

An Ending to a Beginning

Our journey as artists is often about setting ourselves free or the attempt to do so. You must depart & eventually you might arrive.

During a scholarship year sandwiched between four years of my time at Camberwell & then another two at the Slade, I created my own Grand Tour & visited as many of the places in Italy as I could, where the great works of early & later renaissance painting, sculpture & architecture are to be found. I was nearly always alone, & so the impressions these works had on me were undiluted by a dialogue with anyone else.

As a result of these overwhelming experiences, & because I was on the move, I more or less gave up painting for that time.

When I returned to England, I became a student again & a different layer of ideas was laid down. I married another artist &, due to the way things were, had to somewhat circumscribe my artistic activity. Inchoate ideas formed & I stored them away, put them on hold.

After graduating, I stumbled along making work & destroying things in a cycle which lasted nearly a decade. I felt I had reached a time when I was running on empty. In the deep unrest, things were fermenting in the dark corners of my senses.

I needed silence & decided I would turn my back on the city.

What you see as an outsider when you take a walk along the beach in Hastings, is a still life made up of boats of various sizes & a great deal of tackle. Unless you are there at particular times, you do not see any human activity. Certainly, it did not occur to me to sit there & draw, or even take a photograph as I did not own a camera. I enjoyed my walks but I kept to the shoreline & did not think of trespassing into alien territory as the years passed.

That reverie ended quite suddenly one day, & with no warning I was pitched into a different mode. There was some kind of epiphany. It was certainly born of desperation. One thing emerged & this was that human beings were now going to be the topic to occupy me.

First, I had to formulate the questions & then find ways to answer them. In practical terms it meant I had to leave the sanctuary & safety of my small workspace in the house & be at work outdoors. Something I had never done before. I chose to use paper & pencil as that would be to minimise materials & I hoped to somehow minimise my body so that I could blend in with the surroundings. Ideally, I would have been invisible.

The imagination has to perform gymnastics in order to achieve transformation. The essence is extracted from drawing of some kind, which is furthered into a more concrete form. It then becomes a painting which might be seen as a view. It is in fact an alchemy.

Almost as a sculptor might, my effort consisted of using what were often mere scraps of drawing to conjure a solid reality from the ether.

There is a special agony which painters know, which consists in pushing paint around in the effort to transcend the medium, to change the substance & transform it.

Laetitia Yhap Hastings 2024

DLWP, April 2024

These paintings depict an outdoor world & it is peopled with men. It is only now, looking back, that I can understand a little more about what drove me to risk so much.

The main result of my early intensive art training in what is called the 'life room' was fraught with disappointment. Although I understood & accepted that it was a way of really learning to see & not just look, I hated everything I did there because it felt impossible in those circumstances to bring life to the paper. This piece of living female flesh (there was only ever one male model) was decontextualised & dehumanised &, perhaps because I too am female, this, at that time, in some inexpressible way, undermined my sense of my own worth.

By the time I had spent seven years as a student, I was certainly ready to throw the baby out with the bath water.

At that time in the early sixties painting itself was demoted unless it was large-scale colour field abstraction. Many alternatives offered themselves, but none of them appealed, it was another obstacle to be overcome. I made a few experimental works & destroyed them.

My first workspace had been a windowsill, & I grew a few images from very little, using watercolour, but then the floor offered itself & paper was an easy & economic material to use. I spent nearly 10 years on my hands & knees.

Ideas which had been put on hold & simmered away for all those years eventually broke through & took me over.

The first thing was to leave the city, to no longer regard my self as having a place there. Then I had to leave the safety of indoors & find the courage to be at work drawing, out there on the beach, in a wild territory populated by males.

I was compelled to come to a realisation of how, in this situation, my sex would serve me or not.

After 18 months of drawing on the beach through the seasons of the work, I had to confront the formal problem of how to progress to painting, using these scraps of paper. Sometimes these only had the barest trace of a few marks.

The cumulative effect of looking at the early renaissance works on my solitary travels, day after day, had made me see that those images had their own vital life & although they existed because of the religious story, alongside there was the human story.

I also saw that the life force in the early humanist depictions of these remarkable Italian painters, such as Duccio, defied the often tiny scale of the panels. These small panels housed the big stories that were being told. They were the storyboard to set around the aloof central icon, Mary, Christ or Saints.

In my case there was no central icon. The quotidian was the topic. I needed to devise a way of presenting the scenario on the beach in its less than heroic mode & yet not demote the impact that certain almost insignificant moments had on me.

Once I decided to make a painting, some hard decisions needed to be made, because for ten years I had used only watercolour or tempera. I had already made paintings which were not rectangular & not even flat, & many of the watercolours were a vignette within the rectangle.

It seemed to me that if I made myself a small arena suited to a particular imagery it would obviate waste of space. There is often much use of gold in those early Italian works. It means that the artist could float the image & not have to be troubled by adding extraneous detail. I could not resort to gold. I hoped I might be able to make a shape that would contribute to the focus in the chosen images & not add any slack.

I disliked the idea of 'framing' & the way it could corral images & tame them, as it were, so that they could take their place, subdued on a wall in a room or a gallery. I

was thinking of gold antique historic frames on Impressionist paintings in drawing rooms or galleries. And I disliked canvas & the way its weave affected the brush stroke...

It so happened that the first painting I managed with all these restrictions in mind ended up as a narrow-wide rectangle & in monochrome on paper, in a medium that had started out as a drawing in oil pastels. There were practical reasons – I could roll it up like a scroll so that I could travel between London & Hastings while I worked on it from 1975-77. Early on it was about 4 foot wider, but I cut that piece off & it became a separate work.

I moved into colour & again the painting was on paper, in my invention of a kind of tempera. This was worked on from 1977-79 & is a more conventional proportion of rectangle but I was probably looking at Mantegna, at his works which were made to be carried along outdoors in processions.

Each painting was a one off. I carpentered the shapes myself & there were further stages in priming the surfaces. It would often take a week or so to complete these constructions. It was a very physical business but because it took so much time before I could begin to paint on each particular shape, I already knew my way around it intimately. The shape had to seem inevitable for what it held, so I could not afford to get it wrong. Perhaps they were a kind of thought balloon.

So much of the work of creation is hidden from the onlooker. Transformation of what is seen requires gymnastics of the imagination. If it is successful in a painting, one has conjured a unique reality from the ether.

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