

Email interview with Jock McFadyen by Ruth Millington, June 2020, for Art UK

Let's start with your art education. You studied at Chelsea School of Art. What was that like? (Did you specialise in painting/know immediately this was your medium? Was there much art history included?).

Chelsea in the early seventies was totally contemporary, it was a pretty vibrant art school and many students went on to succeed in becoming artists; Helen Chadwick, Anish Kapoor, Christopher Le Brun, Alexei Sayle, James Hugonin and Shirazeh Houshary are just some of the people I overlapped with. Visiting lecturers included Claes Oldenburg, Tom Stoppard, Quentin Crisp and Ernst Gombrich (accompanied by his friend the Scottish sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi) and the regular staff were artists whose work could be seen in the smattering of galleries that existed in London at that time, my postgraduate tutor Ian Stephenson had a retrospective at the Hayward while I was there. Pop Art was still in evidence and photorealism was hovering in the wings and there was the backdrop of minimalism, conceptualism, video, installation, land art, mail art, structuralist film and performance. Gilbert & George, recent graduates from St Martins, were regular exhibitors at the nearby Nigel Greenwood Gallery in Sloane Square. Needless to say all of us students were in thrall to what was happening in New York, then the capital of the art world. How could we add anything to the story of art after Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes, we moaned... but yes I specialized in painting but also made films with Anne Rees-Mogg the film tutor and film has been an influence.

During the 80s, you were painting pictures of London. Is it fair to say the scruffier parts of the city? Why were you drawn to these locations?

After art school there was a huge diaspora of young artists to the east. This started in the sixties with Bert Irvin and Bridget Riley decamping to St Katharine Dock. Warehouse spaces became studios and there were organisations like Acme and Space. My first studio was a bit of floor in Butlers Wharf which was home to about 200 artists who were living illegally in the warehouses before they were reconfigured in the eighties by Terence Conran as glitzy riverside apartments. Andrew Logan, Anne Bean, Richard Wilson, Maurice Agis and Derek Jarman had studios there. One day Adam Ant walked past with Jordan from 'SEX' because Derek Jarman was making his film 'Jubilee'. That was pretty weird as I had just left Chelsea which was the part of London where Punk had exploded into existence and now there was this bloke making a film about it

outside my studio in SE1. But people put down roots and the East End remained an artist place right through the nineties (Emin, Chapmans, Gilbert&George etc. etc.) and now new artists can't afford Shoreditch, Hackney or Dalston. So to answer your question I wasn't so much drawn to the East End, I just went with the flow. But my work changed after I was Artist in Residence at the National Gallery in 1981. Before that my pictures had been schematic and self referential (but still figurative) and after emerging from that residency my focus was to make art that describes the world. So where do you start with that? Well you open your front door which happens to look out onto a scruffy part of the city...

In your paintings of the urban landscape, there's a focus on graffiti, signs, typography, and the written word. What was your interest in these?

Doing this interview by questionnaire I can see into the future. Looking at your list of questions I can see that you are going to ask me about a Howard Hodgkin in my painting of Aldgate East tube station which is next to the Whitechapel Art Gallery where the artist was having a one-man show... and graffiti also comes under the category of a painting of a painting (perhaps a less extreme example of Glenn Brown's painting of an Auerbach?). So a cultural reference then, probably to remind myself that in the sea of shit which is London there are little voices here and there straining to be heard whether it's the loner with a spray can or a highly decorated establishment painter... or if you prefer, a highly trained professional street artist or a deceased decorative painter...

And these paintings are filled with figures. Who were these people? Real individuals or tropes, more representative of time/place/modern life?

Then, over time, these figures disappeared. Was this a conscious decision? Or more gradual?

The question of the figure and its decline is significant for me. The figures were all based on people I saw in the street which I then tried to reconstruct back in my studio, furiously doing visual memorising and doodling and sometimes returning like a private detective to photograph them - Jock McFadyen the stalker... If I wanted a particular gesture or pose I would use myself as the model so the old saying about all portraiture being self portraiture is a bit true in my case but mainly for technical reasons. It dawned on me in the early nineties that the struggle in my pictures was in the structure, the background was the main thing and the figures were the spontaneous bit, or at least the quickly realised bit. The figures had been getting smaller and in 1992 I designed a ballet for Kenneth MacMillan at the Royal Opera House and it involved a huge amount of urban

landscape. The set included 3 cars, buildings, scaffolding and loads of graffiti with the newly built Canary Wharf tower twinkling in the background but no figures were needed because there were real people, the dancers... So, when I was back to solitary confinement in my studio it was natural to continue with pictures without figures and for me it was a revelation. Painting the figure is emotionally and psychologically different to painting the landscape. Even the viewer's response is different. Those who had previously dismissed my work came up to congratulate me and those who had liked my figure paintings felt deserted! But the important shift for me was that in landscape the viewer is levered into looking at the paint and the texture, much more like abstraction. With figuration of all kinds the figure leapfrogs over those considerations to grab attention for itself. The paint is much less up for contemplation because the figure is so psychologically charged.

Can we talk about the idea of place? You've painted busy cities, but also the empty Scottish Highlands. Each work is really evocative of that location. What does place mean to you?

I came across the term 'Psychogeography' recently and the idea of navigating the urban environment in order to examine its architecture and spaces, and break down the barriers between culture and everyday life. I can definitely see the breakdown between culture and everyday life in your paintings – for example, the poster for a Howard Hodgkin show in the underground. Or the sign for Whitechapel. Do you consciously include cultural references?

Place. Yes all landscape painters would claim an obsession with location but Cezanne didn't just paint Mont St Victoire... the opposite to obsession is the artist cruising the landscape looking for something to exploit... like a vampire looking for fresh blood, but maybe doing that is also obsession. There are compelling locations that are unwilling to be painted in a way that makes the paint work and then the picture doesn't succeed. Some would say that a better painter would paint the location anyway and to hell with the result, but both parties have to yield, the painter and the painted. That's why painters move trees and buildings around and tell topographical lies. Lowry is particularly culpable in this and yet his work is treasured for its fidelity to a particular region!

Having said that, there is psychogeography and there is Iain Sinclair, and there is the exciting fact that a subject might be portrayed in different media. Sinclair and I share an obsession with a particular part of London and its outerlands and that landscape might be painted, filmed, photographed, musicalised or written about. If the artist is prepared to be subject-led then formal invention will follow and with

a bit of luck the picture might work...

Can we also talk about your process? Do you find places to paint by walking/cycling/driving around places? I know you have motorbikes!

Do you seek out places to paint, or do they present themselves to you? How do you choose a location to picture/frame it?

There is a great difference between riding a horse and sitting in a carriage. On a horse or a bike one is in the air, in the elements with ever-present danger and while driving a car one is sitting in an armchair looking at the world through windows while pushing levers and buttons, steering, chatting or listening to music. I associate my motorbikes with youth, sex, rebellion and rock and roll but that is old bloke nostalgia... riding a bicycle or a motorbike is a wonderful way to penetrate the landscape and walking isn't too bad either. Iain Sinclair has written about cars as pod culture where the world is viewed privately through windshields. And these windshields are oblong, like my paintings. Or a cinema screen, a computer screen or a mobile screen for that matter, and it is amusing to reflect that these cutting edge oblongs from Silicon Valley come directly from the ancient craft of painting as well as architecture and the proscenium arch. Sinclair has also written about my large landscape works and said that there are lots of oblong-shaped holes in the landscape where McFadyen has cut a section out and taken it to his studio in Hackney. He also thinks my paintings are expensive and has commented drily that they are shaped like chequebooks...

But his observation about the oblong holes is not as surreal as it seems because what is the function of painting the world? The function is to remove a piece of the outside world and put it into a building. Something humans have been doing since they lived in caves.

Do you take photos? How does your painting relate to photography?

I love photography. And I love the energy which occurs when photography and painting collide (Arnulf Rainer, Ian McKeever, Robert Rauschenberg). When I was a first year art student I found a bag of B/W photographs which were of road markings. They were instructions for roadmen telling them where to dig and they included hedges, walls and bits of street furniture. I took these to my studio space and pasted them to my pictures and painted around them and felt the frisson of two realities. At the time I had no idea how to manage this 'discovery' but I never forgot it and in recent years I have absorbed it into my recent graphic work. I make limited edition prints based on collages of painting and photographs and also combining photographs of my paintings. I'm relatively early in the curve of it so still not sure where it's going to take me.

But I have always used photographs to visually rehearse my large paintings. Pre

digital I used to snap areas of interest and frame up and crop and edit and finally square up on the canvas in order to guesstimate where to put the first bits of paint on the surface... When digital came along I scanned onto transparencies and projected to get detail and placing, but these days I use a phone like everybody else and have it on a 5 minute cut-off with poor definition. It's important to have low quality photographic information because you don't want photography to encroach or make any contribution to colour, depth of field, texture, perspective or anything which is the business of painting. Placing (even in order to deviate), and detail which is too profuse and dreary to draw can be quickly provided by photography which enables the paint to make the picture.

With your process - are you an architect or a gardener? Do you know how the painting will end up?

I am definitely a gardener and if things go according to plan I have a hollow feeling of failure.

You've said that you are "aware of the history of painting". Who are your influences? Over time, has this changed?

I am aware of my ignorance and even if I wasn't nearly 70 it would still be impossible to see more than a tiny fraction of the paintings in the world. Having said that, it's great being a painter because you know that you are a tiny part of a huge and ancient tradition which yawns before you and will go on as long as there is life. It's like being a singer actually, although a novelist (that recent discipline) has a similar solitary life to a painter. So all you can do is reach out to the bits of art history which you identify with. It started with Pop art for me but now it's Holbein and Turner.

And now you're an RA artist, you've had a residency at the National Gallery, and shows at major museums. Was there a pivotal moment when you realised you were 'in' the canon of art history? What was your first major exhibition? Has your status changed the way you work? I wonder if we all feel we have something to prove when we start out, and if this changes once we are accepted/does this come with a certain freedom?

One of the tenets of being professional is to know your place in the scheme of things. I might have a bit of a national reputation but am completely unknown beyond the UK and I only have one work in a foreign museum although 50% of my collectors are international. When I was younger I exhibited a little in New York and Germany but I hate travelling and aeroplanes and had no appetite to jet off and set out my stall in another country. I have a love of British art and I think that in order to be universal you have to be provincial with integrity. Damien Hirst

might be one of the most famous artists in the world but to me his art is completely English. In 'Let's Eat Outdoors Today' I can see Timothy Spall sitting on that plastic chair in a shell suit with all the flies buzzing around his head. The work owes nothing to American or European contemporary art and could only have come from our culture. In the eighties there was huge interest in German painting and filmmaking, from Keifer to Wim Wenders. These artists were preoccupied with the bleak predicament of post war Germany but what could be more provincial than that? The integrity shone through despite the clamour to speak English with an American accent like so many English pop stars...

So, to answer the second part of your question about artistic freedom, I always think that the artists who are totally free are those who never sell anything... as well as those who sell everything regardless of quality (because the momentum of the market and the money previously invested in them means that the market will not allow failure while the primary investors are alive!).

Most artists are somewhere in the middle of these poles and riding with the punches. A middling level of success is the most compromising because it is difficult for artists to recognize when they are following the money...

**What have you been working on during lockdown?**

**I think we are all noticing environments a lot more in lockdown...have you seen places anew? Noticed new streets, signs? Has it made you re-evaluate your work?**

Lockdown? Well I have been self-isolating for the last 45 years so no change there, although two of my exhibitions have been cancelled and all the art shops are closed which rather dents the work ethic. We had the virus early on and were two weeks ill and another 3 weeks feeling shaky after that but once up and about I have been just chugging along in the usual way. I have a place in northern France and also a flat in Edinburgh where I divide my time. I only find London bearable if I get away from it on a regular basis and I have never spent such a continuous stretch in London before. I haven't seen anything afresh but the empty streets and quietness was incredible, like 28 Days Later, or a post nuclear vision. It actually felt like one of my pictures. But now the cars are back with all their stink and swagger and ugliness. Back with a vengeance too because nobody wants to travel by public transport so we have regressed by years. It's definitely time to leave...

Jock McFadyen  
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14th November 2020 - 7th March 2021 Jock McFadyen Goes to the Pictures,  
City Art Centre, Edinburgh

22nd January - 11th April 2021 Jock McFadyen: Tourist without a Guidebook,  
Royal Academy, London

11th June - 25th Sep 2021 Jock McFadyen: Lost Boat Party, Dovecot Studios,  
Edinburgh

2021 Dates to be confirmed Jock McFadyen Goes to The Lowry: A  
Retrospective, The Lowry, Salford