is replaced with new ideas as the artist steps into the unknown.

So the activity in the studio is always a struggle to establish difference. Success isn't marked by a body of professional paintings destined for the art market but the resolution of a new pictorial fact. It is important to stress that these explorations must be resolved, otherwise difference would just be novelty, which of course abounds in the contemporary art world.

Occasionally that creative pursuit necessitates a major gear change and for the past year my painting has moved in a new direction. "Terminus Place" marks an end to my former work. Many years ago I replaced conventional perspective for a multitude of different spaces, but I now find myself going much further, looking through objects, painting motifs from many different angles, and giving free reign to my imagination. It is an incredibly difficult journey because the paintings must still be credible though that credibility is not based on them looking like our world. In fact, what motivates me is to find original solutions to everything that I attempt to paint. If it is this way in our world, I want it to be different in the painted world. I call it a "Transrational Realism".

I paint as if I am a student, just starting out. My palette has a vast range of vivid colours. I pick up the largest brush that I think will do the job, mix colour, place it on the canvas and then wonder what my next mark and colour should be. Most of what I do gets scraped off or painted over. What is left at the end of each day will probably be covered over in the following weeks, some will stay. Up close,

the painted surface is a web of abstract shapes and textured marks in an attempt to find a new way to resolve life.

Painting has a very distinctive framework, as does music and literature, and there is so much to learn about this framework. But, whereas much can be said about what it means to paint, the paintings themselves need no explanation. They are not puzzles to be solved or completed by the viewer. They must be complete in their own terms and the viewer's role is simply to bear witness to their creative uniqueness. So it is unnecessary for me to explain a painting like "Looking Glass". It might be more appropriate to point out a little about the experience *from which* it was made.

I have painted this location in six large paintings. It is a café in South Kensington in London. It has become an important place for me to explore pictorial ideas. The people in this painting have also been painted before. They include members of my family, my dealer Geoffrey Parton and my friend, the art theorist Michael Paraskos. The café is in actuality, tiny, and this painting began with me being inside, looking all around me and through the window, and then standing on the pavement looking in. This is an impossible problem to be resolved through drawing and painting but it is just a beginning and anything can happen.

With this painting underway, a new large canvas is begun which can spin off in a different and unknown direction. "Les Souvenirs du Café Anglais" has no known destination. Its title, like all my titles is indicative of my interests. I like that the French word for memories, "souvenirs" is the same as the English word for the concrete artefacts that we accrue to mark our memories. That is what I try to do as a painter.

It has been an exciting year. I haven't exhibited any new work, or attended any events in the art world. Excitement is entirely to do with what happens in the studio, and sharing that with a few visitors who make the journey to our remote part of England. There is a palpable sense of something new happening .

In conventional terms I am a mid-career artist. I am 48. But it is only at this point that I dare to claim the term avant-garde. Looking back over a long apprenticeship which at times was marked by a backsliding into academicism and a dependence on the mechanical languages of photography, it is now clear that an art which is authentic to the individual belongs to the experienced, not the fads of the young. The enduring importance of painting is not because of its history, but because it enables the artist to build his own world, independent of all that has come before. Look closely, those are my marks, shapes, lines, colours and spaces that have built a new world.

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