

Iain Andrews

Interviews Andrew Muñoz

IA: Could I start off by asking you about your journey to becoming a painter? I'm often surprised how rarely this question comes up in artist interviews, and although it's tempting to plunge straight into talking about the work, I'd be interested to hear your journey. I've been struck by the amount of painters whom I've talked to who have said that their journey began very early in their life, at primary school and I've been thinking a lot recently about something Ken Kiff said, along the lines of "If you want to make a real difference on the art world, don't teach at the Royal College, teach in a primary school." Perhaps you could also say something about your experience of early art education too?

AM: My earliest memory of drawing is not at school at all. In fact, from primary to secondary, I have no memory of drawing or painting. However, I do have clear memories of drawing and doodling with my grandmother at a very young age. My parents had no interest the arts generally, and none of my childhood drawings remain. My grandmother would have kept some but unfortunately, they've been lost too. Considering that childhood memory has been a subject of my work, I do feel a sense of loss about this as they would have been an invaluable resource for paintings.

I continued to draw primarily through my childhood to teenage, but school life (and home life) was not a good experience for me due to my family situation and this resulted in me leaving with no qualifications whatsoever. I had a vague notion of wanting to go to art college but back then you needed A levels and the visiting careers officer at school told me it would not be possible and that I should follow a different career. I was offered a carpentry and joinery apprenticeship as I was good at woodwork, and with pressure from my father, I accepted it.

During my apprenticeship, I was always drawing but I did not discover paint until I was around 24 and became obsessed very quickly. I started night school to get four A-levels, did a foundation course, and then got a place at Falmouth at 27.

IA: You studied away from the pull of the London art colleges – at both Falmouth and Plymouth. Having followed a similar path myself, at least to begin with I studied at Aberystwyth. I wondered if you might like to talk a bit about how being away from that central hub of activity, energy and opportunity might have impacted upon your development as a painter? In my experience being on the edge of things brings with it both advantages and challenges, and perhaps you'd like to speak about how your style and vision have developed outside of the main crucible?

AM: The main reason I chose Falmouth was to stay close to my kids who lived in Cornwall, but it also had a very good reputation at the time, being in the top five, and one of the best outside of London. Its isolation was conducive to an atmosphere of an independent art school and a refreshing sense of freedom from the trends and pretentious antics of Goldsmiths and Saint Martins for example. You could say that there was a kind of counter movement there. I feel that my work there was free of the group think that was going on in London and particularly within the Saatchi stable at the time, and therefore perhaps my vision developed more individually and more naturally.

IA: There's a danger as a therapist of psychopathologising but, when I look at your work I respond to a sense of menace and dislocation. In paintings such as *See Saw* and *Das Kind* for example, there is (for me) a palpable sense of quiet horror, things don't fit and there are gaps where I'm looking for answers. I enjoy this in the way that I enjoyed being terrified watching the film *Poltergeist* as a child, as the filmmaker made the TV screen that I was watching it on become part of the device that unsettled me. In a world where we've become saturated with horrific imagery on our devices, painting seems to offer a quieter sense of unease, like a well told ghost story. Would you like to talk about that sense of menace in your work?

AM: A consistent theme of my work is childhood memory, and I certainly remember many traumatic events in my own childhood. I was especially sensitive to violence; physical and psychological; not just based on personal experience but on a societal level. It was this which perhaps led to a strong fascination early on with war; I was also aware that my grandfather had been a soldier in the Spanish civil war. I remember that he hardly ever spoke, and never about the war. I started to read compulsively about the history. after he died. I later learned from other family members that he had witnessed his mother and sister being shot against a wall by Franco's fascists. There is a particularly vicious side to civil war. The wars in Bosnia, Rwanda, Yemen, Syria, Libya etc. have shown us the extremes of brutality, cruelty, and inhumanity. It seems that hatred can be intensified the closer we are and reinforces the idea that love and hate are two sides of the same coin. This duality is a recurring theme in my work. I'm not interested in painting images of war, although I have certainly been influenced by war photographers such as Don McCullin and Robert Capa. In my work these references are subtle and indirect, and over the years I've become less interested in images or news footage of war, but more the potential of violence and isolation that can be seen in ordinary social situations. The figures that I depict are isolated and at odds with their environment, and society; characters that unsettle the viewer and as you say, permeate a quiet sense of unease. I see them as similar to the people in Diane Arbus photographs or, although much more subtle, the Russian destitute drug addicts and prostitutes that Boris Mikhailov photographs. Interesting that you should mention ghost stories as my painting *Hum* is based on a short ghost story set in wartime that I wrote about an elderly couple 'living' beneath a lake, in hiding from the villagers who drowned them. The figures in my work are like ghosts;

elements of my imagination that fade in and out, not only psychologically but physically through the process of painting.

IA: I noticed that you were included in the exhibition *Strange Worlds* that responded to the works of Angela Carter. Her stories have had a big impact on me as a painter, particularly the way in which she re works and retells Faery Tales. There is often a corresponding sense of unease and blatant sexuality in her work, and I think of a painting of yours like *Ablution* and her re working of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set in a rain drenched English wood where she takes ostensibly loveable faerie characters and makes them fearsome and alien. In what ways does your work draw upon existing stories, either hers or by other writers?

AM: Actually, the work shown was *The Bather* and it was not a response to Carter's work but selected by the curator for its associated theme; the aforementioned duality and also the idea that 'Nothing is as it seems', nor is it otherwise'. *The Bather* was a representation of a figure walking in from the sea; the figure is neither male nor female (or both) and has a resemblance of a Victorian scientific figure (Darwin). I suppose that's a reworking of sorts. A more obvious reworking would be my painting *Telly Tubbies*, where in a similar way to Carter, I've taken the four characters and presented them as elderly figures in a very different environment. Another painting *The Painted Birds* was created after reading the book of the same name by Jerzy Kozinski; a tale of a young boy experiencing the horrors of war alone after being torn from his parents. The painting is of my own children and turned out very dark after reading the book. The title comes from the practice of using a brightly coloured bird to catch other (plainer) birds who swoop down to attack it as it is different. So, to answer your question, writers have inspired me to make paintings and I have read a lot of Carter since the exhibition.

IA: Paintings such as *Hymnologist* and *Auto-baptism* have, for me, a sense of decay and removal about them. As though I am a voyeur, looking at a glitching transmission from a distant country, somewhere that I would only like to visit if I was guaranteed a return ticket. I'm conscious too of their titles, alluding to a faith which for many people belongs to an older generation and is no longer part of contemporary life. I am thinking here of painting as a means of recording loss and decay, both in terms of subject matter and process. Would you like to say something about the process of how you go about making a work, both in terms of concept and materials?

AM: There is an intended reference in certain past works to the concept of Nature being as much an intellectual construct as any ideology. I place my 'characters' in these constructed 'natural' environments to see what happens and how one helps to create the other. This was certainly the case with *Auto-baptism* which started with me finding some ripped, filthy clothes abandoned on a riverbank. Many paintings start this way; with a memory, experience or concept, and during the work they may get subsumed by what happens with the paint or

another thought process or completed lost altogether. In terms of material process, I tend to start with quick drawings and mono-prints from imagination or memory. I may use photographs to assist in the representational elements and I'm always taking photographs of green areas if they suggest an idea of starting point.

IA: Following on from this, could you say something about the relationship between the formal qualities of the paint application, in terms of gesture, colour etc as a possible subject matter in and of itself. For example, in a painting like *Still Life (Severn Beach)* I can see an enjoyment of the process of mark making, and it's tempting to let the response remain here, but I am led off by recognisable elements in both the title and the picture, and by almost recognisable shapes and forms to create a narrative. Do you have a view on whether the viewer reads the painting in formal terms or responds imaginatively through the construction of a narrative? I am thinking here of something Francis Bacon said about wanting to say something in paint "without the boredom of a narrative?"

AM: I don't like to inflict a narrative on the viewer or feed it to them. I like to think that both the materials and any sense of narrative connect, and both operate as ways into the painting and that's just the way I currently work. Of course, I'm interested in the language of paint and the abstract nature of the materials, and I try to incorporate those formal elements into my work just as any good painter does. As painters, we appreciate them, enjoy them, yearn for them even, but I think if the subject is purely about the materiality of the paint with no other entry point, it can render the meaning somewhat inaccessible. I understand what Bacon meant but as far as I know, he used both.

IA: What makes you continue to make paintings?

AM: Throughout the thirty years that I have been painting seriously, it has made me poor, miserable and isolated. I have felt exploited, overlooked, pigeon-holed, patronised and pilloried. And yet I continue. Painting grounds me when it's successful and challenges me when it is not. I am still discovering it, and therefore my potential. I still believe that the personal philosophy expressed through my work could be of interest to others and society in general, even though I am an aging, white, straight man. And I still believe that my next work will be better than the last. And as long as I believe that I will continue.

IA: If there was a painter, alive or dead, with whom you would like to have a conversation, who would you choose and why?

AM: Goya. Of all artists past and present, he is the one I go to for inspiration. He was fearless in his critique of society. He risked everything to produce what he wanted with this work. His *Caprichos*, *Disasters of War*, and *Disparates* etchings are for me, some of the most imaginative in the history of representational drawing. And despite falling out of favour,

isolation through deafness, the famine, poverty, cruelty that he witnessed, and the tragic events in his personal life, he kept working doggedly almost as if in defiance of death itself, and with the Black paintings which he started at 73 years old he was producing the most powerful, mysterious and controversial work of his life. After talking about materials and technique for a couple of days, I would ask him about optimism and humour; Apparently, he had both in spades.

IA: Finally, are there any current projects or works in the pipeline that you would like to mention?

AM: I'm continuing to work on small scale drawings, prints and etchings for future paintings. I recently lost my home and studio and I've had to join the van dwelling 'community'. As a consequence, my work has become scaled down and I feel like I'm going back to basics for a while; a kind of reassessment is taking place and that can sometimes be productive.

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