

Alex Hanna

Interviews Susie Hamilton

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

SH: I think it started as a result of an isolated childhood in which I found nature inspiring and, no doubt, consoling. I drew wild birds and animals all the time, although the idea of 'being an artist' was absent. When I was at school my love of poetry and painting combined and I painted from poems such as Dylan Thomas's 'the force that through the green fuse drives the flower'. I was greatly encouraged by my art teacher to think about becoming an artist and going to art school, and although I was at times an appallingly anarchic pupil, eating the food of the art-room still life and throwing powder paint around, I was also more and more determined to do art and go to St. Martins.

AH: Having seen your work recently within your studio I can understand the layering and notions of metamorphosis embodied within the imagery and also the use of glaring light you have referred to in your text. From this I would like to ask about the principals and beliefs that underpin your work.

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.

SH: To begin in childhood, my polar explorer father inspired my wilderness subject matter and my depiction of isolated figures in bleak, challenging places. Although I didn't have much to do with him...he died when I was 8...his exploits were obviously part of my life and I probably inherited something of his disposition.

Then, St Martin's...a gruelling experience as I wasn't prepared for its manipulative debauchery combined with hard-core conceptualism. However, I discovered the work of Michael Andrews, Larry Rivers, RB Kitaj and Francis Bacon and responded to their mutilations of the human figure and the morphing of the figure into abstraction.

Art School 2 was Byam Shaw. I went there in 1989, returning to art after a long stint of literary study. One of the tutors introduced me to the work of Cy Twombly and I loved his juxtaposition of order and disorder, Apollo and Dionysus, also his references to Classical literature. I subsequently found a way of bringing literature into my work, not illustrating it but using it as a springboard for ideas. The theme of metamorphosis in Shakespeare, Ovid,

Marvell and Eliot, was of particular importance and I developed a layered and fluid use of acrylic to represent morphing figures in unstable landscapes.

Glaring light, natural or artificial, is a recurring element in my painting. When at Byam Shaw I painted petrol stations flashing out of the dark and neon signs in London cityscapes. In 2013/4 I went to Morocco and drew figures and their black shadows on the streets of Marrakesh and Fez. And Berck Plage in Northern France inspired a series of big Beach paintings in which dark skies, full of bacteriological shapes, appear above dazzling sand. These paintings and the Dining Room series that went with them were a shift from painting single figures to painting crowds, and they also marked a new interest in the collision of two worlds—the known world and another, unfamiliar reality that threatened it. This contrast continues in my recent work and is key to my C19 series of beaked, visored or spectral doctors looming alarmingly over the beds of covid patients.

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

SH: My style has been called ‘iconoclastic’ since my painting and drawing involve construction and defacement. I paint people in wilderness, as I said, and not only is the setting challenging in itself, in its bleakness or ferocity, but the materials I use—acrylic, oil, pastel, charcoal, pencil—assert themselves against the figures. I do not simply use paints and charcoal etc. to depict the explorers, nurses, riders, plumpers, samurai or shoppers. I use them to assail the people depicted with blurs, spots, lines or veils. My figures are invaded by pencil marks, bombarded by blots, obscured by thin layers of oil or dissolved into acrylic fluidity.

And the reason why I assault my figures in this way relates to my love of metamorphosis. My ‘alchemical’ process of making and unmaking leads to *remaking* and to the creation of uncertain images hovering between human and non-human, as if the human is always vulnerable to being transformed, for example into a cell, a cyborg, a monster, a ghost, a yeti or an abstract shape. My figurative images continually move towards abstraction, exchanging the familiar for something mysterious. For me representational images morphing into abstract ones contrast two ways of seeing: seeing things as named objects or as nameless shapes and therefore confronting the comfortable world of labels and nouns with the unnamed and unnameable.

For this reason I like Bonnard’s remark that ‘The precision of naming takes away from the uniqueness of seeing.’ And I like Thom Gunn’s lines about the same sort of thing in his poem ‘In Santa Maria del Popolo’

‘I see how shadow in the painting brims
With a real shadow, drowning all shapes out

But a dim horse's haunch and various limbs,
Until the very subject is in doubt.'

Interview completed on 30 August 2023