

Marguerite Horner

Interviews Cathy Lomax

MH: Cathy, what are the current themes in your work and what influences have led to them?

CL: I have just completed a film studies PhD where I've been researching film stars and makeup. One of the main theorists I was considering was Rosalind Galt and her book *Pretty*. In this she talks about how 'pretty' is often used to describe feminine aesthetics which are considered insignificant, facile and silly. In effect 'pretty' is used to demean the look of femininity. Pretty is different from beautiful, because beautiful has high classical ideas which are in opposition to the insubstantial qualities of prettiness. The point is that our patriarchal society uses the idea of 'pretty' to put women down. Colour, decoration etc. are deemed not as important as modernist concerns, such as paired back graphic qualities and the ultimate manifestation of this... minimalism. These are seen as styles that have reason which are in opposition to the 'no reason' of prettiness. Of course it's not true, it's just a value judgement and a way of degrading womanly concerns, or things that traditionally have been associated with femininity. So having thought about all of this, I have realised that I should embrace the things that appeal to me - the covers of romance novels, fashion, film stars, makeup, colour... they are important and valid. I'm actively and without embarrassment going for the pretty!

MH:...and 'decorative' is another word...

CL: ...Yes, decorative and also the exotic - things that are a bit foreign - these styles might be mildly amusing, but they're not serious, they're not academic. But of course there is no reason why they can't be academic, and that is what I have come to realise. I am pretty serious.

MH: So why did you start painting?

CL: I don't really remember. I liked painting at school and I had the idea of going to art college, and then I tried to get into fashion, but I didn't have a portfolio, so I didn't get in! I didn't do art for a while, and didn't go to University. Instead I was singing in a band when I left school, which I loved. After a while I started thinking about painting again, and I did evening classes, portfolio preparation I think it was called, at the City Lit. I really loved it, and got back into it that way. I then did my BA and MA fine art part time, while I was working as a makeup artist and starting a family (two kids). So it was all happening at the same time - it was busy.

MH: How do you decide what size canvas to use?

CL: It just depends upon what I am painting really, but my comfort zone is probably something medium smallish. I like to work in series, so I might do a block of medium to small canvases, but I worry about getting too comfortable which I think makes the work get a bit stale. So if I've been working on that size, I'll try to do something bigger, or maybe something really tiny, just to see what happens. I think it is this that makes the most interesting work.

MH: Is there a mystery to painting?

C: That's a very interesting question isn't it?...there's something really a bit magical about doing it, in that you can get so immersed in it. I think that's the thing I find the most exciting. I will always have my idea and will have thought about what I am painting and planned it out to a certain extent. I might have images that I'm referring to. But when I actually start painting the decisions I make are quite instinctive. This is a mysterious, magical thing, because I'm not really sure why something has happened. This is when painting is at its best – when you can lose yourself, when you're in the flow and when you let things happen. I find it helpful to listen to a podcast or audiobook while I'm painting, so my thoughts can fix on to something else and not focus too much on what I'm painting. Yes there's mystery.

MH: Have there been periods in your life when you haven't painted and if so what do you feel when you haven't painted for a while and how do you get back into the process of painting?

CL: I've always painted since I did my adult art education. But there have been periods when I didn't paint as much and I think it's quite healthy to sometimes have little breaks from the studio. If I'm here every day I start to feel like I'm getting into too much of a routine and I get a bit weary of it. So I quite like to not be here for a while and then come back and then it feels fresh. Then I'm excited about doing things.

MH: What is the art world and is it of any importance?

CL: Well it is important if you want to have a career as a painter. I mean it's a kind of weird nebulous thing and nobody is quite sure what it is, but I guess if I have to pin it down it's the art establishment – the gatekeepers, the people running the big museums and the big galleries, the big collectors, the famous artists. This is all important, but it makes me think about why it's important and what I'm trying to do and what the point of it all is – if I'm just making the kind of work that will please the art world, where is the depth and meaning? I think when it comes down to it you have to make work that you're really excited by and interested in. Work that you like, work that you would like to have yourself and if you're being honest with

yourself, that's not really to do with the art world. But I do feel if you are doing something that you can connect with and feels good, then it will translate, and other people will appreciate it. There is something else of course, which is that I do want my work to be seen, I enjoy it being seen, I wouldn't want to just do it for myself, that would seem a bit pointless. So there is a kind of exhibitionist thing...well putting on an exhibition, we call it putting on a show don't we?

MH: Do you compartmentalise your artistic life from everyday life?

CL: I try not to, because that feels like I'm not being true to who I am. When I had young children, the main theme of my work concerned young children, I was fascinated by how they could get lost in their imaginations. This is not something that I am interested in making work about now, that was who I was then. So whatever the thing is that is interesting to me, the thing that I get excited by, that's what I want to make my work about. It's not autobiographical, in terms of painting the street outside my window and that kind of thing, instead it's about the things that are vivid to me. For instance I watch a lot of films, my PhD was about film stardom, and I make lots of work about films – they're really important to me. I can kind of chart my life by the films I was watching at a particular time. Because I've chosen to watch these films there is an autobiographical thread, albeit one that is diffused through a vicarious filmic screen.

MH: What do you look for in a painting?

CL: This is very hard to quantify! People talk about good painting and bad painting, which I don't find particularly helpful because there can be just something, some quality, which just works and it's hard to pin down. I know the paintings I like when I see them! I normally prefer figurative work, but I like it to be loose, so there is meaning beyond the actual image. So I can't really tell you what makes a good painting because I think it's very personal.

MH: What concerns you about painting today?

C: I think painting is really healthy at the moment compared with when I was doing my degree and MA, at the end of the 90s and into the 2000s. On my MA in particular everything was very much about conceptual art and painting was considered a bit old-fashioned. You had to really fight your corner as a painter and justify why you were doing it. Now there are so many more artists painting, and there are art colleges, like Turps Banana, that are devoted to painters. To be a painter and exchange ideas with other painters, is an aspirational thing. There are also so many different styles going on, and it's all kind of possible and valid. *Mixing It Up: Painting Today* at the Hayward Gallery in 2021 was so interesting, the sheer amount of painting and the stylistic diversity of it was fantastic.

MH: Are there too many paintings?

CL: There can never be too many paintings, although maybe there are too many paintings in my studio at the moment! But no, how can there be too many paintings – definitely not!

Interview completed on 17 July 2023