

Mandy Payne

Interviews David Ainley

MP: How long have you been practising /making art and can you give a bit of background information as to how you come to be where you are now?

DA: As a son of the cloth, in childhood I explored churches and churchyards with my father, a FRHistS. I scrutinized stonework and drew in pen and ink. It was a stroke of good fortune that, rather than becoming an architectural apprentice, I was offered a place at Derby College of Art, a dynamic environment in the early '60s in which academicism was being challenged by contemporary approaches which introduced me to a world of art and culture. The Bauhaus-infused curriculum of Keith Richardson-Jones was disciplined and inspiring. Studies in art teaching ensued at Manchester School of Art/University and at the age of 21 I was, to my great surprise, appointed as Master in Charge of Art at the Joseph Wright Secondary School of Art in Derby. There followed a fifty-year-long career in full- and part-time posts which supported my studio practice. I taught at every level from infant school to post-graduate studies including teacher education. One strand throughout was part-time lecturing for the pioneering Nottingham University Department of Adult Education, initially in conjunction with the WEA. In 1982 I directed a national conference *Art, Leisure, Education, and Purpose* in London for NATFHE at which the critic Peter Fuller was characteristically controversial. I spoke at international conferences on Adult Education, lectured on British Council Summer Schools in *Landscape and Literature*, worked for Winsor & Newton as an education adviser and lectured in over twenty-five university and college fine art departments. Whilst an art student I began exhibiting. My first solo show was at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham (1966) and was well reviewed in *The Guardian*. Over the years I have greatly valued the professional company and friendship of colleagues in collaborative ventures including the innovative Derby Group (1962-68) exhibiting extensively in the UK and in 1969 was invited to become a member of the prestigious Midland Group, Nottingham where I served on fine art, photography, performance and management committees. I was one of a small group who managed the Research Group for Artists Publications (RGAP) (2004-2012). Robert Priseman invited me to become a member of Contemporary British Painting in 2014.

MP: You live in Bolehill , a village above Wirksworth, in Derbyshire, in a landscape with a history of quarrying and lead mining, how has this location influenced your work?

DA: I have absorbed and learnt about this landscape and its people since my teenage years. The extraordinary geology between limestone and gritstone underlies the history of extractive

industries which are at its heart. It is a place born of hidden hard labour which is inscribed on its fields and in its buildings. It has shaped my thinking.

MP: Landscape and labour are two concepts that inform your work, can you discuss this a bit more?

DA: From the Gang Vein, on the limestone plateau, I can look to the north towards Matlock Dale, a spectacular landscape depicted by Joseph Wright of Derby, Alexander and John Robert Cozens, and Philip de Loutherbourg. The seductions of that panoramic view hold danger for an unwary walker. When first I knew this place numerous lead mine shafts were open, traps for the unwary, often disguised by thorn bushes and nettles. My eyes and thoughts turned underground. There, like Auden in Northumberland, I dropped pebbles and ‘the reservoir of darkness stirred’. I later learnt that miners making repetitive strokes with small picks had quarried in hard rock to excavate levels often at about a handspan a day in search of the then valuable lead ore, galena. I recognise a present-day parallel in the extraction of rare earths used in the manufacture of modern electronic technology and am especially mindful of people in, for example, the DRC who work in artisanal small-scale mines. Their effort is often disregarded. Human labour is a relatively unrepresented subject in landscape painting.

MP: Minimalism, materialism, and a multilayered, rigorous systems-based approach are reflected in your work. Can you expand a little on your process?

DA: My interest in systems can be traced to studies I made in biomorphism in the 1960s. Paul Klee’s *The Thinking Eye* and *The Nature of Nature*, Sir D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson’s *On Growth and Form*, C.H. Waddington’s *Behind Appearance: A Study of the Relations between Painting and the Natural Sciences in This Century* and *Sensitive Chaos: Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air* by Theodor Schwenk were my significant influences. In the early 1970s I devised a systems-based approach in which the process of painting was pre-determined. Paintings that Mark Lancaster was making in 1970 were a stimulus. The *Life Game* of the mathematician John Horton Conway lay at the root of my work. The history of each painting’s production was embodied in its colour and layers. Subsequently as I returned to a concern with landscape, and as my interests in labour developed, the conventions of landscape painting such as a fixed viewpoint, the division of space into foreground middle-distance and background and compositional devices in relation to framing did not meet my needs. Nor did the beguiling effects of atmospheric abstraction. I did not want to simply illustrate the labour of mining but to make something that addressed the slow perception of something easily overlooked. I loosened the rigour of my earlier systems approach and eventually began to work in multiple layers of monochrome each one of which was drawn through numerous times with a blade before it was overpainted. At each stage traces of the previous layers were evident. The slow and repetitive process involved evoked the pickwork of miners, some of which is described as ‘woodpecker work’. I adopted the basic form of a

cross which was physically cut from the panel: a simple idea that related to the removal of stone and ore from a hillside. The edges of the cut forms which were sometimes turned when reinserted or even moved between paintings became a particular feature having a variety of subtle characteristics. Research into specific mines led to the incorporation of lines derived from the topography of mapped ore deposits. These 'veins' or 'lodes' were sawn through the panels and were extended into drilled holes, 'shafts'. Apart from my landscape-related works, I have made occasional paintings of the figure which have a simplicity of form that acknowledges early Cycladic sculpture and a small number of 'history paintings' in which specific works by other artists (e.g. Piero della Francesca) have been deconstructed through analysis of their colours then re-painted layer upon layer of monochrome.

MP: What mediums do you work in and what affects your choice?

DA: Oils, acrylics and watercolours and, for drawing, a wide range of graphic media including pencils with all degrees of hardness, pens, ink, graphite, crayons of many kinds. Fine watercolour papers are important. I use mediums to adjust the flow and transparency of watercolours. I have a range of brushes including some of very high quality and others that are 'adjusted' such as scrubbing brushes with some bristles cut out. Nowadays I tend to use oils only for glazing. I 'draw' in paintings with saws of different kinds, drills and knives. The various qualities of steel and blades' sharpness from an initial cut to the blunter, wider, points of those that have been used innumerable times are characteristics I employ with varying pressure and speed when drawing lines through acrylic layers the hardness and character of which I adjust through the use of mediums and drying times.

MP: Tell us about your studio...

DA: My studio is at home and has a view towards the Gulf Fault and Middlepeak Quarry in the west. It has skylights. Visitors are sometimes impressed that I have a large library of books. There is a comfortable chair and a writing desk, but no computer there. My 'archive' of paintings and drawings, sources of reference, documentation and works in progress (some of them years old) may give a greater impression of orderliness than is the reality. Generally I work standing at a bench with my paintings flat or watercolours propped on a board.

MP: Do you keep sketchbooks?

DA: Not in any conventional sense. I have sometimes kept books in which patches of painted colour are accompanied by notes. What, I guess, might serve as sketchbooks are painterly investigations on small sheets of board or in numerous drawings and studies. I have a habit of writing quick notes on slips of paper which I subsequently have trouble deciphering.

MP: Do your paintings start with a drawing or are you ever influenced by photography?

DA: Almost always a painting is preceded by numerous drawings, often on tracing- or graph-paper. I keep photographs as a source of reference of places visited but they don't directly influence my paintings.

MP: What scale are your paintings? Do you tend to stick to a certain size? What is the largest / smallest size of your paintings?

DA: In *The Quarrying Series* I determined that the paintings should be my own height and very narrow so that viewers would scan them from top to bottom, contrary to the way in which landscapes are normally viewed. For many years now I have made paintings in a square format about 61 cm square and set in a larger frame, or 33 cm x 28 cm. Drawings and other works on paper range from 83 cm x 63 cm to 22 cm x 15 cm or smaller.

MP: You did a painting entitled *The Significance of Unfinished Work*. How do you know when a painting is finished and is titling important in your practice? Does the idea of a title provide the impetus to make a work?

DA: I always seek to achieve an 'object-quality' in my work before it leaves the studio. This demands multiple layers. When in 1970 I began to make works in response to John Horton Conway's *Life Game* I adopted a rigorous approach in which the stages of the painting were pre-determined and pursued until, according to the rules of the system, it was finished. Subsequently I relaxed this practice to include elements of chance. Though clearly any painting involves a process it is important to distinguish between one which is employed simply as a necessary technical procedure in the making of a product and, as in my case, one in which content is embodied in the activity. 'Painting', the verb, evident in 'painting', the object. W. H. Auden's assertion, following Paul Valéry, that a poem is never finished only abandoned resonates with me. Mines and quarries when abandoned will often retain a licence for re-opening which may happen after years of naturalising. My paintings are sometimes revisited after years of lying dormant, even occasionally after exhibition. I try to give my paintings titles that relate to their content, sometimes with specific topographical references.

MP: If you had to pick one painting by another artist as a favourite, what would you choose?

DA: A wonderful painting to which I often return is *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion*, 1648, by Nicolas Poussin, in the collection of The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. Anthony Blunt admired Poussin's "Classical ideals of reason, harmony, balance, economy, moderation, clarity and concentration." Discussing the *froideur* of this classicism, Richard Verdi quoted the artist's claim that "he could sing different tunes at the same time" and remarked that "The telltale use of colour denotes a passionate temperament seething beneath a cool and classical façade." Aside from Poussin's historical content derived from Plutarch I

would be pleased if the formal qualities referred to by Blunt and Verdi were recognised in my painting, always as aspiration and sometimes in achievement.

MP: Which artists /writers/ musicians have most influenced your work throughout your career?

DA: I am very chary about answering this question as there are so many that I might mention. Numerous artists have been an influence, as often as not in determining what I do not want to do. I like Gustav Mahler's apophthegm "Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire." Piero della Francesca, Paul Cezanne and Paul Klee are at the heart of things. Seeing Mark Rothko's paintings at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1961 was an epiphany. I find nourishment in the attitudes and processes of genuinely creative people in many spheres perhaps especially composers, poets and choreographers. In British landscape painting Prunella Clough and Peter Lanyon embodied content to which I relate whilst evolving inventive and personal approaches to imagery. I painted through a period when there was much talk of 'the death of painting' in which landscape as a genre was at the lowest level and I found that the most innovative work was made by artists who worked in media other than paint including Robert Smithson, Michelle Stuart and Richard Long. I have a particular regard for those whose innovations have dug deep into the essence of painting in reductive form where there is an intense focus on specific subtle qualities in, for example, the monochrome, the grid and through repetition. Kasimir Malevich, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Ryman and Agnes Martin have an enduring appeal. Their successors including Brice Marden, Simon Callery and Maria Lalic who have introduced other layers of content are inspirational.

In poetry alongside W.H. Auden and T.S. Eliot, Robert Lax and Lorine Niedecker, whose 'condensery' remains a lodestar, Thomas A. Clark and Peter Riley are important. Small press publications by for example Coracle Press of Simon Cutts and Erica Van Horn engage me. I find elements that correspond to my approaches to visual art in the music of John Cage, Morton Feldman, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Bill Evans, Howard Skempton and Caroline Shaw. The performances and writings of the pianist Philip Thomas have been an especially great enrichment. Ewan McColl and John Tams resonate with my interest in social history. In dance Merce Cunningham and Wayne McGregor's choreographic inventiveness inspire me. My library includes books and journals on mining history and cultural geography alongside art, music and literature. The writings of Lucy Lippard, Edward S. Casey and Tim Ingold have also been important sources of reference.

MP: Your work is beautifully minimalist but also multi-layered, and epitomises the notion of slow painting, as the viewer requires time to observe its hidden depths and subtleties. What would you like the viewer to take away with them when looking at your work?

DA: A positive response may not be easily articulated in words. Adrian Stokes wrote that “The great work is surrounded by silence.” My paintings and drawings invite contemplation. There can be emotional and intellectual reactions. Viewers’ perception of content below and beyond what immediately hits the eye develops over time and when the character of a painting is lodged in memory it has the potential to expand insights into landscape and its representation beyond conventional imagery. I like to think that someone might carry paintings of mine in their mind’s eye when they are out in landscape.

MP: I would imagine your paintings are difficult to photograph accurately. Does this ever cause problems? Do you photograph your paintings yourself or have you ever had them scanned digitally?

DA: Yes. Though I have done myself no favours in making paintings that are difficult to photograph I assert the particularity of the unique work. Viewers who see my paintings at first hand often express surprise at their qualities. I think that few paintings are satisfactorily reproduced in a single photograph however good that might be. Changing qualities of light and the distance and angle from which a work is viewed are significant in its appearance. I should probably have sought more help with photographing my own work.

MP: I had the pleasure of being one of your students on the Part Time BA Fine Art course where you taught Art Practice and Theory at the University of Nottingham and I always looked forward to your erudite crits and observations. You had a long and established career in education, how did you find juggling the demands of teaching commitments with your own work and what have been the biggest challenges to your practice?

DA: I appreciate your generous recollection Mandy. Thank you. Teaching has been a privilege. I always viewed it as an activity in which I would learn and I have taught in a wide variety of circumstances often with inspirational colleagues. I relished many opportunities for innovation and experiment in formal and informal situations. Developing combined studies degrees was very rewarding. In teacher education I had a particular focus on creativity and the study of children’s drawings. *Art and the Built Environment*, a Schools Council project in which I was a co-ordinator was, in the words of Colin Ward, “developed at a time when ideas of child centred learning, social justice and participatory democracy permeated educational thinking.” A curriculum model for primary years which I created underlay a substantial and extensively illustrated book *Form and Freedom in Art Teaching and Learning* (unpublished) based on my work in a group of schools. Many of the underlying principles have been in my mind in my work at all levels. Though inevitably it was time that might have been spent in my own studio practice I have seen teaching as a part of my art, at its best a creative and experimental endeavour. I have, in higher education, sought to help students recognise a repertoire of possibilities in which a decision to paint was to be practised for its particularity in the light of other approaches through which their ideas might be addressed. I am pleased

that former students have found a variety of forms through which to practise. Teaching was both energising and exhausting.

MP: How do you balance your arts practice and personal life?

DA: I try not to concern myself with what increasingly feels an unrealistic desire for balance. All time is precious and that available for regular studio practice particularly so. The happiest periods are when I have a rhythm, even if it is staccato. There is no need to wait for inspiration. Work in progress invites attention whenever an opportunity arises. Problems in art fill my mind whether I am in my studio or not. I carry imagery in my head.

MP: What are you working on now? Have you any upcoming projects?

DA: As my eyesight has deteriorated my artistic vision remains undimmed and my focus sharper. There is much still to achieve making, organising and, in a miners' phrase for raising ore to the surface, bringing my project to grass, DV.

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