

# Natalie Dowse

## Interviews Phil Illingworth

ND: For the benefit of those who may not know your work, how would you describe your practice?

PI: My practice is very mixed, and experimental. I work in the expanded fields of painting and drawing, sound and video, and sculpture.

ND: You say that you work in the expanded field of painting, could you go into that a little more and explain the relationship between your work and painting?

PI: I used to work in a more traditional manner, that is to say paint on canvas, drawing on paper and so forth, but around 15 years ago I moved away from that into much more experimental stuff and away from the flat rectangle into three dimensions. We live in a three-dimensional world and I wanted to explore those relationships. I found it incredibly exciting and liberating.

ND: You also mentioned that you work with video, sound, and in sculpture. Could you go into that in a little more depth?

PI: I tend to be driven by ideas rather than process, and the reason my practice is so mixed is because it's my way of expressing these ideas. Sound and video speak for themselves I suppose. I'm aware that the sculptural work might be less easy for the onlooker to differentiate, since a lot of the painting is three dimensional. I'm very clear about the boundaries between my painting and sculpture, so when I start a work I have a clear understanding in my head as to whether it's about painting or about sculpture, so whilst some of the painting work is three dimensional, I'm clear that it is about painting. There's other work which is quite distinctly sculpture.

ND: Obviously there is a fine line between your painting and your sculptural work, so the pieces that you would consider in your mind to be painting, what is it about those pieces that put it in that domain? Is it for example the materials you use, or is it something else?

PI: It's quite instinctive actually. There's a point when I'm going through the process of making a piece of work that I might decide it's not actually about painting, and either I'll stop making it or I will continue it as a sculpture. Those distinctions, for me at least, shouldn't be blurred. Historically, of course, that there should be a distinction is a relatively recent conceit.

ND: So how much do you use the wet stuff - actual physical wet paint as we know it, or does that manifest itself in different ways?

PI: Most of the work involves the wet stuff at some point, but I also toy with the idea of pigment coming from sources other than from a tube. In other words colour needn't come from a tube or a jar in order to be

useful. I often use materials that are already pigmented in some way, and I have used natural materials such as ground turmeric powder, or by creating copper oxide, or charring wood for example. The wet stuff does appear but I deploy it just as selectively as everything else.

ND: Thinking about paint and the alternatives you use, I wonder if you could tell me how important colour is in your work?

PI: Colour's a funny thing, for me at least. In a lot of works the colour is quite arbitrary. Quite often in making a piece of work I won't think about colour at all until very late in the process. If the work is about painting there has to be colour of some form in there somewhere, but I try not to make it *about* the colour, rather more than about painting. There seems to be bit of a contradiction there, but it is about the history and traditions, the medium, the processes of painting that I am exploring, so colour itself isn't necessarily the key ingredient. I say the colour is arbitrary, but of course there has to be some subliminal, or subconscious decision-making at some point. I doubt I'd make colour decisions in the same way as I might if I were approaching painting from a different standpoint.

ND: Yes that's a really interesting point. You say it's arbitrary but obviously it can't totally be by chance, so do you deliberately pick colours that might clash, or do you just go with the flow? I am thinking particularly of pieces I know where you have painted the edges in a series of colour blocks. I was wondering whether you follow a code, perhaps you pre-mix a lot of colours, or do you just try and free your mind of those things?

PI: Well in practice it depends on the work. Sometimes I will find a colour that just appeals to me, sometimes I consider the physicality of the work and make decisions accordingly. It's fair to say that I do often create quite shocking colour combinations, and again that's part of the decision-making process I suppose. A work you are referring to specifically - *The parasite and the host* - I set out to try and randomise the colour as much as possible. I started by breaking the colour area into different sized sections, pretty much randomly. I started with a colour and added other colours, but quite ad hoc. So for example I would add, say, crimson to blue and use whatever came out, even if the colours seemed a little bit odd. Then I might start with a Naples yellow, maybe add some blue, or red, some white, maybe Paynes' grey, whatever came to hand, and let the colour lead the way. That is as close as I felt I could get to being genuinely random in the colour decision process. The weird thing was that when I counted the colour blocks out of my own curiosity there were exactly 100 - but that was genuinely pure coincidence.

ND: Oh I can see how that would work. So it wasn't just one continuously changing pot of colour?

PI: No not quite, I started with maybe half a dozen base colours, and as I added colours, I separated some of them out and mixed colour 'A' with two other colours to get two more colours, and so on. But I would still have starter colour 'A' to work with, and to which I would add completely different colours. They grew exponentially and I ended up with lots and lots of little pots of colour to use.

ND: I'm almost seeing little probability diagrams in my head as you go down a certain colour journey.

When I see your artworks, and the whole list of what I might like to call ingredients that go into making your work, I wonder if you could talk about the variety of often quite unusual materials you use?

PI: Yeah, in actual fact the materials are key. I seek out specific materials to express a specific idea, and not just materials but sometimes processes. I often have to effectively re-invent the wheel to make something, and I often have to learn new skills to enable me to execute a particular piece of work. The downside of it is that I need a lot of tools and equipment, I need a large store of materials, or I have to spend time trawling the internet to locate something that I maybe haven't used before, or I'm not even sure exists in some instances. My research leads me to new materials, which might spark something else, and so on. This plays a huge part: the selection of materials, the decisions about how I am going to machine say, MDF, or metal, or plastics, all of which go into the making and creative processes.

ND: I note that in some of your works you use existing objects, and what look like antique objects, which I guess may be a nod to the readymade. But I think you take that a step further by integrating these things with other materials. Would you like to elaborate on that?

PI: Yes, there is definitely a nod to the readymade. I acquire materials and objects that appeal to me for one reason or another, and often a reason I'm not quite sure of yet. I keep those materials and objects in my head so to speak, and think about them or how I might use them. Sometimes I'll have something specific in mind, other times not. I use these objects in conjunction with other materials and processes to create work in ways which resonate.

ND: You've touched on some of your process there, I was just wondering where you might get your ideas from?

PI: Mostly they are entirely spontaneous. I imagine a part of my brain must be whirring away on its own: I might be listening to music, or travelling, or in conversation with someone, and an idea will pop into my head which I scribble down in my notebook. My notebook is very special to me. It is a repository for every idea, good or bad, and I go back to those little scribbles some time later and choose one to develop. Other times my materials might suggest an indication of a route I want to take. I allow ideas to develop from a different kind of seed. There's a closer relationship to Abstract Expressionism than you might expect.

ND: You say that your notebook is very special to you. Is it a private thing or do you ever show those scribbles or sketches?

PI: I rarely show what's in my notebooks, maybe the odd page. You're probably the only person to have seen any of them in their entirety. I tend to keep them to myself because I find that discussing my ideas *desaturates* them I think - weakens them. So I like to keep things to myself until I am ready to show the completed work.

ND: Do you ever feel tempted to show work in progress? Some artists do and some don't - one outlet for that would be social media. Do you ever show anything incomplete or are you careful just to show complete works?

PI: There was an artist some years ago, I can't remember who, who said they never show work in progress because it takes the energy out of the work. That struck a chord with me to some extent: the work should be seen in its final form. But there is pressure to maintain a presence on social media, so to get round that I will occasionally show little portions of a work in progress, just, I suppose, to show the world I'm actually doing something rather than having disappeared off the face of the planet. I will reveal bits and pieces, and that is as far as I am usually prepared to go. I used to be a lot more concerned about maintaining a social media presence than I am now. I decided that I could quite happily take the pressure off myself and not succumb. The algorithms may be against me, but so be it.

ND: I am very aware that you have very intriguing titles for much of your work, for example, *Fallacy of the beard* and *Apocalypso*. I was just wondering how you arrive at these titles and whether they have any hidden meaning, or are they simply identifiers for the work?

PI: They are rarely just identifiers, I like to utilise titles. I occasionally note down potential titles in my notebook, and if I need a title for a piece I can refer to that list to see if there is one that suits. I often use titles that have no meaning whatsoever, and that can be as significant. Other times the title is deeply connected to the work and which I consider to be as important as the media, intrinsic to the work. I'm very interested in ideas of truth and perceptions of truth. Researching into this led me to the *Fallacy of the Beard*, aka the Continuum Fallacy, and the Sorites Paradox. *Apocalypso* is a portmanteau I made up - it feels perfectly apposite in the current climate where we're metaphorically dancing whilst the world is falling apart around us. There are undertones in much of my work that don't reveal themselves readily. Titles can be useful signposts.

ND: Did the covid lockdowns have any impact on your practice?

PI: They had a huge impact, but not in the way I might have expected. Being in a situation where we were suddenly isolated from the usual distractions I should have been in my element, having all the time I needed to be able to make my work. But as lockdowns progressed I started to get wrapped up in politics, you know, the terrible number of people dying, the PPE scandals, emerging signs of dodgy contracts, and I began to delve into the nitty gritty of what was going on. It became obsessive and soon had me so angry and so upset that it pretty much stopped me thinking about my work altogether. In some ways it seemed pointless making art when all of this was going on. I had enormous trouble containing the anger I felt arising from it all. I think I could have gone mad, and had to make a concerted effort to limit myself from going too deep. In the end, in a roundabout way, it led to a shift in the subjects I want to explore in my work - less toward talking about painting per se, and far more into the sociopolitical thinking I was addressing in earlier works. I'm still angry by the way.

ND: So obviously it's had quite an influence on your work and the way you are thinking and you say you have now been able to channel that. Are there any other influences that you would like to talk about?

PI: I would say that early on, when I was a student, my biggest influence was probably Robert Rauschenberg. His work left a great impression on me, and his approach is perhaps something that remains with me. I would say beyond that, everything we look at, everything we see, everything we experience is an influence in some way. And to say that I was/am influenced by any one or more artists would be only part of the answer. I'm happy to say I like a particular artist - I like a lot of artists - but I can't think of any I would say directly influence me in a way I consciously recognise.

ND: It is interesting that you mention Rauschenberg and I can see clear parallels. Not so much in the execution of the work, but in your wide ranging use of different media. I am thinking particularly about his *Bed* - I'm sure I recall once reading that as well as the bed cover and paint, even blood and toothpaste were listed among the materials. I can imagine that when you were a young student seeing that work would have been quite an experience for you.

PI: There was a large exhibition of his work at Tate Modern in 2016. It was something of a pilgrimage for me, and I got to see much of his work in the flesh for the very first time. My own work *Extra Heavy* is titled after a piece of text collaged onto the base of *Monogram*.

ND: What are you working on at the moment?

PI: I have a solo exhibition lined up for about a year from now, so for the foreseeable future I envisage that I will mostly be making new work for that.

ND: If you don't mind telling us, what's in the studio right now?

PI: I'm working on a piece which is kind of a riff on a Constructivist piece from the mid 1960s. It's an idea I have been kicking around for quite a few years and I finally decided I was ready to make it. It is a kinetic piece, other than that I don't want to reveal any more at the minute.

ND: It's always difficult isn't it when you are working towards a show, as to whether you reveal any of the work. It harks back to the question I asked you earlier about putting work in progress on social media. I guess artists approach it in different ways. Do you think that much of your new work for the exhibition will be kept under wraps?

PI: My intention is probably to keep it under wraps, although if I make work in the intervening period that isn't for that show I may share it. I'd like to present the work I'm making for the exhibition at the event rather than beforehand.

ND: Earlier, when you were talking about your notebooks you hinted that your work takes along time. What would you define as a long time with your practice, how long does it take for work to come to fruition?

PI: Sometimes, quite literally decades. In the last ten years I've made work that I initially conceived when I was a student and mentally kicked around on and off ever since. There are lots of reasons - often I wasn't entirely sure how I wanted to manifest them, other times it was a case of waiting until the time felt right. Typically, the gestation period - the time between when that spark of an idea I noted down in my sketchbook and the work arriving in the real world - is lengthy. I go over and over these ideas in my head - that's where most of the developmental work takes place. I rarely make intermediate sketches, other than for the purpose of resolving technical issues, and often I produce working drawings for jigs and templates and things like that. Other times work can be completed very quickly, I'll become greatly enthused by an idea and get straight on with it. To the exclusion of everything else.

**Interview completed 22 September 2024**