

# Cathy Lomax

## Interviews Andrew Stahl

CL: I'm really intrigued by the title of your 2022 exhibition at the Matdot Gallery in Bangkok –*The Sparkling City* – it is so evocative. It makes me think of the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*. Can you tell me more about what the sparkling city is?

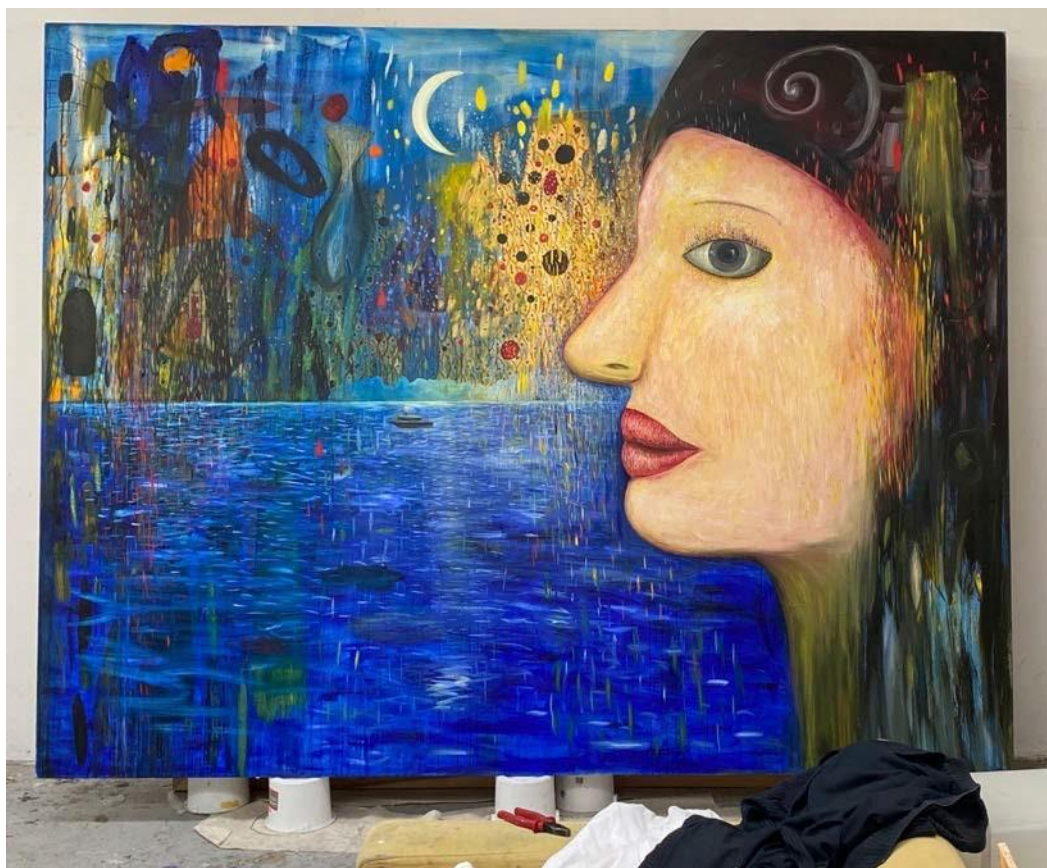
AS: The exhibition featured work I made on a residency there. When I first arrived in Thailand for the residency it was evening, and as we drove into the city it was like Manhattan, all these towers with twinkling lights against a very dark sky, the whole place was just so full of energy. My hotel room was on something like the 15<sup>th</sup> floor looking across at these amazing high-rise buildings. We went out to an all-night restaurant and the cafes and streets were packed. So, the sparkling represents the idea of future energy. I made a drawing every night in a 24-hour café while I was there, and there's a bit of a story to each one – a cat in the studio, strange trees, musicians playing in the street...



*Surprise in the Sparkling City, 2023. (Work in progress)*

CL: The ‘sparkling’ section in *Miyu Contemplating the Night Sky* (which is from before the Matdot residency) makes me think of Klimt.

AS: Yes, you are right. I wasn’t thinking of Klimt exactly when I made it, but of a kind of Austrian thing, and then I was looking at a book of Klimt.



*Miyu Contemplating the Night Sky*, 2018.

CL: Have you travelled a lot?

AS: Yes, I’ve been lucky enough to have done residences in Thailand, Hong Kong, China, Italy, Australia – quite a few. The Wingate scholarship in ’91 was really important as it gave me money to travel to Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Burma, and I was able to rent an apartment in Bangkok. And then after the Wingate I did a small residency in Indonesia, and then Sri Lanka, and The British Council invited me to run a workshop in an art school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

CL: I am imagining that residencies must be productive periods for you; what is it that you enjoy about them?



AS: What I like, is to be out of my comfort zone, and get plonked somewhere. When I was sent to Sri Lanka by The British Council, I was there with a German artist and a French artist and we just had such an interesting exchange. The city was amazing and in the countryside there were giant lizards and all sorts of stuff. Incidentally the Matdot art centre in Bangkok has many old buildings nearby and I remember walking down the street and there was a big crack in the wall, I looked through and there was giant lizard looking back at me – which is what the green thing is in *Monsoon Lizard*.



*Monsoon Lizard*, 2023.

AS: My first residency was at the British School at Rome, which I know you did as well.

CL: Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

AS: I think I might have been on your interview actually!

CL: Really. Wow! I remember there being loads of people there – all the faces were a bit of a blur. I recognised Chantal Joffe and just focused on her!

AS: I went to the BSR twice. When I left the Slade I got the long one which was then two years. I was there from '79 to '81 with a three-month summer gap.

CL: I loved being in Rome but I haven't done another residency since. I find the thought of them a bit frightening – I like working in my own studio. But I do like being outside my comfort zone in terms of the work I do – using unfamiliar materials and trying different approaches. I should just be less scared really. I'm about to apply for a short residency just outside Naples, I've been umming and ahring but I'm going to do it!

AS: What I really like, and what I really liked in the Matdot residency, was I just felt free to express energy and joy.

CL It is amazing to have travelled so much, and what a privilege to be able to spend time in all those places. What is it that you're drawn to? I mean I understand getting out of your comfort zone, but there is obviously something else going on, especially in the connection you have to Asia.

AS: Yes. Well, the thing that really hit me when I first went to Thailand was an important temple in Bangkok called Wat Pho, which houses a giant Buddha, lying on its side – reclining. The foot was about the size of this studio! And in the feet was the story of Buddha. I just looked at this thing and I thought how come I've never been taught anything about this statue! It was several hundred years old and one of the most amazing things I've ever seen – breath-taking. And then on my travels I saw similar things in Burma – extraordinary Buddhas and amazing murals. I thought, my God the art history we teach is so limited, and that was a really big and important discovery.

CL: Are you depicting Asia with an outsider's eye? Or because you have been based in Thailand etc. (albeit temporarily) does that put you in a different position?

AS: That is a really difficult question. I think that one of the interesting things about Bangkok is that like London it's incredibly international, so you don't feel like an outsider when you're there. But I'm also worried about the idea of, you know, being a kind of outside observer. I see myself more as an explorer.

CL: I wanted to ask you about your process. Do your paintings necessarily start with a drawing?

AS: No, they're a voyage into the unknown. One thing that really amuses me, is that everywhere I go, often people say, 'so Mr Stahl, what's your concept?'

CL: Haha. I think that that was one of my questions!

AS: My concept is no concept! And then someone says, 'what's your research about?' I know a research methodologist who says there are two types of research – research that goes around measuring everything, and then speculative research, which is a voyage into the unknown. And that's what I feel my work is about.

CL: So, you are led by what you are drawn to?

AS: Yes, by instinct, by memory, by things I've loved, beautiful things that have really got me.

CL: Do you take photographs?

AS: I do, yes.

CL: Do those help in recalling these beautiful things?

AS: Yes definitely. Even sometimes when I'm watching a film on TV there will be a beautiful landscape and I am like, 'quick pause it', so I can take a photo.

CL: So, the paintings might be an amalgamation of things you see, like the lizard in Thailand, and a film on TV?

AS: Yes. In one recent painting I was just thinking of going along a raised-up highway at night, a bit like the Westway, surrounded by buildings with their sparkling lights.

CL: I'm particularly interested in the sparkle because I've been thinking about starbursts, like the ones used in animations to describe a diamond or something blingy. This idea of the glittering and the sparkly is really alluring and I find it fascinating – especially when thinking about it in terms of painting.

AS: For me it's about lively places, lively cities, wandering out at night and just walking past a cafe and seeing hundreds of people and cars going past, and the night sky. I did science A levels because I wanted to be an astronaut, then I did art as a side class because there was no homework, and then suddenly I realised I preferred art as it was more interesting to me than science.

CL: I'm really fascinated by the heads in your paintings.

AS: You're a head painter aren't you?

CL: I do like heads and particularly heads that aren't attached to bodies – just a head. I'm even fascinated by decapitated heads in religious iconography. When I was thinking about which artist from the Priseman Seabrook Collection I would like to interview it was the heads in your paintings that particularly drew me to you.



Duccio, *Maestà*, 1308.

AS: Have you been to Sienna? Because there is that amazing painting there full of heads – Duccio's *Maestà*. It has bodies too, but the thing is these rows of heads with Mary and Jesus in the middle. And yes, it interests me too. My new work *Kumi by the Swimming Pool* is the first time I've put a body in for a long time, and I did it, I think, just to push myself. I was reading about Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and she said that all the heads in her paintings are created, not real – they are not portraits – well nor are mine.





*Onsen*, 2023.

AS: In this painting – *Onsen* – I thought about Japanese onsens and how the body submerges in them, and the head just pops out.

CL: It reminds me of Martin Sheen's head emerging from the water in *Apocalypse Now*.

AS: It is so interesting you should say that. I love *Apocalypse Now* and I love its origin. Look what I've got here [Andrew shows me a copy of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*]. Conrad spent time in Bangkok in the Author's Lounge at the Mandarin Oriental hotel! I love Coppola's films... *The Godfather*...

CL: Umm I would say that they are not particularly my type of film, but there are scenes that stick with me and resonate, such as the one in *Apocalypse Now*. And if I continue to think about a scene when the film's over it is a measure of something working! Another Vietnam film I like is *The Quiet American* with Michael Caine. I don't think it's particularly well thought of, but it has a realness about Vietnam, a place I haven't been to, but in this film I believe it. I love it when a film transports you to another place – it is so powerful.

AS: When I visited Vietnam they still had American stuff around, someone was even using an American helmet to scoop water, and in the middle of a square in Hanoi there was a crashed B-52. All these things have inspired paintings.

CL: Do you read a lot, and what other authors, aside from Conrad, do you like?

AS: I tend to read at night and I find I fall asleep, so I wouldn't say that I've read that well in the last five years! But I have lots of favourites, Herman Hesse I love, CS Lewis, EM Forster – these are just books that I happen to have in the studio really. Also, Allen Ginsberg, his poem *Cosmopolitan Greetings* is important to me.

CL: Can you tell me which artists you admire.

AS: As a teenager I went to the Chateau d'Antibes in the South of France (the Musée Picasso). Picasso was given the place in the 1950s and he painted on some of the walls and windows, he made amazing paintings which were hung all through the space. It was just so free and amazing, absolute extraordinary, so full of energy. And then I went to see the Léger Museum, which is nearby, and I loved it. The early cubist works were really important to me, and this is reflected in my early work. And, of course Munch was my favourite artist. When I was eighteen I drove to Norway with a friend to see the Munch Museum. I already knew Munch and loved *The Scream* but it just knocked me sideways, I just thought wow painting can have feeling.

The kind of art that was around when I was at art college was incredibly minimal and conceptual, or life painting. So when I was at The Slade I decided to make the opposite and go maximal. I made paintings and sculptures by collecting everybody's belongings around me, acrylic paint tubes, buckets, a hanger, a bra, you know things people chucked away. Then I decided to make the biggest painting anyone had ever made at The Slade!

CL: What was the reaction to this maximal work in an environment where minimalism was king?

AS: Well, I was really enjoying myself, and I didn't care. And I was encouraged by John Hoyland, Mick Moon, Tess Jaray, Bernard Cohen and Noel Forster (who were wonderful). And then I did my MA at The Slade and my work changed. When I got the Rome scholarship, I saw all these places – Villa D'este, the Pantheon, the painted walls of Livia's bedroom, and I started my Italian work – there were a lot of fountains and it became more and more figurative.



CL: And the fountains still appear in your work!

AS: Yes, the two things that have never escaped are Buddhas and fountains.



*Thinking Leg*, 1991.

CL: I'm really fascinated by what look like calligraphic icons that appear in many of your paintings – they are almost like hieroglyphics. I particularly like *Thinking Leg*, I can see a fountain, lips, a television...

AS: Painting thoughts – I'm interested in painting thoughts and memories, so it's a mixture of having something, like a head, and all the thoughts around it.

CL: Ah, like in a cartoon when thoughts are shown in bubbles?

AS: Maybe yeh. The painting *View of Saigon from the Golden Mount* features a large arm and a series of floating images – elephant, figure on a bike etc. The Golden Mount is a temple high up in Bangkok, but I was looking at the blue sky and thinking about all the things I saw in Vietnam – like the helicopter.



CL: Your painting *Hand* makes me think of the huge Colossus of Constantine hand in Rome.

AS: That's right, but it's a mixture. I was also thinking of the story in China that if you lie you have your finger chopped off!

CL: How do you decide on the size of a painting – for instance you often work on a very large scale.

AS: One thing I like is that if they are really big they become intimate.

CL: That's interesting, so it's as though you can enter into them?

AS: Yes.



*Kumi by the Swimming Pool, 2023 (work in progress).*



CL: How do you know when a painting is finished?

AS: I come into my studio and I look at the painting and it speaks to me – it says ‘You need to put yellow there’, or it says nothing, and if it says nothing its finished (I heard Christopher Le Brun say something like this and it really made sense to me). So that’s how I jump to and from the work. This painting for instance – *Kumi by the Swimming Pool* – is saying to me I want to have hundreds of those night lights, but I want the Buddhist thing to show through. So it’s going to be push and pull. And I want to make the figure more finished and solid – more-heavy. The thing I love about Picasso is when you get those huge objects, maybe a horse, that have tremendous weight. And they stand out in front of the painting. That’s what I want my heads to do – float in front of the surface of the canvas. I try to do this in all of them. I remember seeing Giovanni Bellini’s *Resurrection of Christ* in Naples and just seeing the figure rising and it flew across the room, it was amazing. And that is what I like about Picasso and Léger. Formally for me this is really important. I think this is something that you do too.

CL: Ummm – yes, I think you’re right.

You mention being interested in the surrealists and the marvelous. Could you talk a bit about what this is and how it relates to your practice.

AS: I think I’m interested in the idea that you can come across something that is so exquisitely beautiful that you can’t believe it. It’s like Sienese art where you come across an extraordinary detail or a piece of amazing jewellery.

*We head to the storage area of Stahl’s studio...*

CL: Do you listen to music when you are working?

AS: Music is really important to me and I like music of every type. I can hardly work without it. I’ll put on my latest playlist, its full of old as well as new.

CL: I read somewhere that you are a collector.

AS: Well, I’ve got tons of art, things that people have swapped with me or students have given me. But I haven’t consciously collected it.

CL: Are these your scrapbooks?

AS: Yes, this one is all about travelling to the moon! And this I suppose is a kind of collection – a cigarette packet signed by Andy Warhol. I went to his show at Anthony d’Offay and there were about ten people waiting to get his signature with bits of paper, I smoked cigarettes in those days so I thought why not!

CL: Ah, Rose Wylie’s book – do you like her work?

AS: Very much, I asked her and her husband (Roy Oxlade) to come and give a lecture at The Slade. And I’ve been to her studio – I love her overgrown garden!

CL: When I saw your snakes and lizards, I was reminded of the painting of the snake that she showed at David Zwirner a few years back. It went all along the wall over a number of canvases. Very witty!



Rose Wylie, *Snake*, 2018, oil on canvas in ten parts, 182 x 1560 cm, curtesy David Zwirner.

CL: I wanted to finish by asking you about your show in Sharjah in the UAE in 2019. How do you feel about having a retrospective – was it good to see everything together?

AS: Yes, I really enjoyed it. It is an extraordinary space and there was a huge area in the middle where I made a gigantic sculpture – *Astro Fragility* – my biggest ever. And they were so generous, they flew out all my work.



*Astro Fragility* in *Andrew Stahl: 1976-Today*, at Sharjah Art Foundation, 2019.

CL: How did the show come about?

AS: Hoor Al Qasimi (the renowned curator) saw my work in various places. She came to my studio about four years earlier.

CL: Was there any censorship in terms of the work you could show?

AS: I couldn't show anything explicit, but to be honest I didn't mind. I had plenty of other work that I believed in.

CL: Is it a public space?

AS: Yes. The Sharjah Art Foundation is the biggest art foundation in the whole of the UAE, including Dubai. This is just one of the galleries, there are about seventeen.

CL: I don't know anything about Sharjah, what is it like?

AS: Sharjah is amazing, they have a Biennale, and it is very exciting, very together. It's different from Dubai, it has lots of old buildings and is very well preserved. I made this big yellow painting (*Jet Alive*) inspired by my visit. I was driven through the desert every day to go to the gallery to install the sculpture. It reminded me of *Lawrence of Arabia*!





*Jet Alive*, 2022, oil on canvas, 244 x 612 cm.

**Interview completed on 25 July 2023 at Andrew Stahl's studio in West London**