

Brian Bergquist

“An Interview”

Is there a main idea you are following with your work? What idea is it?

A central theme? I've painted just about everything in the last fifty-odd years and at first sight I'd say No... But then, in a sense perhaps, the central theme my own reaction to the world about me; but surely that's true of all painters?

In what way is presence present in your work – how about timelessness?

Timelessness? Yes, in the sense that many of my pictures are about an instant in time. Usually this has involved something that I've seen or that has actually happened, but was then digested over the years. The result, then – more correctly – is a summation over a slice of time. However, if you mean will my work will still be of interest in one, two centuries time, then I can only say that this will be decided by other people than you and I!

And presence?... The only presence I am aware of is my own! And I hope people see in my work the considered, but passionate response of one man to the world about him; sometimes hitting the mark, often wide. I'd settle for that. But if you're thinking in terms of a sense of place or time, though, then I would say no. Most contextual evidence – where the original image took shape – has been blurred out in the refinement process.

Is your art ironic?

Almost always, though not by conscious intent; I am no satirist!

'Ein Heldenleben', for example, dates back to a very subdued drawing (1974/5) of one of my sons feeding some sleepy gulls with bits of crab from his bucket. In later sketches, though, the boy – now older – is throwing something, and at about the same time I was doing far more energetic sketches of birds wheeling and flying. The painting first took shape in about 1992, and showed a man throwing fish-ends to some lively sea gulls in front of a traditional English sky and choppy sea. But even as I began underpainting I realised that it was going to look like ten thousand other paintings, and repeating what's already been said is tiresome for painter and spectator alike. So I laid it aside. But a year or so ago I looked at the underpainting again, and now I saw it differently. It wasn't clear what it was about, but the jolly sea and clouds no longer interested me, so they had to go. I'd tried using a simple red ground before, but here I used two tones of red, giving me a conceptual sea and sky. Red implies green, of course – I've never given up on Cezanne! – so the gulls became green.

By then I was a long way from the original subject, and feel free to distort the central character to give added tension. His upper body is now poised like an arrow, with an arc of birds curved round him like a bow. To complete the composition, I put him on a shallow diagonal stage, Edward Hopper fashion, and made that the only diagonal that isn't 'stopped'. With that the eye is always led back into the painting and the waiting tension.

But what is the painting now about? The conceptual sea and sky emphasise the image of what had been a boy and had become a fisherman, throwing scraps to the birds. But that makes it over-important, surely, and with that I began to see something of the irony in the scene I had contrived. The whole thing had become an episode in some primeval struggle, seemingly – Man against the elements, no less – but in that case, aren't the fishtail 'weapons' somewhat absurd? And isn't fishermen feeding birds a daily occurrence in any port?

None of these steps were worked out in cold blood. Instead I was led through the maze of possibilities by my own excitement, the tension rising to a frenzy as I began to pull it all together. So after all, perhaps it was an exercise in discovering some sort of inner image; the statue in the stone. And along the way it has become ironic at all levels: an ironic comment on heroism, in effect.

Hence the the use of Richard Strauss' title. But should I be saying any of this? Shouldn't the painting speak for itself: a guy throwing fish tails to the birds?

Does your personality hide behind your pictures?

Inevitably, is the quick response. After all, nobody else could have painted them, so they must say something peculiar to me. And at this point A.E.Houseman's collection of poems, 'A Shropshire Lad', comes to mind, although I doubt they are anywhere near as well known in Germany as England. The point is that Houseman never even visited Shropshire, as far as is known. The 'Lad' was no more than a persona, in which guise – possibly unconscious – he could wander unseen among the village characters that fill his work. Maybe, then, I am also lurking somewhere in my paintings. That will be for a future Art Historian to decide!

Do you think there is some kind of straight development your work has made in the last 18 years, or is it more like ways and ways beneath?

Why eighteen years?... Looking back I see more of a 'saw-tooth' progress. Generally my images have become simpler, due to a not-entirely-conscious process of winnowing out whatever is not essential. I do 'backtrack', though, and I also 'test out' the influence of other painters; you will find a reference to Picasso's pink period in the present collection. At the moment I'm exploring the expressive possibilities of random colour transposition. That's not new, either, but it's brought me back to landscape painting, where the effects are strong and dramatic.

What answer do you expect, or what question should be answered from the visual and unvisual world you investigate with your work?

The truth is that my most satisfying paintings lead to questions! Any sort of answer would be a dead-end, I think. As to visual and unvisual, see below.

In your work there seems to be an abyss behind the appearance of objects – if so, what kind of abyss?

These days I certainly tend to isolate my subjects in one way or another, but that wasn't always the case. I used to paint very much 'école anglaise', with every object firmly embedded in the picture space (vide 'Days Long Journey'; not exhibited but in my catalogue). That changed when I encountered the Sibley painters and adopted a more robust technique. From then on my canvases tended to say 'This is what I'm discussing. Look at the rest if you wish, but it's not that important'. Nowadays I leave out the 'rest' altogether!

Do you analyze the visual or the unvisual world with your work?

I don't know. But unlike abstract expressionist painters I start with the visual world, with my vision being refined as I proceed, via drawings or photographs. But I find the latter more difficult, and there is usually a preliminary process whereby I somehow make the image 'my own'. I do this in several ways. One is to make a drawing from the photograph, then a drawing from the drawing etc. Another is to use the computer's ability to distort, invert, dissect and reassemble... Then I do a drawing from that! In the end, of course, I'm not clear myself what I'm analysing; my instincts have either led me somewhere useful, or the project has become meaningless noise. Most recently I've been letting my mind run free, as it were, and painting from imagination. Does that help?

Is it all just about the lust of painting?

Who could paint day after day without a lust for painting? That wonderful sensation when the paint starts to flow under the brush – I love painting 'wet into wet' – is all part of the passion. I need it right now, in fact!

Do you have an idea what your work might look like in about five years?

I seem to be following the Matisse track, don't I? Certainly I'd expect my paintings to continue getting simpler and bolder. But unlike Matisse, I think Landscape will figure more prominently in the next year or so.

What is the abstract aspect in your figurative work?

I'd say the moment a painter stops trying to imitate the subject – which, after all, is what the camera freed us from – then abstraction creeps in. He's no longer painting the woman in front of him, for

example; to some extent he's painting Woman as concept; Picasso is a good example. Perhaps I should explain, though: for me abstraction has nothing to do with eliminating Image, an assertion that led to four decades of chaos.

An example is 'Two Boys in a Landscape' (1991: exhibited and in the catalogue). This began as a conventional painting of two of my sons playing in Alum Bay on the Isle of Wight. As I began painting the coloured rocks behind them, though, I realised that I was looking at a landscape tilted vertically. From then on I was no longer painting my sons, but conceptual boys set against a conceptual landscape. Another example is 'Days Long Journey' – mentioned above – where I became interested in the way the rectangular window intruded into the triangular space occupied by the seated girl. Accordingly, I distorted the figure to emphasise this.

Are you telling the truth?

No-one is perfect, but I try hard to tell it as it is!

In which way, if so, does your "former life" as a professional in abstract sciences influence your work? Is your painting a turn to the opposite of that? Or some kind of going forward?

My painting and drawing helped my scientific work, but without feedback in the reverse direction. It is very helpful to be able to visualise complex situations – abstraction again! – and to see how things interact. That's very important in engineering and – especially – modern physics, where graphical techniques are frequently used. Easel painting, on the other hand, is impossible without freeing the emotions.

An example of a problem you want to solve with a painting...

Someone said 'problems are only opportunities?' didn't they? That certainly seems to have been the case in my painting experience! As for the future, I feel drawn to the ontological – other minds – problem. This, of course, is a rich pasture for film makers and novelists, but there are many examples in painting. Walter Sickert's 'L'Ennui' is a superb treatment of the gulf that can develop between husband and wife. Another, more famous, example – this time of the generation gulf – is Velasquez' 'Water Seller of Seville'. The idea of dance is beginning to interest me in this context. When I look at the weekly market in Forcalquier, for example, with all the interactions going on, I have a distinct sense of being in a ballet... Though that is hardly commensurate with my physique!

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Brian Bergquist wurde befragt von Dagmar Schott, Kunsthistorikerin M.A.*