

# Nathan Eastwood

## Interviews Nicholas Middleton

NE: How long have you been making art and specifically painting?

NM: I imagine that the self-consciousness of making 'art' would have made itself felt around the time I was a teenager – children pretty much always paint and draw – but I did have the advantage of having a father who was and is an artist, and as a result being aware that that was something one could do. Painting was always there, but possibly not given any more priority over drawing, etching, wood engraving and linocuts.

NE: When did you consider a career within the arts, or did you want to do something completely different?

NM: Apart from visual art, there was a point in time that I wanted to be a writer, partly I think due to the appeal of the idea that one might be able to live lightly on the world, being able to work anywhere, having little need for equipment to carry on such a profession. Being a visual artist seemed marginally easier, at least in terms of getting work out there into the world, and I took the route of least resistance, going to art college after finishing school. This barely felt like a conscious decision, and I picked up painting again after art school (I had specialised in printmaking for my degree). I started exhibiting and selling paintings, mostly through open calls and commissions, and the end of the 1990s and early 2000s seemed to be an economically sympathetic environment to pursue a creative life. It wasn't until much later that I even begin to think of it as a 'career'.

NE: For many years now you have been making black and white paintings, why did you decide to work with a minimal palette and when did this begin?

NM: Working in black and white goes back to taking photographs, for which I still mostly use photographic film, and develop myself, and mostly using black and white film, a largely instinctive choice. Often – although not always – the photographs are taken without an intention that the subject is going to become a painting: I frequently look through my archive for images when I have an idea for a painting for photographs which fit. Making paintings in black and white is a consequence of this, although I enjoy working with such limitations – it frees you up to concentrate on other aspects once you've established a set of ground rules for making work. Sometimes of course a subject demands colour, but it's possible I'm generally not drawn to those subjects where that might be the case. Working in black and white really began four or five years after I'd finished my degree: I had been making Pop-Art-inspired work for a time (although I think it was largely influenced by contemporary graphic design), which involved using colour and a collage-like aesthetic, but I then began the process

of stripping some of these elements out from what I was doing, partly just through the confidence to make things simpler.

NE: So, your artistic methodology/practice - what procedures do you take from start to finish?

NM: I think technically my work is very simple. In recent years I've tended to work on prepared paper, using a grid to work from my source material, and if I can, and the painting's going well, I like to work alla prima as much as possible, working wet-in-wet with oils and a little medium. I find that's harder to do when I am using colour on the occasions that I do, and then find the necessity for working with layers to help modify tones and colours. I don't think there's anything complicated going on with my paintings technically, but then I'm probably too close to make those kinds of statements.

NE: Your paintings are in a realist aesthetic. Do you think of yourself as a photorealist or social realist? How would you describe your kind of realist paintings?

NM: I sometimes think it's the province of one's viewers to decide how to categorise the work I make, if they feel the need to identify it with a certain trend or movement. However, I don't really feel that I have an affinity with what I might term canonical photorealism, despite the appearance of my paintings at a surface reading. I think photorealism tends to highlight artefacts of the photographic process: high contrast, saturated local colour, wide angle distortions, contrasts of focus and out of focus areas, and with that there is then often a concentration on limited range of subject matter about the surfaces of modernity. Perhaps I do find there to be something sympathetic about the strand of realism that one can draw from mid-nineteenth-century France, both in literature and in painting, which ultimately has its roots in Romanticism, but ultimately it's about trying to make sense of the experience of being in the world in a small and limited way, which I think, for me, is all that art is really about.

NE: Is your painting practice influenced by photography as a visual language?

NM: One can see photography as a technological expression of a particular way of seeing the world that goes back to Romanticism – the why as to photography's invention when it happened – and a new type of individual sensibility and its response to certain types of visual phenomena – I'm thinking of Thomas Jones' oil sketches in Naples – and that way of seeing the world predates photography itself. As a 'visual language', the fact that the camera's lens reproduces Renaissance perspective – beautifully turning a complex three-dimensional reality into a two-dimensional image on a plane surface – of course is attractive as a means by which to make paintings. I think it's also a visual language which has become so embedded in our everyday world as to feel 'natural' – it's very easy to make the false equivalent of 'photographic' with 'realistic' – that it's a phenomena that has a lot of potential to play with as an artist.

NE: Who are your biggest influences – this can be film directors, novelists, visual artists, now and historically?

NM: It's difficult to think of a neat coherent list, and influence obviously can contain a certain unconscious element too. What I could name changes as the work changes, as one is exposed to new things. When I was younger, there was a time when Albrecht Dürer would have been the first artist that came to mind, then probably Caravaggio, Caspar David Friedrich, then Robert Rauschenberg and James Rosenquist. Clearly, having made work responding to Vermeer and the films of Wim Wenders, I'd have to list these as influences, but then also Edgar Reitz's *Die Zweite Heimat*, being something, I saw at a formative age had an effect on how I saw the world. Later, this would be Patrick Keiller, then, going into doing my PhD, reading Laura Mulvey and Siegfried Kracauer, and, particularly with *Ulysse*, Agnes Varda. Now, I think more of practitioners whose work I see as a model, for inspiration more than influence perhaps, the work of artists like Sharon Lockhart, or Mohammed Sami, whose recent exhibition at the Camden Arts Centre was one of the best I've seen recently.

NE: If you were the viewer and not the artist, how would you sum up the paintings that Nicholas Middleton makes?

NM: That's an impossible question to answer, but there was a time that I thought that I was making paintings that I'd like to see out there in the world. Now I'm not so sure.

NE: Why painting in our age of digital media and with much talk about A.I. image making?

NM: Making physical artefacts – paintings – which are not made to be seen on a screen, and to be experienced in the same space as the viewer, with all the specific nuances of how they are made, by hand and over time – this is something not quite yet adequately replaced by technology, although I'm sure this will come. I would be concerned if I was a professional illustrator whose work primarily existed in the digital or print realm, seeing the developments over the last year or two. Of course, I wouldn't be painting if it wasn't for the already-existing history of the medium's past six hundred years: if one could imagine that 'painting' was somehow just invented, now, in the contemporary moment, I don't think it would appeal to me as an arena to work in. What seems to me to be often missing from the discussion around machine learning is what we want from our encounters with art, as if we are all passive consumers, and not active participants in the creation of meaning – and how that changes if what we are responding to is an algorithmic accretion scraped from vast data sets which sample already-existing creative iterations of one form or another. In some respects, perhaps it doesn't matter very much, and if artist as a form of remunerative work becomes obsolete I would assume society would already be on its way to implementing a universal basic income.

NE: One cannot escape the news, and with the current crisis with the cost of living, how do you manage financially as an artist and as a PhD student?

NM: Most visual artists don't make very much money from their art and my main approach has been simply to keep my overheads as low as possible. There are expectations of artists doing a lot of work for free, which wouldn't happen in other professions, and that's something which I think is only just beginning to be talked about. I think there should be much more transparency in general about the financial side of being an artist. One of the big sacrifices I have made in order to keep making work has been not having a studio, although that has been the case apart from a couple years in the early to mid-2000s and not just a response to the current situation. I sometimes think it makes me look unprofessional – or there's the perception of that – but to be able to afford a proper studio I'd probably have to take on twice as much paid work as I currently do (I teach part-time), and then there'd be little time to go to the studio and make work as a result. In terms of my PhD study, this has been self-funded from whatever I can scrape together, part student loan, part getting into debt, borrowing from a hopefully more financially secure imagined future, and the artist support pledge, which covered my fees for a couple of years.

NE: You have an established art practice with some John Moores painting prizes under your belt, how has undergoing a PhD assisted or benefitted your artistic practice?

NM: Initially, I think the PhD was something of a side-step, and with it (and a couple of projects leading up to it), I enjoyed the process of trying to get to grips with writing, with intent, oriented to certain effects and as a means of expression; then, there have been a number of things I've done where the PhD has given me the 'permission to fail' – going back to art college, really – in which there didn't need to be successful outcomes, which was very freeing once I'd embraced it, and I was able to explore making very different kinds of work.

NE: What has the theory on your PhD research done for your studio development, has it made a big impact on your painting practice and image development?

NM: For the first two or three years I didn't really do any painting as part of the practice-based PhD and I found it quite enjoyable to take a step back and think more seriously about photography and film as mediums in their own rights – indeed, to be able to think about the nature of what an artistic medium is itself. There was a point that I thought I might be giving up on painting as a means of expression, partly as a result of not valuing something that comes relatively easily, but painting came back in as it seemed to be the most productive way to work through some of the problems I was encountering – to work through ideas about the making of images in a more involved and complicated fashion.

NE: Now nearing the end of your PHD Is there any notable changes aesthetically since you commenced your course?

NM: One of the things that I've done is allow ideas to find their 'right' form, which hasn't necessarily been painting, a case of actually taking my own advice that I've given to students for many years. It

might be too early to really be prescriptive about what has genuinely changed as a result: I think, or hope, that it has sharpened some of my approaches to making work.

NE: Would you recommend a PhD to any artist thinking about making an application?

NM: Not necessarily: I applied on something like a whim, to see how far through the application process I could get, and was surprised to be offered a place on the strength of what in retrospect was a naïve and ill-thought-through proposal. I also imagined, naïvely too, that somehow the funding of it would work out, and I'm not sure that I'd recommend starting a PhD if you don't know how you are going to fund it. However, it has provided the space to be able to think seriously about practice – to question some of its fundamental underpinnings – and has provided the rich experience of getting to know, understand, and talk about the practices that make up a peer group of deeply interesting artists and researchers, which has been such a valuable part of the whole experience.

NE: How do you balance your personal life and your art practice? Do you meditate or have a passive interest in something like gaming to allow you to have some down time?

NM: I would possibly have to choose gardening, specifically working on my allotment as an activity which provides a certain therapeutic quality, in that you have to approach it in a practical and logical manner – and baking too – both activities of which have similarities to making paintings.

**Interview completed on 5 July 2023**