

Lucy Cox

Interviews Keith Murdoch

LC: Has your practice changed since I visited your studio a few years ago? 2019 I think it was!

KM: I'm not sure that my practice has changed particularly but my productivity has perhaps increased, in the sense that fewer artworks need to be recycled. I feel better able to focus on what I need from a painting than I did four years ago. One reason for this is that I now utilise my outdoor studies much more than I did. Previously, making these studies was a way to instil the experience of being in the landscape; that sense of place, and I would draw from that memory alone, without reference the actual studies made there. But now I am utilising these studies—several hundred of them, to be exact—as a visual resource when developing new studio work. It might seem an obvious thing to do, but for some reason I wasn't ready to work in this way until recently.

LC: What are you working on now?

KM: I see my practice as continually evolving and developing. In a sense I'm always working on the same thing, but admittedly I do like to explore new avenues of process. I've returned to working small after about a year of working on a larger scale, which ended in a re-evaluation of my goals—vis-à-vis, I destroyed everything. One thing that's important to me is to create a painting as something to be enjoyed visually as much as an object with meaning. So, I'm currently working and reworking around forty or so small works with a conscious effort to maintain a methodology of process: working, scraping back, working some more, and trying to energise the surface, but doing so with meaningful marks at this stage as opposed to mere decoration.

These works, like all of my work, is rooted in reality, specifically my association with the North East coastline, in the area known locally as North Blyth at Cambois. It's from this small strip of coastline that I have made most of the bank of sketches that I'm working from. These sketches constitute moments—fleeting snatches of memory, I suppose. As I alluded to earlier, these are more than just aides-memoirs, they are also experiences in their own right that become a different kind of memory going beyond a mere experience of place.

LC: It seems to me you are completely immersed! Even your processes “reworking, scraping back, mark-making and energising” resemble the constantly changing coastline. I'm thinking about natural marks on stones and reworked and rounded pebbles. Nature's drawings...

snapshots of time. Life is fleeting! I shouldn't get too philosophical but you know what I mean. Your work expresses that beautifully in a subtle way. Why did you destroy everything?

KM: For a number of reasons really. I realised that I was going in the wrong direction. I was making work for an imagined audience and as such the works lacked integrity. I felt they were dishonest in some way. I do accept that there often comes a point in a painting where the vision ends and the picture making takes over—that's one of the lovely things about painting in that you can sometimes just enjoy the medium and have a bit of fun with colour and texture. But there needs, for me at least, to be some sort of scaffold of integrity that holds that vision and allows it to still communicate through the playfulness. None of those paintings had that. They were pretty in parts but ultimately confused and, well, I just didn't like them. They were also taking up premium canvas real-estate! To allow 7 or 8 4ft canvases to rot in storage is simply not practical to be honest.

LC: You've lived in Cambois for some years now. Has working smaller changed your perspective of the landscape?

KM: I'm not sure it's changed my perspective, but it has helped in getting closer to being able to represent my perspective. Working small with normal sized brushes means that a mark or flick of the brush in response to an idea or sensation has a big impact on that small space and ultimately makes a statement. It's raw emotion at that scale.

LC: What are you struggling with at the moment?

KM: Painting! It's a constant struggle. I often wonder if I find it too difficult but if you read the memoirs of artists throughout history, many talk of the struggle—Matisse in particular was quite vocal about this—so I consider myself in very good company. But it's never relaxing. I'm always a bit on edge while I'm painting. I don't know if this could be classed as a struggle, but one of my preoccupations is how to combine several memories of a very similar activity or experience into a whole and how to fill in the gaps of memory by re-experiencing a situation by effectively adding-to or completing an existing memory. This line of enquiry is crossing over into philosophy.

LC: I'm sure many artists will empathise with you, especially those with jobs that have little or no creativity. It's a struggle not only find time but also to compartmentalise and get into the creative zone. How do you compartmentalise?

KM: Being in my studio is how I compartmentalise. My day job never enters that space. I manage to spend some time there most days. Even if it's just to look at the work I've been making or relax with a bit of music playing and having a read of something, it's all quality

creative time. I no longer pressure myself to make something, which is perhaps a side-effect of having a day job?

LC: Definitely. Having a separate creative space is invaluable. What have you been reading and listening to lately? Do you have any recommendations?

KM: I listen to a lot of Jazz in the studio: Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, etcetera. When it's not Jazz, I'll gravitate to Bob Dylan, Roy Harper or Smog or something. Lately I've been listening to Alabama 3 quite a bit.

I tend to work in short bursts, and very rarely lose myself in my work. I'm too much of a thinker—or an over-thinker—so it's useful to have distractions like music to keep me in the studio. Listening to something while reading will often result in some sort of revelation and then another 10-minute flurry of painting activity.

As for reading material... I'm a painter, so it's mostly picture books! If I find an artist whom I like I'll try and find a book or catalogue to have something I can hold in my hand. I still much prefer an illustration in a book to viewing paintings on the internet. I have a considerable library of art books accumulated over 30 years. The latest library additions have been a monograph on Margaret Merrill and a series of interviews with John Baldissari. I also dip in and out of reading philosophy, particularly philosophies of making and experience but I find this kind of reading hard to digest at times, so it can be slow and sometimes painful going! I persevere through as I think it helps me to understand better what I'm experiencing when I visit the coast.

LC: Could you expand on your 'several memories' idea?

KM: I'd love to—if I could explain it to myself, I'd gladly explain it to you! It's a thought in progress if you like. But I was thinking about provisional experience, the baggage of previous experience and the expectation of possible experience. I am aware that my experience of the landscape might be tempered because it's become a thing, an activity that's part of my creative process. In the same way, my memory of experience, which is essentially what I'm working from in the studio, can and must be coloured in some way. It's far from pure because of all these experiential factors. Memory fades, too. It's fragile. So, the idea that memories can be added to by re-experience and cemented somehow to be recalled more accurately and for longer. Embracing older strong memories and fusing them with more recent ones for clearer recall.

The things I experience are so transitory and fleeting: a wave break, a rock pool ripple, a cloud... these things are but moments. Their memory begins to fade almost immediately. In the studio I'm trying to make contemplative paintings—a slow process—of a fleeting

moment from a fading memory. It's a conundrum that's eased me into researching some kind of fusion between phenomenology and adaptive memory.

LC: Maybe you're trying to appreciate the beauty and tragedy of nature and as an artist ask "why"? It's refreshing to see painters inspired by and immersing themselves in the actual landscape rather than using it politically—reclaiming it, owning it, whatever it may be.

KM: Yes, you could be right. I suppose I try to paint how a place makes me feel but if I'm going to do that then I must actually feel something. I think it's the uncontrollable ferocity of nature that interests me. You can really sense the power of nature when you stand at high tide at the edge of the North Sea. Ironically perhaps, it's the aftermath of this ferocity; low tide, rock pools, detritus, that has interested me of late and that's what I've been painting. There's a strange tension at low tide; an eerie calm before the next bout of ferocity.

LC: What are your thoughts on the future of painting?

KM: Well, I sincerely hope there is one. I don't give it much thought to be honest. I believe as long as enough people appreciate the honesty and integrity of the handmade mark then painting will have a future.

LC: Me too. I wonder if painters stand a chance against the sudden flurry of artificial intelligence. Practitioners across all disciplines have expressed concerns but you're quite right about the handmade mark. It has emotion and depth. Art arises out of creative struggle and the ability to make connections between things, which AI is unable to achieve. Perhaps that's our strength (as humans and as artists).

KM: AI as it stands at the moment is nothing more than machine learning, so there's nothing for me to fear from it... or is there? If I were an illustrator, I might start looking over my shoulder. I suppose if you combine machine learning with its ability to gather knowledge and extrapolate that into pseudo-meaningful content, combined with some sort of advanced 3D printing system that can mimic a paint brush, then there's no reason why you couldn't manufacture something interesting. Ok... perhaps now I am getting worried! Having said that, my work is largely about personal experience, so no machine, and not even another human could view the world from my perspective, let alone make meaningful work. I'm not completely convinced that I can either, but that's the journey.

LC: I hope you continue that journey! Thanks very much for your time, Keith. It's been great chatting with you.

Interview completed on 1 August 2023