

A Love of Many Things – *Graham Crowley in conversation with artist Monica Petzal*

Monica: Graham, can you give me some background to the exhibition?

Graham: This is not a retrospective, so much as a collection of obsessions and passions. I am asking you, as the viewer, to imagine that you are looking at a group show by five or six painters who have all responded differently to their experience of the last 40 years. The exhibition title, 'A Love of Many Things', reflects my interest and engagement in diverse aspects of the world around me. I am curious and dissenting. As a painter, I respond differently to changing times. This way of working is an intellectual and emotional acknowledgement of the difference between what I need to do, and what I should do.

I went to St Martin's School of Art in 1968 – a time of profound social upheaval. We were the generation that questioned everything. There was a consensus that painting was dead and painting faced institutional condemnation – fortunately, at the Royal College of Art in 1972, I met students who also wanted to paint but finding a way to go about this was complicated and we had to steer our own path. The dominant art of the day was conceptual, American (or both) and referred back to modernism.

It was around this time that I first heard the term postmodern. Postmodernism was a movement that was both sceptical and ironic, and refused to recognise the dominance of any single style. It challenged the definition of what art is, ignoring the distinctions between high, mass and popular. This led me to question whether I could ever be original.

During those years I travelled extensively, looking at past and present art. I began to carve out a space in the postmodern landscape in which I felt I could operate legitimately as a painter. My strategy was to borrow from previous paintings. I 'appropriated' the work of the French artist Fernand Legér, a painter who had embraced the contemporary and modern world. For the very first time I felt some ownership of my work – ironic really, as it was willfully appropriated.

MP: Graham, do you identify specifically as a painter?

GC: Yes. I have always seen myself as a painter. I find the term artist problematic, it's woolly and self-congratulatory. I identify as a painter because I have a passion for the activity, not because I reject modernity or technology. When I left the Royal College in 1975 the word 'appropriation' was not in the lexicon.

I came to understand that making paintings was not about having a fixed identity, it was a matter of being in a constant conversation with the world, trying to make sense and to find meaning. So, because meaning is never constant, objects cannot be fixed – this led me to start to paint what I regard as more ambitious pictures.

MP: Graham, did you appropriate anything practical on your route to being a painter?

GC: My grandparents were Victorians and I believe that I got my work ethic from them. Because I rejected the self-indulgent image of 'the artist', I adopted the work ethos of an engineer or builder, someone with a 'proper' job. I work long hours, meticulously and in silence. I approached my painting in an historical manner by adopting the historical technique of Grisaille, an outmoded academic form of monochromatic tonal painting. I also taught myself how to glaze. Glazing had been in use for centuries but was made obsolete in the mid-nineteenth century due to the ascendancy of the brushstroke. The brushstroke was a romantic idea reflecting certainty, the grand sweeping gesture that said it all. I'm interested in the journey so I make the painterly equivalent of building lighthouses out of matchsticks. Going with my slight OCD tendencies, some of these flower and history paintings, the impastos, are painted with minute brush strokes, using Underpainting White specifically designed for the job. These paintings can take up to six months to make as they need to take a month or two to dry after which they are glazed. The glazing allows the light to be reflected from the surface, making the paintings appear luminous.

MP: Graham, would genres be a helpful way to categorise your paintings?

GC: Yes. I'm not happy with the idea of figurative and abstract. I think most painting is defined by genre and this has clarity because it is culturally constructed and not attributed by the artist. My earliest paintings could certainly be regarded as non-objective or non-referential. I then migrated to something approaching synthetic figuration. After the dystopian urban landscapes and some not so urban landscapes, I wondered which genre is the most derided. The one genre of painting that the 'style council' had least time for was flower painting. Flower paintings are often ridiculed because they are regarded as the haven of the amateur. They are usually domestic in scale, highly coloured and celebratory and I wanted to appropriate the genre and turn it on its head. Mine are large, monochromatic, painted using impasto and glazed with Payne's Gray.

MP: Was appropriating from history an obvious extension to your life as a collector?

GC: I think I've always had the collecting gene. One of my stronger suits is my nerdiness and OCD streak. Aged six, at the time of the Suez crisis, I collected obsolete petrol coupons that were given to me by my granddad, a travelling salesman and I was captivated by their exquisite engraving. I also 'collected' car number plates. There was a register in the back of the AA Book of the Road listing the last two letters of the number plate, indicating where the vehicle was first registered. I can still remember many of those. Granddad, a smoker, used matches so, following the theme, I built cars out of matchboxes.

Later, I became fascinated by comics and spent the little pocket money that I had on the Beano and the Dandy. I would pour over the Ben-Day screened images – the dots, the halftones and the minutiae – I was also captivated by the fact that they were invariably out of register. We didn't have books at home and I did not visit an art gallery until I was 15. This was my visual world.

I also collected stamps. About ten years ago, I started collecting again, concentrating on what is termed social philately. I also collect 'Cinderella' stamps which exist somewhere between postage stamps and printed ephemera. It is this and my passion and understanding of motorcycles that informed my designs for the 2018 stamps for the Isle of Man.

My interest in motorcycles came from growing up in a household of engineers. My father built TV sets and had worked on radar in the Second World War. The first job I had when I left the Royal College of Art was as a fitter building racing motorcycles. I have since built many other motorcycles and regularly ride a 1949 Vincent HRD. I have always been fascinated by invention and innovation – I think it's where modernism and I intersect.

And of course, there is music. Music has always been an important part of my life, whether it has been punk, experimental, power electronics, ambient or industrial music. I have been a fan of Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band for fifty years. I have one of the most comprehensive collections of their work, printed as well as recorded music, bootlegs and acetates. I have met Don Van Vliet (aka Captain Beefheart) but that's another story.

MP: Graham, you are into everything but you're not much of a 'joiner' and yet you did join the 'club' as Professor of Painting at your old college the Royal College of Art.

GC: No, I'm not a joiner in that sense, you might describe me as a very gregarious and talkative loner. However, I have many familiars and friends and as those who know me would tell you, I talk prodigiously about practice, contemporary culture and everything else. I have a voracious appetite for information and I can store and retain it in a scary way. I believe that teaching is critical to the development of culture and I was fortunate to have some remarkable tutors at the RCA, including Peter de Francia, John Golding and Richard Wollheim. I see teaching, much like painting, as a discourse. Teaching in art schools today is not about the conversation, it's about certification.

MP: Has place been an important influence?

GC: I was born in Romford in the Thames Estuary and now live in Suffolk. I think if I talk about place I've got to mention family and identity. My working class families were originally Irish Catholic and London East End Polish. It was not until I went to art school in London that I met people from other places and backgrounds and began to identify myself as essentially urban. Throughout my career I have lived in Ireland and the Forest of Dean, as well as having held many UK artist's residencies. Sometimes the move was about furthering my career and earning a living, at other times it was about fostering my practice.

In Ireland I started to make (literally and metaphorically) more reflective paintings. They are ostensibly landscape paintings but I think they are more concerned with states of mind, the idea of fiction and depiction. There is still an academic aspect to the work but it's been subsumed into something more humane. I learn quickly about places, I can identify things and some of the most important paintings I've ever made have been painted in and about the Irish experience.

At the age of 64 I knew we had to leave London. I have had an ongoing love-hate relationship with London, as I do with all high culture. I'm happier at an auto-jumble rather than spending a Sunday afternoon at the Tate Modern, it's that sort of problem. I already had a psychological map – this psychogeography idea – and I felt I knew Suffolk. Eventually, this lovely place was available and my current studio and workshop are larger than in our previous house in London. It was a no-brainer – I was out there this morning feeding the birds and doing all the things that somebody who leads the good life does, and thinking, "Yeah, I'm alive".

MP: What else would you like to say?

GC: I have a respect for invention and I think that's what attracts me to the margins in all things. I want my music, my reading and my paintings to be demanding, I want it to be engaging, I want to feel it's actually happening. I now recognise that to be perplexed is probably one of life's most profound experiences. The idea of not knowing what you think about something is enabling. It forces you to question your assumptions and reject lazy answers. I would like viewers of my paintings to be engaged and perplexed.

1838 words