

Robert Priseman Interviews Susie Hamilton

RP: I'd like to begin by asking you to talk about the core theme which unites your work. You seem to be interested in an underlying concept that we experience the universe in a fundamentally existentialist way. Is that true?

SH: Yes I think that is true in the sense that I often paint wandering outsiders, figures on some sort of quest, looking for meaning in the bleak world around them. This can be the bleakness of wintry nature or the impersonal spaces of modern urban life. Like Heidegger's humans, they are "thrown" into the world and have to forge their own autonomous existence. And the existentialist desire to be autonomous and authentic, crucial to Sartre and Camus as well as to Heidegger, reminds me that my figures have a look of self-contained independence. I think that this is partly because I draw them from life--on the street--and I have to "spy" on them while they are unaware of my presence. Consequently they are not looking at a spectator nor colluding with an audience but are absorbed in their own purposes. Also, because I have to draw them very quickly I condense and abbreviate their bodies. This may give them an appearance of misshapen and even grotesque singularity.

The committed atheism of much existentialist thought, however, is not for me. The nameless oddness of things that the character, Roquentin experiences in *Nausea* appeals to me very much. For him names are suddenly removed from objects, the word will not stick to the thing and the world becomes alien and fearful. But, for me, this dimension of fear and mystery is not unreligious. My wandering figures are surrounded by a question, by mystery and by threat but this owes as much to the Biblical desert or to the opening of *Pilgrims Progress* ("As I walked through the wilderness of this world") as to the nihilistic narratives in Sartre and Camus.

RP: Whilst many of your paintings focus on the individual figure, you also have series which examine large groups, such as your 'Hens' and 'Beach' paintings. Is the idea that we are social beings important to you and if so how?

SH: The idea that we are social beings is important to me but it is also a source of conflict. Going back to your reference to existentialism, society can be a place of the inauthentic, of role-playing. I'm thinking of Heidegger's "Gerede" (or gossip), Sartre's "L'enfer c'est les autres" or the anti-hero of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* who cannot feel part of society. My Dining room paintings especially are of people dissipated in small talk or dilapidated by the presence of each other. They are not keeping their own shape but are reduced to blots or empty signs. And while some of my Hen girls are festive and in gangs, there's usually an outsider Hen, misshapen and awkward, who is tacked onto the others or

standing alone in the street. It's not a good view of society in that she is there to make the others feel better, she is a foil to their superiority. She's what the French call a "faire-valoir".

RP: Your palette appears to be quite bright and joyful, certainly in terms of painting the human form, yet there is also a sense of surrounding darkness or void in your paintings. Can you expand?

SH: Yes it is joyful at times, especially in paintings of birds and "flying" monkeys. Unlike my figures trudging along the ground these creatures are not earthbound or restrained. Yet my bright colour, whether used in painting birds or humans, can be painful or toxic, almost chemical with its synthetic sherbets and pinks and limes. And the bright light that is made by these colours is not very comfortable either. "Shoppers", "Diners" and "Hens" are exposed in a blinding, neon glare.

And yes, the figures can be surrounded by a void, either a black one as in the "Dining Rooms", "Beaches" and "Hens" or the white void of paper in the Moroccan drawings and paintings. I like to introduce emptiness into paintings but this is not necessarily nihilistic. To me it suggests something unknown and full of possibility. Similarly the figures themselves can have this "empty" quality since they are often painted as black silhouettes or as white shapes blitzed by light. When we try to look into them there is something hidden and obscured.

RP: Do you have a specific set of colours you always use?

SH: My colours are quite varied but I do tend to go back to the sherbet colours that I mentioned before. I tend to use secondary colours then make them into "seaside" pastels by adding white. I like cool purples and lemons and turquoises brought together into a sour, pastel clash. Sometimes I use these closely-toned, pale colours on their own, often I use black as a contrast. This started when I made night paintings of motorways, petrol stations and neon signs against the black sky.

RP: Your paintings appear to be executed in a very rapid manner. As with a lot of painters who work in this style, are your paintings executed far more slowly than they appear to be, or, like van Gogh, do you manage to produce complete works in one sitting?

SH: I do work very quickly especially when drawing and painting from life, as on the street in Fez or Marrakech. In the studio I also make paintings quickly, though not as quickly. I usually do preparatory drawings and works on paper. I then start on the painting which sometimes seems to work in one sitting but sometimes it doesn't and I have to scrape it off or paint over it and start again. I like the finished painting to have the decisiveness and freshness

of the drawings but this can mean that I destroy a lot of work that looks fumbled or muddy or ponderous.

RP: Do you paint everyday?

SH: Yes, almost. If I'm not in the studio I'm usually drawing from life in a shopping mall or street or supermarket. Recently I've been drawing in St. Paul's cathedral.

RP: Who do you regard as your artistic influences?

SH: There are very many...Gislebertus, Bosch, Bruegel. Ma Yuan, Hogarth, Picasso, Twombly, Kitaj, Darger, Warhol, Bacon, Ofili and more.

RP: And if you could sum up your core message in one sentence, what would it be?

SH: I like to move the figurative towards the abstract in a painting in order to suggest the named and familiar morphing into the mysterious and unfamiliar.