

David Sullivan

Interviews Nathan Eastwood

DS: Nathan, hi and very glad for this opportunity to discuss your work, your practise and painting generally.

Is it possible to talk about your own 'ignition spark' that led yourself to painting, and the different influences that have emerged and have become important to you on the journey thus far whether artists and paintings, or music and of course culture?

NE: It is an absolute pleasure to have this opportunity to exchange in conversation with you about my painting practice with you David.

Well, this 'ignition spark' – not sure really when it happened. As a young teenager attending school, I was very enthusiastic about joining the armed forces and specifically the Royal Marines. I went to Marine Cadets and at school when we had art classes I would be drawing and making pictures of tanks. I was a real geek for anything military. Not sure why I was obsessed but maybe I wanted to follow my father's footsteps into the armed services. My Dad was in the Royal Navy. When I left school, I tried to join up but sadly due to having asthma I failed the medical entrance test.

Around the age of 16-19 for recreation, when home, instead of hanging out with mates I would spend my time, long-into the night, drawing, or painting. At the age of 19 I got into art school to do a course in art and design. I always loved looking at paintings and whenever I was in London, many times the morning after being at a rave with friends the night before, I would make them come with me to the National Gallery so I could just marvel at these huge, well-crafted paintings. I was astonished by some of the paintings sheer scale, and use of colour and other formal arrangements. I wanted to become a painter and learn about painting materials.

DS: We've known each other many years now of course, and I remember the very early experiments on very different supports you were exploring - Wet and Dry sandpaper for instance - this being also the period when ideas and imagery of maybe forgotten and overlooked places became important to you. Probably all artists have had that moment of realisation, that art - and in our case painting specifically - offered a way to describe and communicate ideas about the world and our relation to it.

NE: Oh, gosh, yes, I remember this, now “Wet and Dry sandpaper” - that I spent a lot of time exploring this material. I was doing my BA Degree at this point. I was working with acrylic paints on sandpaper. I was even buying the material that allow you to make sandpaper. I was applying this to large scale MDF surfaces, where effectively I was making my own sandpaper. Once done I would begin painting on this very rough texture without trying to destroy the paint brush.

During my MA, I reached a point where I felt that the correct procedure in my development was to empty out my art practice of all existing references to the real world. This was a time of de-cluttering, purging, and reducing my paintings to a minimal abstract object. Over the course of my studies, I was getting into the aesthetics of measurement. It was at this point that I was thinking about the art I was making and its relationships to the exhibition space. The artists I was examining at the time were, Agnes Martin, Alan Charlton, Gunter Umberg, Gerhard Merz, Mel Bochner, to name a few. These artists work allowed me to question and explore the possibilities in what painting could be and look like. I read the book *Measuring the World* by Daniel Kehlmann. I found this book fascinating and I think, it has stayed with me.

A couple of years after graduating with an MA, in 2011, I turned away from this minimal, abstracted painted finish to embracing a realist, social derived aesthetic. I wanted to reflect more of my own cultural interests. To allow other things external to painting to influence my studio development. Bands such as the Specials, and their records like *Blank Expression* had a significant interest for me - in fact their black and white two-tone aesthetic inspired me to work in a greyscale. Even popular musical genres today such Dark Wave, Cold Wave and Post Gothic I listen to. Film directors such as Shane Meadows and Ken Loach have also had a big influence on my subject matter. Their style of Kitchen Sink drama has had its impact on my subject development.

As an artist I am constantly looking at the painting titled *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* by the artist Sir Luke Field, and I am often examining Duane Hanson's hyper-real sculptures as I am extremely fascinated by his subject matter. These artists inform my thinking.

DS: Much of your work has a quietness to it, indeed a very gentle poetry that gives rise to ideas and reflections about society and social relations. The quotidian everyday moments recorded that otherwise would have passed away unnoticed.

What is the drive that maintains this ‘type of image’ within a boundary given the unending possibilities that arise? Can you see lines of enquiry that lead elsewhere, but then ignore in order to stay within a very similar aesthetic terrain?

NE: Yes, well, this quietness is not intended as such, as I am not going out of my way to exaggerate this possibility within the motif. The photo that I potentially intend use to base a painting on is mainly selected for reasons of subject narrative. What I will say is I do prefer images that have less people as this allows a painted image to breathe and give the view less stress on the eyes (visual data).

Some of my paintings have occasionally been compared to the artist Vilhelm Hammershøi which I take as a compliment. If you know the artist works, then you probably see why these references are made. In some of my paintings we see someone reading alone or putting out the washing on a line in the backyard. Here is the silence, quietness, almost meditative, in their moment.

Actually, I would say that another level of quietness in relation to my painting has also much to do with scale. The scale with some of these works are small allowing the view a personal engagement with what they are examining. A silence is had between the behold and the painting. This is quite poetic. Even some of my paintings that have more than two people depicted there still has a quietness, even when a painted motif reveals something happening, a community of people entering a building for instance.

Well, of course there are many possibilities that can arise from various photos taken of various subjects, from subject to use of colour or working in a minimal/reductionist greyscale. The drive for image and narrative consistency is for an exhibition coherence. For me solo exhibitions are like chapters within a book, and here I would expect balance, consistency in content. So, yes, I am quite constrained with my over-all intended presentation. I often use photoshop as a tool for making sketches.

I try very hard to avoid distractions, wrong turnings, and hope to stay on the correct road re my long-term ambitions, which is not always easy when confronting potential issues in life. One sometimes has to deal with self-doubt and the black dog. So, I have chosen to focus on the working-class and petty bourgeoisie as the subject for my paintings within a minimal, grisaille aesthetic. So, ultimately, I am conscious of visual and content consistency, which has become quite important to me. This allows my process and thinking remain uncluttered.

DS: Often your figures are caught engaging in activities, or their own thoughts and tasks. You've spoken about the use of your camera phone. How do you collect your images, your source materials, and what is the role of accident in this gathering process, or is it something more determined?

NE: Yes, the paintings do capture ordinary folk engaging with mundane activities. These activities captured are varied depending on where I am at that moment, I could be sitting in the local café, or shops, or train station.

I am attracted to making works that show ordinary life, the things which go unnoticed, the boring moments that are normally relegated to simple faded memory. These moments can be perfect for a potential painting. When someone is getting on with activities, they have no time for posing, they then come across to the camera lens as natural. Most of the time they are not even aware I am there taking photos of them. I use a camera phone for this specific reason. It is a perfect tool for me to prevent myself from becoming conspicuous. I like to remain unnoticed when taking photos. Having my camera phone on me is like when artists from the past would have a pencil in their pocket and quickly sketched a picture when located in that moment. My camera phone is something for my toolbox.

I am not looking to make a load of noise, nor a quite picture. But instead I'm just looking for an image which conveys something about everyday politics. The images I make are birthed from out of my relationship with the environment or sympathy for a specific subject matter.

Here I would like to quote George Lukacs, which I believe underpins my conceptual concerns, "The Inner truth of the works of the great realists' rests on the fact that they arise from life itself, that their artistic characteristics are reflections of the social structure of life lived by the artist himself" PP.148 - *Studies in European Realism*.

This is my ongoing objective – to use my camera phone and capture lived experience, to generate images that arise from life itself. These images are defiantly moments in real time captured and then transmitted through the process of painting which trap the past as a frozen historical document.

I would like to add here that, although I use a camera phone to gather image data, I am not necessarily planning to make a painting at this point. This finding of potential images for painting normally arises from spending time surveying hundreds of JPEGs that are sitting on my PC via the use of Photoshop. while most of my photos I use to paint from are taken by me I do sometimes use photos that by others. However, the painting process has often gone through a process of editing. So, they are never quite the same as the original source.

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