

An Interview Between Alex Hanna and Sean Williams

‘Let’s start at the beginning. Can you remember the moment you wanted to be an artist? How did your interest start?’

Alex - I don’t think I’ve ever honestly thought of myself as an artist, though the first time I became aware of the possibility was when I bought a set of cheap Chinese oil paints and tried to paint with them. My father made me an easel and I think I used a board to paint onto. My father then also provided me with a beret and an old shirt, like a smock. The idea was to make me look like the archetypal artist (Claude Monet perhaps). For a moment I stood there in front of the easel, and I remember thinking what it must be like to be an artist. It felt strange.

Much of my early interest in art and painting was to some extent encouraged by my mother whose enthusiasm for a wide range of types of art rubbed off on me. She used to take us to the nearest art gallery in the area, the Lady Lever Galley in Port Sunlight. I was about eight at the time. This collection of Regency, Victorian and Edwardian paintings, and some Greco-Roman Sculptures along with a few Napoleonic interiors and furniture really did fire my interest and curiosity. I found these works from the past stimulating. I wanted to know how they were made and how the paint was used to create such effects. Also, there were books on art and painting lying in the living room. The images seemed shocking, nudes and paintings of conflict, abstract images and journeys into the psych. What did it all mean?

Sean - I remember going to galleries in Manchester with my Dad when I was young. He wasn’t artistic at all but loved Turner and I now really appreciate him introducing me to art. I also remember seeing some more contemporary painting and being intrigued by both it and the fact that my Dad was quite dismissive of it. And then he bought a landscape painting by Gwyneth ap Tomos. It was of a place called Rhyd Ddu, a village in North Wales close to where he had grown up. I consider myself very lucky to have been able to study it on and off over the years, looking at how she had applied the oil paint and how she had combined pure colour with more somber versions to create such a dynamic surface. It looks photographic from a distance but certainly not up close. The way she suggested the particular textures of the heather and gorse, and the dry-stone walls is so skillful. My mum still has the painting and, looking at it now with more knowledge than when I first saw it, it is a sort of pop-Impressionism and still looks great. We visited her gallery in North Wales and met her there. I think it was at that point that I realised being an artist could be a real job, and might be an option if I failed to make the grade as a footballer. It was much later, when I found myself at Art College, not Stoke City Football Club, that I began to understand what being an artist might entail and that it would be possible to make a living at it. Yet it is only in the last

couple of years that I have learnt how adaptable an artist needs to be in order to survive financially, particularly if they make work that is not likely to sell in great numbers.

‘It seems there are key points along the way that help artists get to this point. Can you say more about the influences from various stages of your development.’

Alex - As a teenager too many paintings at the local art gallery in Port Sunlight (Lady Lever Gallery) fired my imagination. Landscapes by Richard Wilson, Constable and Turner, portraits by Sargent and Millais etc. Whilst studying A level art in the sixth form I was given additional art history lessons once a week. This had a considerable impact and helped me see the possible cultural links and connections between artworks and historical and technological developments. I visited the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool. They had a painting by Lucien Freud of a man holding a cigarette. I was captivated by the type of vision and composition behind it, particularly the sense of real surfaces and space.

Foundation Art and Design at Wirral Metropolitan Collage was a great experience. I found the whole thing very engaging, and the staff provided a great deal of support and encouragement. I remember one teacher showing a group of us Henry Moore’s sheep sketchbook. He talked about the drawings with such enthusiasm that it compelled me to make regular drawings of animals, which I found helped me develop greater drawing and visual awareness skills. I really did find life drawing and animal drawing a real test of my ability to grasp the essential elements when capturing an image. It also stimulated an interest in Henry Moore and his interpretation of sculptural form.

During this time, I visited London and saw works in the National, Tate (Britain) and Courtauld. These were all places that I have relied upon since and at the time I saw the range of possibilities available. In the Tate a large life size nude by Uglow made me think about how one could paint the figure and three dimensions translated onto a flat two-dimensional surface. I can remember the way the image was comprised of a series of surface configurations which attempted to interpret depth. Understanding form and how it can be translated in paint. Things like this still fascinate today, particularly the use of scale and paint materiality. Seeing the works by other students and how they managed and dealt with visual material helped too. Galleries and paintings from the past have always been important in giving me ideas and the stimulus to develop works of my own.

Sean - On my Foundation Course I saw a show of Neo-Expressionism in London that, in retrospect was formative. I found it very liberating. Materials, subject matter, substrate, skill levels were all up for grabs. I didn’t understand it but it looked so exciting. But at college I could see that a certain level of craft was important to me. It is part of the meaning I want to convey and I enjoy the challenge of realism. It seems concomitant with the

amount of investment I put into the motif. I would like to think these are scenes of some psychological significance and I feel I owe them a duty of care in their rendering. Seurat is a huge influence, which is probably no great surprise if you have seen my recent paintings. His work is problematic in its interpretation and I strive to create similar uncertainty on some level. And I use an adapted pointillist technique now. I find it an effective means of achieving my aims of applying paint in a cool, controlled way that does not dominate the potential meaning in the motif. It also allows me to build a picture that can look photographic from a reasonable viewing distance but closer inspection reveals a surface constructed of thousands of tiny dots, some of actual colour, some of pure colour, and others of grey/brown that serve to quieten the stronger colours when viewed from a distance. I think some of the Dutch landscape painters – Hobbema, van Ruisdael and Cuyp – have affected me too. I love that timeless subject matter. I do a lot of birdwatching to relax, and there's nothing quite like standing in a field in the middle of nowhere. It is an escape, undoubtedly. That said, for my paintings I prefer the terrain on the edges of towns so that there is a suggestion of both urban and rural life, neither quite one nor the other.

'In your current work what are the tenets that drive and inform your work? Are there key phrases that you hold on to?'

Alex - I have generally a palette that I use, and this is something I have used since being a student. Though I do have slight changes to this line-up of colour, I base most of my colour mixes around Yellow Ochre, Cad Red, (warm), Ivory Black and Ultramarine (cool), plus Titanium/Flake white. Most of the mixes go through the white first. White, particularly Flake operates as a base, through which colours can be built. It seems to turn colour into colour and paint-form, making the colour solid. The white also helps one see the colour and from this make decisions about its value and tone. It is surprising that most of the colours I require can be obtained from this selection. There are cases when I may require a colder red than cadmium, for this I am willing to incorporate Alizarin, which can produce a very strong, cold pink. However, its use needs to be kept in check. It can have addictive properties, rather like Viridian, a similar type of colour. Viridian and Alizarin are great for transparent layers and glazes, but I tend to control their use within my work when using solid colour.

I also tend to use my surroundings (living space) as a subject. This refers to my studio and home. These have given me most of the ideas that have informed much of my work and have also been highly practical. Restrictions can help one to place greater importance upon creative choices and to make it easier to arrive at solutions. It's a bit like being in a sweet shop and having too much choice, it's much easier if you know what you are working with and then to look for ways to modify these parameters.

Finally, I try to avoid adding things into a composition and feel better when I am removing elements or components. I remember a tutor saying, "It seems that perfection is attained not

when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing more to remove.” - Antoine de Saint Exupéry, or it may have simply been “remove but add nothing”.

Sean - I take a lot of photos that I think might fit my criteria for a painting. A major problem is that those criteria are quite nebulous. It’s a feeling that I just have to run with in the hope that I will work out what it was that resonated initially. Like a train timetable, this is subject to change at a moment’s notice for no apparent reason.

It is all an act of faith, faith in the idea that theory follows work and, over the course of its making, something interesting may emerge. We hear sports people talk about ‘trusting in the process’, disregarding the ultimate outcome. If they follow their method appropriately the result will look after itself. It is my job, therefore, to be aware throughout the long-time of the painting of what it might mean. Do the dots bring to mind Seurat or Pissarro and their intentions and persuasions? Will this goat be interpreted as a symbol of lust and witchcraft? I need to be in the moment, concentrating not only on making the brush marks as neat as possible, but also what will make the painting more impactful. Can it be emptier, less cluttered, with more space for the viewer to imagine themselves entering the scene and moving around within it.

Latterly, I am trying very hard to be bound by the source photograph, thinking of it more as a stepping-off point, giving myself permission to alter colours as I see fit, and allowing the painting itself to suggest how it might proceed – composition, colour, tone and all that. I want the surface to be an intense amalgam of dots. This is for two reasons. If it is done well, with a host of colours in a cluster, the painting can appear to shimmer, changing with the light. Secondly, I believe this cool intensity folds itself into the overall meaning of the work, making it a scene of some significance despite its apparent mundanity.

Another tenet I hold on to is to avoid making the same painting twice. It is a trap, particularly if a previous painting has proved successful, but I try to take on increasingly complex images, pictures that require patience and thought to construct properly, and to read. I want to keep learning and experimenting. I know it doesn’t look like it, but the intention is there. I tell myself to be tougher with the work, to turn up the colour dial so that it starts to look hyperreal, to dial down the tone to make it darker, richer and weirder. The scene being depicted might not be unusual but I can make it beguiling and slightly unsettling.

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