

Ruth Calland

Interviews Iain Andrews

RC: You told me that you have a sense of an ‘observing other’ when you paint. Would you like to say something about that?

IA: The older you get the more ghosts there are around - those who have impacted you through their teaching and practice and helped form you into the painter you are today, and those whom you have never met physically but whose work has inspired you to paint and to make things, and memories of past versions of yourself who may critique or encourage. I think that, rather like working as a psychotherapist, being a painter means having the ability to move between two very different states - one is more intuitive, instinctive and immediate, the other more reflective and critical, with the ability to adjust and edit. I have a strong sense of being part of something much bigger than myself when I paint, of being part of a great tradition that has and will somehow outlast the maddening rush and speeding up of modern life with its tiny attention span.

RC: You invited me to read Tolkien's short story, *Leaf, by Niggle*, which I enjoyed. What relevance does this have to you as a painter?

IA: I think every painter can relate to the idea of interruptions - the aspects of life that get in the way of us being able to make work, whether those be good, problematic or simply the neutral stuff of everyday life. Tolkien deals with this wonderfully in the tale, and the idea that what we attempt to make on this earth will somehow, someday, be fulfilled and finally, properly ‘finished’, (though, as he says in the story ‘not finished with’) is a tremendous encouragement to artists to keep going I think.

RC: Your paintings remind me of elaborately decorated cakes, sumptuous and impressive to look at, and I’m wondering what is actually happening for you as you paint. In the early looser gestural mark-making stage, what is happening in your body and your feelings; your emotional state? And how are you connecting your feelings or bodily experience at this point to your subject matter? And how does that emotional state change as you move into the second phase of mark-making, working over the gestural marks with more finely drawn marks and lines?

IA: I think this feels like a very ‘therapist’ question – I’m not sure how well I can attempt to understand what is actually happening emotionally when I make work and how this relates to my subject matter. I can identify different phases when making a painting – there is an early

stage where the surface is prepared, rubbed down, scraped away, a secondary phase where the main structure of the image is created (which usually entails a high level of anxiety) and a final stage where marks are adjusted with fine detail brushes – shadows and highlights are added. This final stage is one where one can afford to be a little more self-conscious and reflective, and there's a sense of editing a performance about this, removing and enhancing. The idea of the theatrical is hugely important to me as each image operates within quite a shallow space, and casts shadows against some form of illusory backdrop. I'm not sure I've answered your question here!

RC: It's an interesting journey you describe, from anxiety to reflection. I'm reminded of the novel *The Glass Bead Game* by Hermann Hesse, in which the intellectuals of society spend their days in hermetic solitude, extracting detailed abstract connections between different disciplines, whilst the other citizens manage the running of society and live more messy but emotionally embodied lives. Do you relate to this mind/body split?

IA: The only Hesse book that I have read is *Narcissus and Goldmund*, and from what you mention about *The Glass Bead Game* it sounds as though there are similar themes – the ascetic life of the monk or hermit versus that of the more physical, Dionysian lifestyle of sensation and experience. For a long time I've been interested in the ways in which this split is brought together – I think, for example, that a faith of any kind should always be worked out physically, otherwise it is meaningless. Biblical stories are full of Christ and the prophets eating with people, getting messy and physically involved, and there is a wonderful, earthy carnality to these. I'd love to create work that embraces it's synaesthetic elements, that invites viewers to taste or lick the globs of paint, but without sacrificing the narrative elements of the subject matter. I'm thinking now of Murillo's painting of the Crucifixion - a wonderful combination of the creamy physicality of paint with the cerebral mystery of the subject matter. I think about art as a form of recovery, as a way of trying to return to something that we have lost, and I think this is why I will often use a pre-existing past image as a starting point. There is a quote from CS Lewis on this desire to return that I love 'Apparently then, our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the Universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere romantic fallacy, but the truest index of our real situation'.

RC: I experience a feeling that there is something I can't quite get hold of in the paintings, a sort of tantalising refusal to be explicit, like in Cicely Brown's work. Do you feel that there are some things that you want to paint about that have to be encoded? Protected from the direct gaze?

IA: There's a sense in which I think that the whole painting needs to be encoded in some

way, in order to maintain interest. I think painting has a difficult time today, since we live in an image saturated scrolling culture, and so I feel the need to make something that is going to subvert the direct gaze. I find myself needing to create something and then destroy it – sand it down, rub it away in some way using a scalpel. This process of addition and subtraction creates a palimpsest, which then functions as the stage upon which the image is constructed.

RC: Often you work with a single figure, or character, where it seems as though everything in the painting has been magnetically pulled in by its energy - for example *The Eat Me*, the *Golem* series, *The Wizard*, and the *Prophet* series. Does it feel different psychologically, if you have more than one subject in the painting?

IA: I think I've always felt an affinity to a single figure in a landscape. Growing up I was an only child and spent a lot of time on my own in my imagination. At college the paintings of Friedrich had a big influence on me, and my own subjects have tended to revolve around either a single palette like conglomerate in the centre of the canvas or a single figure – such as in the paintings I made of Josef Stawinoga. I'm interested primarily by individual figures rather than groups since images seem to make more sense to me with only a single figure

RC: Do you have an animistic relationship to your materials? Is the history of the materials an important part of their physical presence? I'm thinking of your use of oak gall ink, or the school desk in *Mythopoeia - the Judicator*, and whether the origins of the materials or support add to the work, metaphysically or even spiritually.

IA: The desk came from the school where I work and like my painting surfaces had much sanding down and scraping away. It was important that it bore the scratches and graffiti of years of secondary school children who had sat there and worked over years. Certainly it's important for me that there is some form of link with past traditions and materials, for the reasons I've mentioned earlier, to do with recovery.

RC: You say that Bettelheim's work on/with fairy stories has been influential. It's interesting that he was a bit of tale-teller himself, incorporating the writings of others into his own work without acknowledgement! Is there also a playful trickster element within your practice?

IA: It's unclear to what extent Bettelheim plagiarized, but the evidence certainly seems to be that he copied other people's writings about fairy stories. I'm not sure this would classify him as a playful trickster however, more of a cheat. I think the idea of plagiarizing fairy tales is a strange one - because there is always the question of who they belong to – they are collective myths that are constantly being told and retold. I think one of the mistakes I made at art college was trying too hard to be what I thought of as 'original', rather than simply concentrating on making the best work that I could.

RC: You're very interested in stories, and I'm thinking about dream as story: how dreams have a teleological aspect and present the ego with a situation of which it is unaware, or not fully aware, and giving an encoded way forward. Do you think of your work as having this kind of function? For yourself and/or the viewer?

IA: That's a good way of putting it. I think of the work as growing from a compost heap of ideas that rot down and decompose. There are always certain things that refuse to rot, or decide to grow instead of decomposing, and these aspects seem to offer a way forward. Like a dream, these are often hidden from the conscious mind to begin with, but become clearer over time.

RC: You have a beautiful drawing practice, with stunningly elaborate and deliberately antiquated looking pieces as well as your representations of key scenes in fairy tales. The drawings have a clarity and directness about them which is almost the opposite of how your paintings function. Why is this and what is the relationship between drawing and painting for you?

IA: I don't think that my drawing practice relates to my painting directly, other than by balancing it out somewhat. Painting for me is a far more chaotic, messy, intuitive activity, whereas drawing offers a more considered, cognitive process that enables me to work patiently and slowly, building up an image in a more linear way. The craft of this way of working is necessary to me, especially when I'm feeling defeated by a painting.

RC: I know that you're an art therapist, and I remember at the Priseman Seabrook Collections show in Gdansk, seeing drawings of some objects that your clients had made, and I was very struck by the reverence and respect that you had shown to them, in your observation of these humble objects, and how this seemed to elevate them somehow. Whilst your paintings seem to pull your 'high art' source material and imagery about, sometimes blending it with cartoonish elements, or almost chewing it up and spitting it out. Would you call yourself an iconoclast of sorts?

IA: I'm not sure about the term 'iconoclast'. The compost heap metaphor is perhaps more significant here, but I also think about Roualt's paintings of prostitutes and what the art critic Peter Fuller referred to as 'redemption through form' – an attempt to ascribe dignity and worth to something or someone who might otherwise be overlooked through the act of making art. Art is important for the ways in which it can cause us to pause and look again at that which might otherwise pass us by, and I think this matters far more than whether material fits into 'high' or 'low' art.

RC: When I look at some of your very visceral painting I find that my eyes struggle to stay focussed - it sometimes seems as though I'm looking at a blizzard of dissected flesh. The

scene seems reminiscent of an abattoir, but with decorative flourishes. Could you say something about bringing horror and sensuality together?

IA: I've always been fascinated by not so much horror films, but by those that have a grotesque physicality to them such as *Delicatessen* and *The City of Lost Children*. Many faery tales tackle the idea of overwhelming oral greed – *Hansel and Gretel*, *Goldilocks* etc and there's a corresponding element of horror in each of these, a warning about being too greedy or impatient, and I'm interested in trying to say this visually using the formal means of colour and touch.

RC: Some of my favourite paintings of yours have feminine sounding titles, and these are paintings which are generally looser in feel, perhaps airier, lighter somehow: *Jezebel*, *Rose Briar*, *The Witch of Endor*, *The Loves of Lady Purple*. How do gender constructs and identities play out in your work?

IA: I love the writing of Angela Carter, who of course reworked many traditional tales – being more explicit about sexual elements in particular. I live amongst women (my wife and daughters) and as they grew up there was a lot of pink and Disney in our house, and I think elements of this have made it into my work. But I'm also a huge fan of painters such as Boucher, Watteau and Fragonard, since their paintings seem to me to be visual faery tales, often with a palette that you could reasonably describe as 'feminine'.

RC: You've spoken about connections with surrealism in your painting, and of course the surrealists were dealing with mass anxiety and the horrors of war. There was an altered perspective of what it means to be human, an existential crisis. I'm wondering if you feel that your work is tuned in to some sort of contemporary existential crisis?

IA: I'm not sure how tuned in my work is to any contemporary crisis, other than the fact that the image is always breaking down and decaying in some way. Working as a therapist in the world of self-harm, anorexia and depression means that you are always immersed with what may be termed an existential crisis, the desire for self-destruction, and teenagers have a wonderful ability to cut through the layers of personal propaganda that we manufacture to insulate ourselves with. I guess, through that work I've become more conscious of anxiety and horror in the world, but also of beauty. When I look at humanity as a whole, I don't see a lot of hope, but when I encounter an individual human being, and get to hear their story, then I think there is cause to be hopeful.

Interview completed on 6 September 2023