David Ainley
Interviews Mandy Payne

DA: I first met you in 2011 when you embarked on the six-year part-time Fine Art (Honours) Degree Course at the University of Nottingham. You were coming to the end of a successful 25-year long career in the NHS specialising in Children's Dentistry in the Community and in Hospital Dental Services. What was it that led you to take this step?

MP: When I first started the degree course I was still working part-time as a Community Dentist. I had just completed a 3-year part-time HND in Fine Art in Sheffield and this course made me realise that art was what I really wanted to do with the rest of my life. I had heard great things about the BA course in Nottingham and was fortunate that credits earned from the HND enabled me to join in year 5.

In my final year of the degree course, when I had started to exhibit more, I decided to resign from the NHS to work as a full-time artist. I was juggling a lot of things at the time, teenage children and a demanding job and wanted to focus more of my efforts on my art. It was a very difficult decision to leave the security of my day job, but it was something I had plotted and planned for many years and the time felt right.

DA: Are there, I wonder, aspects of dentistry that provided you with skills, attitudes or insights that have underpinned or nourished your practice as an artist.

MP: I think there are many transferable skills. From the obvious that both professions are creative and involve (in my case) quite detailed work, to the handling of materials (we worked with dental plaster and stone to make false teeth as dental students so mixing concrete seemed fairly straightforward!). Other more mundane things like timekeeping, responding quickly to emails, multitasking, and working with the public which have become ingrained after working so long in the NHS have served me well professionally as an artist.

DA: Though you deem them 'mundane' the combination of life skills you mention is enviable. We will return to matters of manual dexterity later in this discussion.

MP: I think the most important thing I gained from my old day job which has hugely informed my artistic practice is how I look at things. Within the NHS I always worked in areas of high social need, often with marginalised sections of the community, and I think this is why I am drawn to the locations I paint. These are often places that are similarly overlooked, undervalued and disenfranchised.

DA: You very soon identified subject matter which has gone on to be a preoccupation. What was it about the buildings and urban environments that first engaged you?

MP: I have always been interested in architecture (I very nearly studied it instead of dentistry) but my love of Brutalism probably started at an early age as I grew up on the outskirts of Bradford and school was a large concrete comprehensive built by Chamberlin, Powell and Bon (the architects of the Barbican). During my studies at Nottingham I started exploring the Park Hill Estate in my home town of Sheffield.

Park Hill is one of Europe's largest Grade II* listed structures which is undergoing regeneration. At this time (2011/12), it was in a state of flux. Most of the original tenants had been decanted but a few were still living there. There was such a contrast between the newly developed and the old parts of the estate (which were largely boarded up) that it felt important to document this state of transition, together with the loss of the existing community. I interviewed past residents and people who had worked on the estate and was struck by how most of the people who had lived there in the early days had really loved the place and had happy memories. Their recollections seemed to live up to the utopian dream which was in stark contrast to Park Hill's latter-day reputation as a sink estate. I became fascinated by its social history and reputation, the notions of utopias/ dystopias/modernism and all that was happening around the time of construction of estates like Park Hill: the creation of the welfare state, the NHS and the ideals of many of the modernist architects that nothing was too good for ordinary people.

I was also struck by the aesthetics of Park Hill, its sheer physicality and monolithic scale and how it was so cleverly designed to slot topographically into the landscape, with its interconnecting elevated walkways, and that the young architects who had designed it had been so community focused.

DA: In what ways has your approach to the subject matter changed? Is this reflected in your research and its development?

MP: I started this work on Park Hill over 13 years ago. The estate continues to be developed (and probably won't be completed for another 5 years) and it remains a source of inspiration. There were times though when public access to Park Hill was restricted so I began to look at estates in other locations, particularly in London. It was hard to do this initially as I had got to know Park Hill so well, but I found many other places undergoing similar gentrification, particularly the Aylesbury estate in Southwark and Robin Hood Gardens in Poplar which I would visit many times whenever in London. I developed a particular fascination with the Aylesbury estate and was fortunate to work with another artist there who shared similar concerns. Together we collaborated with young residents on the Aylesbury, getting them to

take us to places of significance to them before they were lost, and then running drawing and print workshops for them to document their responses. This culminated with an exhibition of our work and the prints and drawings the young residents had made in the workshops. The exhibition was held in the ASC gallery which was located on the estate.

As time has passed, I have looked at other modernist/mid-century buildings (not just housing estates) that are at risk from gentrification.

DA: '*Out of the Ordinary'* (Revelations 23 Press, 2024) the handsomely illustrated book on your work reflects how well your paintings reproduce in photographs. This initially conveys a sense of realism. Do you sense that many people when seeing your work at first hand are surprised by its physicality, its 'object quality'?

MP: I strongly believe all paintings should be seen 'in the flesh' where possible, rather than on a screen or in print, to fully appreciate their haptic qualities and scale. This is particularly so with my own paintings as one of the important concepts underpinning the work was that I wanted to use materials that had a physical connection to the sites I was depicting (namely concrete and spray paint) which can be missed if not seen in person.

I do think of them as objects, preferring where possible not to frame them to emphasize their structural and surface qualities. I also usually digitally scan the works rather than photographing them. I don't know if this enhances how they reproduce.

DA: When reflecting on your subject matter, and particularly that apparent objectivity, I have recalled the work of the superb and influential German photographic duo Bernd and Hilla Becher. Apart from some correspondence between your concerns for architectural archaeology I am fascinated by the trouble they took to produce seemingly straightforward images of industrial edifices: for example the blank skies and rigorous frontality are clear artistic choices. When you take photographs as research for painting what matters do you have in mind when you frame your images?

MP: I am a massive fan of the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, and I am similarly drawn to the unintentional beauty and formal qualities of industrial buildings. I seek to do a similar thing with my own work, encouraging people to take a closer look at buildings often designated as 'ugly' and which are fast disappearing.

When researching, I do a lot of urban walking, I tend to just use the camera on my phone as I find it more portable and less obtrusive than a conventional camera, especially if photographing people's homes.

Like Bernd and Hilla Becher, I try to capture a full-frontal image where possible. I am looking for something I find visually interesting, emphasising the geometry and grid like structure of buildings and their history, but also looking for an ‘atmosphere’, an underlying sense of loss and melancholy, often evoked by textures and varying surface qualities.

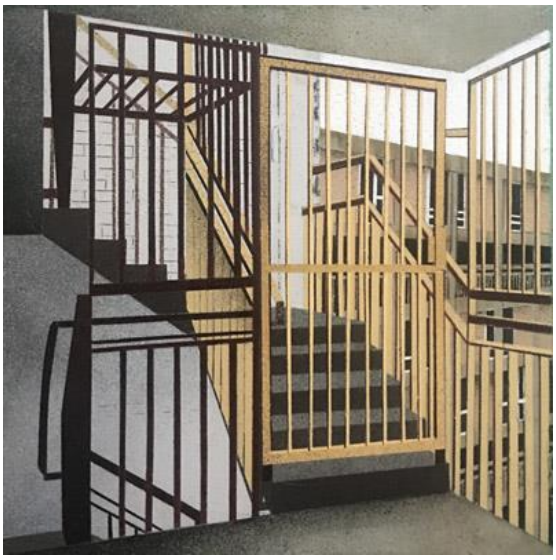
DA: Between your photographs and the decision to make a painting what selection takes place?

MP: I have amassed thousands and thousands of photos on my phone, but few will make the final cut.

Once home I will home in, heavily crop and edit the photos to compositionally give me something I can work from. Ideally, I am looking for an image that hovers somewhere between representation and abstraction.

The locations I choose are varied. If I have an exhibition in a particular city, I frequently try to make work of that place. I often do a series of paintings focussing on a particular location, looking at the same building from different perspectives.

DA: Besides those paintings where there is a frontal view in which grid-like structures are represented many of your paintings have a complex spatial depth. For example, railings separate the viewer from what lies beyond the foreground in the marvellously intricate ‘Stairwell’.



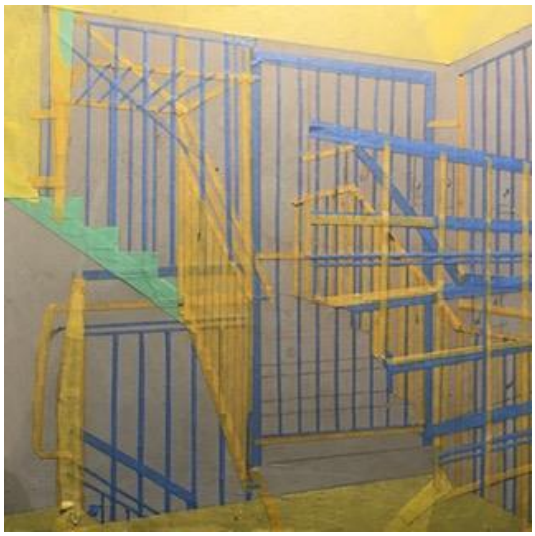
‘Stairwell’ – Spray paint and oil paint on concrete - 20cm x 20cm

‘Vortex’ has a vertiginous perspective. Do you sense that some works like these, both from Park Hill Estate, have a particularly strong emotional punch?

'Vortex' - Spray paint and oil paint on concrete - 20cm x 20cm

MP: I hope so, I am fascinated by staircases. They often have an understated elegance and geometry but also a duality as they can represent both accessibility and obstruction. The ones on Park Hill are pretty high (going up to 13 floors) and I was drawn by the almost Droste effect of the photograph I snapped to make 'Vortex'. There was a reeling, void-like feeling looking down which I wanted to try and capture. 'Stairwell' is calmer, but I hope has that sense of duality I mentioned earlier. Access to the next level is prohibited although it's possible to descend.

In both these images I was hoping to capture a balance between representation and abstraction and depicted space and flatness. Both paintings were very challenging to make on a practical level as they were so complex, made mainly using 0.5mm-1mm masking tapes to create the negative spaces.



Masking tapes on concrete to make 'Stairwell'

DA: ‘Looking at the Overlooked’ is one of many paintings in which you have represented the echoing curves of concrete structures. Though you don’t populate these places with people, to me you convey a great sense of what it would be like to walk into and under, or stand behind, such features. Do you purposely like to leave a space for viewer’s imagination?

‘Looking At The Overlooked ‘ -Spray paint and oil paint on concrete 50cm x 50cm

MP: The lack of figures is entirely intentional as through absence you can create presence. I would rather focus on the traces people leave; graffiti, smashed windows, half-opened curtains to bring in the human element. It also allows for more space in the paintings to focus on the architectural structures and makes them less illustrative.

DA: In photographs and films of you in your studio one cannot help but be impressed by your patience and the manipulative skills involved in making your work. Do these fine motor skills have their roots in your practice as a dentist?

MP: I am not sure, but dentistry indeed does involve fine motor skills which are compounded in that you’re frequently working ‘backwards’ as you are looking through a mirror, against gravity, in a limited, wet space with a sensorial human being attached – what I do now is infinitely easier!

DA: Your prodigious success in being one of the five shortlisted prizewinning artists for the John Moores Painting Prize in 2014 was followed twice more by selection for the John Moores exhibition and there has been a succession of other awards and exhibitions. Your sedulity and energy have been remarkable. It has been a great pleasure for me to witness

these tremendous achievements. Apart from the recognition they have deservedly brought, how have they informed or influenced your experience as an artist?

MP: Being shortlisted as a prize winner in the JMPP has been the pinnacle of my career. I had just graduated and the selected painting was one from my degree show. I was completely shocked to have even had work accepted, let alone win a prize. I had recently given up my dental job so this award really validated that difficult decision.

I must add here David, that it is completely down to you that I even entered the John Moores. In the last months of my degree course, where you were one of my tutors, you gave a lecture emboldening any painters within our group to enter, something I wouldn't have even considered without your active encouragement.

I feel very fortunate as many lovely opportunities and connections have arisen from being included in similar exhibitions. I would always encourage other artists to enter open competitions as when successful it's a great way of getting your work seen by a wider audience. However (especially having judged competitions on a couple of occasions) I would also temper this with that it's all a bit of lottery and totally dependent on who is judging so not to take it personally if a submission is not accepted. It can be an expensive business entering opens, but my advice would be to keep on trying, I've had paintings rejected from some competitions that have been accepted in others.

DA. Thank you Mandy for providing so many insights into your background, work ethic and concerns, all of which continue to nurture your practice and its ongoing development.

Interview completed 26 November 2024