

# Nicholas Middleton

## Interviews Wayne Clough

NM: One aspect of your practice that I've noticed over the years is your choice of particular materials: it feels as though you switch quite freely between working with oil paint, then watercolour or coloured pencil or graphite. What affects the choice of medium for a composition? Are there specific reasons for using one approach over another?

WC: I much prefer working in oils but I enjoy the challenge of working in other mediums. The choice is rather arbitrary and possibly directed by what's most expedient at the time. I find acrylics pretty redundant and lack the versatility of oils so I steer clear of them generally.

NM: A number of your recent works have clear art historical references in them, do these reveal something about your influences or current interests?

WC: I think when painting, it's unavoidable referencing historical art influences or tropes. Painting always seems about emulation and a consequence of this, consciously or unconsciously, is acknowledging what went before. There always feels a sense of reinventing the wheel when it comes to painting which is probably the most difficult hurdle to overcome.

NM: Are there specific moments – encounters with artworks or art theory – that you can identify as having had a lasting impact in your development as an artist?

WC: I think I'm quite cynical about art so usually find gallery encounters underwhelming. I'm more wowed by the historical circumstances in which a work was made which is why I'm way more excited by art in say the National Gallery or Rijks. Theoretically I'd say *The End of Art Theory* was invaluable to me and a brilliant overview of ideas in art - at least until the early 90s. Right now I'm more engaged with philosophy proper and I find contemporary art theory somewhat overindulgent in the grand scheme of things.

NM: Your practice has evolved considerably over the last decade or so, from what appear to be fairly 'straight' transcriptions from mass-media images, to personal, intimate works, and now the recent paintings, with complex layering or collage-like juxtapositions. Are there commonalities that run through all of these ways of working?

WC: I think there's bound to be but it's often that other people are best placed to identify that.

NM: It looks like you often rework existing paintings, sometimes radically. Is this a lack of preciousness, a sign of a restless imagination, a pragmatic approach to making, or a form of self-curation to a developing body of work?

WC: It's probably some of each but right now I'm sort of trying to fathom it out. I'm not entirely sure what pragmatism looks like in relation to what I do. It's hard to define progress when you're in the thick of battlefield.

NM: There appear to be key themes of class, popular culture and a kind of collective memory which anchors much of your work to specifics of place and time. At the same time there seems to be a form of elegiac subversion at work here – like a collective dream gone bad or that we've got all wrong – is there something which connects all these elements across your paintings?

WC: The notion of collective memory pertaining specifically to class is crucial in what I think about. Hopefully something of this comes through in my work. It's hard to escape issues around class when you're from a council estate in Bradford and I intentionally strive for this to affect my practice. I don't want to be drab though. I think there are things to celebrate when you're not from a privileged background, although you can easily wallow in misery. Dystopia can be quite sexy, just look at stuff like *The Walking Dead* and *Game of Thrones*.

NM: Can you say something about the role of humour in your work? This seems to have come to the fore more recently – I'm thinking of quite a wide definition of humour here, seeing aspects of irony or word-play, linguistic puzzles, incongruities, or elements of the surreal in the work.

WC: Humour is very important to me. I loved watching things like *Blackadder* and *The Young Ones* growing up. I also love satire like *The Day Today* and *Nathan Barley*. I'd hope that elements of these particular shows would influence my art and if that's so I'm quite pleased. In terms of language I'd say there's always a comfortable tension between it and visual culture (for want of a better description). I think titles are important and it's a bit of a cop out to name something 'Untitled'. That said, I think crowbarring a naff title in can be equally as facile.

NM: How does the relationship of paintings to their titles work in your practice? Does the idea of a title sometimes provoke the making of the work?

WC: Yes sometimes the title comes first. It's kind of a conceptual way of working and one I'm not ashamed to admit. Often some movies use a similar device which doesn't usually end well and perhaps my work falls into this trap.

NM: I've been thinking a lot more about the role of the viewer in the making of my own work recently, in the compact between work and viewer, and how different modes of address function in contextualising work. Do you have an ideal viewer in mind while conceiving or making work?

WC: I think this is such a crucial question and one I'm forever cogitating over. When I'm in the making I suppose I'm the ideal viewer. Post production I'd say it's whoever I expect to see the work. If I'm entering a piece into an open competition it would be the jury. If it's an open submission then the gallery management. My head is crowded with prospective viewers and I think this is how it should be. We don't work within a vacuum and the reality is that an artist has limited control of their fate. I believe the narrower your scope the less opportunities you'll create.

**Interview completed on 11 October 2023**