

Simon Carter

Interviews Marco Cali

SC: What are your feelings about the idea of a studio?

MC: I guess a studio is the place where an artist works, that's to say a painter paints. In this sense, my studio has been in our spare room since the pandemic. So, I've found a place where it is practical to paint. It has been a lucky change, forcing how I work much further and faster into the direction in which I had previously dabbled. I now work on paper at a small to medium scale in a more sustained manner. And I have completely switched to pre-primed unstretched canvas for larger scale work. But if the studio is where inspiration or thinking about work happens, then I get this from social settings as much as from works of art. I like those situations that offer some form of note taking or mulling over thoughts and ideas. I know this is true of most artists, whatever the medium. In my case it's either being in some urban settings, usually where people might congregate or pass through. Or it's being with the work of other artists, whatever the field or era, but especially medieval to modern times. I think with these last it's because the artworks attempted to contain within themselves a whole of some form of human experience, however flawed or narrow the perspective. I like the studio to be a place for the ideas triggered from those settings to come into fruition.

SC: Describe for us your studio set up.

MC: As I mentioned, for a while now I have worked almost exclusively on unstretched canvas or prepared paper and using primed boards for some small format painting. There is a wall that I can fix primed canvas or large format paper directly onto. I lay a large plastic sheet, the kind used in home decoration, along the floor and behind the canvas with good overlap. For smaller works on paper I have a flat board or just the block that art paper comes in that can be propped up either on a small desk or a chair. Normally there are a number of finished and unfinished bits and pieces propped around. Not too many, and if someone comes over to stay then all these pictures have to disappear. Because the room is within the home and has multiple uses I hardly ever use turpentine there, and make good use of walnut oil as a thinner instead.

I like the idea of displaying paintings with some reference to how they are made. That is to say, canvas or paper put directly onto the wall. Placing contrasting images next to each other, just as they are in my studio as I work. If possible, I would include the protective plastic just as I use in the studio.

SC: What shape does a day in the studio take?

MC: Ideally, I already have a notion of why I am there. The day will in any case be shaped by what I'm working on. If it's a small or medium work, I might aim to finish it in a single sitting. If it's a more complex work, then it might require some element of contemplating what the next step might be. In this instance I might just leave the usually larger image fixed to the wall or board and work on something completely different. This is how many disparate images come to be all over the studio, and this is why I prefer the works to be exhibited to reflect this. I like to think that there are many ideas within each individual piece as well as in relation to each other. This is how they come about, as a wandering of thought and body.

SC: Is part of being an artist to have ideas?

MC: I suspect all of us have only one of two notions or specific interests, call them core ideas maybe. We then recycle them or revisit them again and again throughout our career. Perhaps we refine what it is that we are fixated with, or we find a seemingly new angle, or perhaps just continue to mine the seam coming up with new nuggets of expressive potential. For me, it's exciting to feel like I'm playing with the narrative and abstract forms of painting and image making, but to do this with a personal element. What that might mean I hope is not too specific or descriptive, but more of a broad influence on which to draw upon. In any case, it should feel like a new piece, worth doing in itself. I'm not the kind of artist who finds this kind of satisfaction by creating works that concentrate on a singular theme or subject matter.

SC: Where do your paintings start?

MC: They start whilst thinking about something else. I'll be mulling some daft thought and something will trigger a visual version of that. Nothing complete, just a notion that this might lead to an interesting image. Sometime afterwards, with a blank canvas or paper in front of me, I often make a random mark and see if I can return to that train of thought. It doesn't always work, but it pays to try and bring the image to resolution. At its best, it's fun to be working through a variety of pictorial possibilities within the one theme.

SC: Would you say your work is ideas led?

MC: I suppose I can't get away from what I said earlier, so the answer to that must be an emphatic yes. In the end of it is true that there are one or two notions that we play with then, inevitably, we're always working in series in some way. But what this series might be exactly is something I usually find difficult to put into words. In this sense, producing images is an amazing way to bring together themes and ideas that in words don't necessarily hang together.

Ask me again in a few months, and I'm certain I'll give a different answer. But, as of now, I think that my work has an element of journaling by another name. It's much less disciplined and it tries to exist within a painterly or drawing practice. It's sometimes interesting to think of what canon or traditions we are drawing from, what are the so called influences. I know that I keep coming back with the same excitement to the same subjects and sources. Cartoonists (Jacovitti, Ralph Stedman, Chuck Jones...), Manet, Goya and Rubens, Noire and silent era movies, the simplest of computer graphics, and so on, baroque and late medieval churches and palaces, shopping centres, train stations and the contemporary urban environment. I feed the nerd within every time I see a movie or read a novel that for whatever reason sets me off. How was the movie produced, where was it filmed and what stood in for what? How did the script change? For novels, where and when of the writing and publishing, influences and so on. I'm not at all certain how I can explain how all this then becomes a painting, but it does.

SC: Do you draw, and what relation does drawing or lack of it, have to your work?

MC: Draw, yes, I do. As both an endpoint and as working things out in note taking. In all these forms, it seems to work as a separate exercise for me to painting I love the way it's possible to evoke a whole world with a few lines and a lot of implied shapes. I also find that drawing, works on paper in any case, seem to accept different strategies, materials and styles with more economy and success than paintings on canvas. There is scope for mixed media and intuition in what is usually meant by drawing. Whereas in painting it is more difficult or messy to get there for me. I always want to keep hold of the beauty of paint.

SC: What are your thoughts on planning v spontaneity?

MC: For me, this is a trick that I have to evoke. It's a pretence or an act. It's great to make the marks and surface look fresh and spontaneous. It gives the most satisfaction in my eyes. But in reality there is a lot of conscious and instinctive working and reworking. This is why I much prefer using oil paint, it's much more forgiving and there is the possibility of retaining a fresh looking surface.

SC: Do you need or want to know where a painting is going before it is made...

MC: Yes and no, and that is the trick. Having a rough outline of what is going on, but being open and ready to go down whatever path comes along. It feels impossible to disrupt the blank canvas without knowing where and why it is being broken. At the same time, where the final image ends up is the story of the journey to get to that same end point. Maybe that's exactly what makes an idea a trigger to get the ball rolling, the niggling thought that this, whatever this is, is the start of an interesting journey towards an interesting image.

SC: Tell us about a recent exhibition visit that has been significant to your work. Does exhibition-going play an important part in your painting life?

MC: There is a church in my home town of Genova that I visit every time we are there. When you walk up the side marble steps to the columned portico, you are travelling in time, from today's street traffic, up a temple from classical Greece and into a 17th Century Catholic church on the floorplan of a civic building, a basilica, from imperial Rome. The Nunziata is a high baroque church, with many frescoes and gold leaf stucco as well as life size statues of saints surrounded with spiritual creations, all in the most realistic life-like finish. All the artworks play with the physical architecture of the building, light from windows is repeated in paint, angels rise up towards the sky, both real and depicted. Although it's been extensively restored, there's a shabbiness about it. Bits of fresco are patched, chunks of yellowing marble are missing, dust and cobwebs cling to the repainted surfaces of all those statues in their eternal ecstasy. The noise and fumes from the street outside soil the incensed air inside. A few people pray, whilst many gawp and take selfies.

Then, I am often around Westfield Shopping Centre in Stratford, or Euston station in London. And there again, life size or over life size images, increasingly digital, that are animated and have their own perfection. The building is concrete and steel beneath, with a veneer of expensive or expensive-looking materials. Light from outside is controlled with architectural glass and large openings. We, the people, are channelled around the place. It is freedom of a kind. The spaces are vast, much larger than whatever could be imagined even a few hundred years ago. And yet most of us move around here as if it is nothing, the sublime is the everyday.

SC: What are you reading or viewing currently?

MC: I'm embarrassed by my YouTube feed. It's full of politics, history and war with the odd stand-up thrown in. I guess I'm the typical middle aged man in middle England. At best I might get satire and a sense of humanity in all its absurdity. At best I might also be influenced by the graphics and imagery juxtaposition. As to reading, at the moment the unfinished pile includes a graphic novel about the Balkan war *Gorazdne* by Joe Sacco, the autobiographical coming of age *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, the satirical *Broken Glass* by Congolese Alain Mabanckou. To be honest I listen to a lot of podcasts, especially *In Our Time* which I often hear repeatedly.

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