

Robin Mason

Interview by Tess Charnley

29th June 2020

Due to COVID-19, Block 336's scheduled programming has been postponed. As part of our effort to recalibrate and find new ways of working, we are presenting a series of interviews with artists.

*For the third interview in the series, Tess Charnley (Programme Coordinator at Block 336) interviewed Robin Mason about his process; the stylistic positioning of his work; his influences and more. Robin Mason is a painter and Head of Fine Art at City & Guilds of London Art School. Following his MA in Painting at The Royal College of Art he established a studio in London. He has continued to exhibit nationally and internationally and his work can be found in public, significant private and corporate collections including those of Unilever and the Government Art Collection. He exhibited at Block 336 in 2013 with his show *The Deepest Darkness* and as part of our 5 year anniversary celebration in 2017.*

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Robin Mason, *The Deepest Darkness*, 2013, Block 336, Installation view

Your paintings are often-large scale and extremely complex in terms of their symbolism. What is your process? Do you work from drawings or studies?

Drawing and studies lead the way into the larger works. I have an archive of sketchbooks invested with hours of drawing and thinking. Some are stored in the lounge under the TV in a tin trunk. During lockdown I was drawn to delve into the sketchbooks, to wander back between their pages. It was a highly emotional experience that triggered all sorts of memories and feelings. As each sketchbook was opened, the minutes, hours, months, years and decades went by in a flash. It made me realise that within those pages are the scratches, scribbles and attempts made while trying to find images to represent or make

sense of some feeling, or need I had to say something about something that I couldn't find words for.

Before the pencil starts its meanderings, there is often a trigger pulled inside me, a memory of place or thoughts about some socio-political event or something someone says or does, that needs to be investigated further. The next stage is linked to finding an image, normally a painting in a book or a postcard or the memory of a painting visited, whose emotional content has its parallels to the trigger that niggled within me.

Then I start to scratch and scribble, investigating the compositional structure and placement of images in relation to one another within the reproduction of the painting. I often draw over a reproduction of the original to further understand the position of everything. These compositional dynamics were used by filmmakers to create moments of tension. I find them useful in analysing how these paintings full of things, hang together and read as understandable experiences.

I decide on the scale of the final work. Some of the large works have a site-specific element to them, quite often this happens when an opportunity to exhibit arises. I've recently realised that my desire to make larger works and wall drawings probably comes from a mural project I was involved in while on my BA course in Wolverhampton. I recently found a black and white photograph of my mural of an industrial coal mining area. It reminded me of the immersive nature of murals and the experience of the viewer, rather like my experience of seeing and being with the frescos in Siena. Some of the larger works have made visits to several shows and they sometimes return to the studio to be reworked and more often than not added to, increasing their complexity and multiplying or dilating the symbolic weight of the paintings.

Back to the initial drawings. There were moments of surprise when I found in the archive of sketch books, the pages where I found drawings, which then became large paintings. I should show them to each other - or show them with each other - sometime.

Voltaire said, "I have ideas in my head because I have images". I tend to draw every day in sketch books to try and get those images in my head.

You describe your work as metamodernist but, to me, it also seems to imbibe surrealism and, in your new work on paper *Study for Pop up Self Portrait as Artist*, even your own take on Cubism. How would you position your work stylistically?



Robin Mason, *Study for Pop up Self Portrait as Artist*, 2020, Acrylic and black gesso on paper, 28 x 24cm

My undergraduate education directed my work towards an 'ism.' At that time, it was Abstract Expressionism and in my application to the Royal College of Art I said I wanted to find a language of imagery that would stand in for the symbolism of the brush strokes and paint marks that I had become too comfortable with. While at the RCA I was encouraged to draw every day. Following a discussion about a series of landscape drawings made in Wales, I was advised to visit the Early Italian paintings at the National Gallery, to explore their landscape settings. There I found paintings layered with an imagery that spoke to me of landscapes, or more like the mind remembering a landscape, it felt so familiar. Like memory, small hills and trees and undefined things floated and scattered throughout the paintings, reminding me of dreams and poems. They performed as metaphor then, but later spoke of their original narrative and history.

I took the liberty of constructing my own set of symbolic metaphors from these works; stand-ins for places, people, experiences, actions. Juxtapose the influence of these early religious works against the shock of reading DM Thomas's *White Hotel* (with its cascading symbolism of erotic psychoanalytic metaphor) and before I knew it, stylistically, a kind of medieval surrealism from the medieval (mystical writing and imagery) rather than from twentieth century surrealism emerged.

This dialogue was happening as Postmodernism was evolving, allowing quotes, styles and subject from any time or place to be juxtaposed and merged. Postmodernism gave many artists and designers the chance to do what they wanted, as long as it was through the lens of irony. I wasn't being ironic in my use of elements of the landscape from Wales where I grew up, or in the use of quotes from a painting experienced on a visit to a European museum. The juxtaposition of souvenirs from these places, the things and experiences that make me who I am, are autobiographical and in some ways make all my paintings into self-portraits, representations of the things that consume me at certain times.

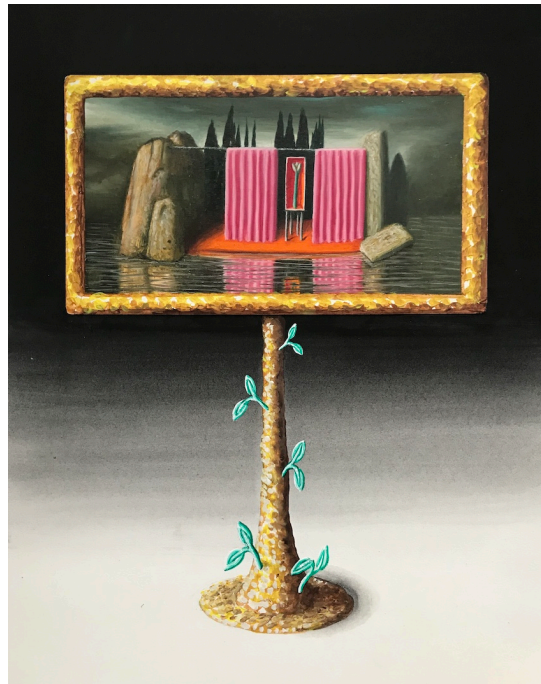
I found the ism in Metamodernism to be rounded. It didn't call for the ridicule, irony or rejection that many isms called for in response to the last ism, it gave permission for an ism to be quoted from and other isms to be referenced; this ism felt relevant. It allows me, in a work like *Study for Pop up Self Portrait as Artist*, to play seriously or seriously play.

That small study painting popped out of the introspection that COVID-19 forced on us earlier this year. It references a child's pop-up book from the 1920s, my father's book. The power of the folded vibrant colours and imagery, emerging from this tired looking book on a lockdown day in April, was overwhelming. I needed to use its reference as a moment of 'hope' or 'survival'. Your reference to Cubism is right. To start with, the pop-up, folded imagery has a cubist referent; it presents one side of something while displaying the other. But closer to the mark is the edgy Dada Cubism in the works of Otto Dix and George Grosz. The palette, a symbol of the artist, is held under the arm of a blue cardigan sleeve. Both these things are aspects of my security and identity, my crutches. Without drawing or painting, I fail to exist. The confusion of the multi-eyed and mouthed conglomerate taking the place of the head is an accurate representation of moments experienced during this time of coming face to face with ourselves; 'be vigilant' we were told. I turned to a multitude of old favourites, the eyes and mouths of the cartoon characters that have peppered my life as they deal with all sorts of terrifying scenarios to emerge unscathed. The pink and orange interior quoting from Bacon, the pop-up book from the 1920s linking me to family and the eyes quoted from Takashi Murakami's characters and other cartoon painted moments all merging. Stylistically and conceptually I think on reflection I position my work using the geological term for one of my favourite rock formations: Conglomeratism. But not really.

Your painting seems contradictory in some ways - it is at once utopic and dystopic, fantastical and unnerving. Crucifixions exist alongside funfairs and museums. There is a sense of an underworld but one that is alluring; like going down the rabbit hole in Alice and Wonderland. It almost seems like a process of world-making, encompassing the dark and the light yet permeated with a sense of nostalgia. Does nostalgia operate as the thread that draws these contrasting ideas together in your work?

Paulo Coelho's book *The Alchemist* takes the protagonist on a journey across continents in a search for treasure, or like Heine's description of the 'English' as 'Frankenstein's Monster'

wandering across Europe in search of their souls. I wander away from the beaches of childhood memory with happiness and sadness, as I search for the rose-tinted veins of the memories of those experiences in places far from their origin.



Robin Mason, *After Bocklin*, 2020, Oil and acrylic on paper, 35 x 28cm

Sundays included the incense filled theatre of church in the morning with shafts of light creating future fog-bound forest memories. Then to the beach in the afternoon followed by visits to the funfair where, as the evenings drew in, the giant murals and painted rides flickered, tempted and tormented as lights, sounds and smells of summer laid down Proustian moments. The protagonist of *The Alchemist* found real treasure buried in the garden of his childhood, thousands of miles searching for the thing that he had so near all along. I go back often to the physical places and do find treasure, but the treasure of the childhood sensory bliss is smelt, felt and seen through memories now rather than the physical original, but I do find my soul there.

The Welsh word 'Hiraeth' might be better positioned to tie the past and present emotions together. A word which has no direct translation, it is a call to those who were born there, a feeling, a deep longing and nostalgia that stirs the soul to return. This yearning and longing fuels my London based studio. Hiraeth is my muse as I paint the things I've seen, experienced and thought about into a landscape that is constantly the beach in Wales. It's not as an unpleasant feeling, but something that is a calling from a particular coast to return to physically and in dreams.

Your work, particularly in its combination of colour and monochrome, looks like entering a person's mind in its amalgamation of imagery and symbolism creating a mental landscape. Does psychoanalytic theory influence your work? Could you expand on your interest in sublimating, in the psychoanalytic sense, and the impact that has on your practice?

Psychoanalytic theory as a subject of research doesn't influence my work directly, however the act of making work that is influenced by it, has and does happen. As mentioned previously, *The White Hotel* by DM Thomas was one of those moments. It shocked and gave permission to re-evaluate the iconography of medieval mystical imagery, without the constraints of their doctrinal origins. I felt cut loose by the Freudian symbolism in the book and was then able to rethink the medieval paintings made from the writings of the mystics, whose hallucinatory dreams and meditations of torments and temptations gave us the imagery of medieval surrealism.

Retrospective reading of my decision to develop certain imagery has, of course, made clear that subconscious and conscious decisions can and have produced answers or brought to the surface certain suppressed and sometimes maybe forgotten incidents or experiences. I'm not talking here about a form of art therapy, but maybe the dialogue created in the triangulation of a subconscious need to create (at times obsessive), the conscious desire to paint and the magic of raw materials; pigment, mediums and canvas. The results of which can be surprisingly psychoanalytic, as is answering this question.

To begin to answer the question of sublimation, I should explain that at times I find myself drawn to certain works of art that have a darkness and reference to death in their subject, often religious subject matters, the ones that are tinged with hope rather than bathed in it. The darkness I recognise as an alluring space, a place that we all visit from time to time. When faced with the shadow of Thanatos, I have a need to sublimate those scenarios. Through facing up to these paintings or reproductions, a fecundity starts to stir. At that point I raise a Lacanian screen, a canvas or sheet of paper, positioning it between me and the dark work of art. I start to cover the holes in the screen, blocking out the darkness and replacing it with pigments and mediums, wrestling them into the antithesis of the original.

This form of sublimation moving the imagery from the death drive into a libidinal life drive, releases itself into often colourful, eroticised, playful curious imagery as if objects on the surface of the screen. The darkness almost hidden allows both drives to be present. I wish I could just make paintings, but an attempt to understand why about a place or what about an experience is ever present as a constant itch that needs scratching. I would like the paintings to have something of the funfair about them, bright, colourful, playful with that underlying something else that always lingers in the corners as warnings.

Counterbalancing the pull towards dark historic works is the desire to be in the presence of contemporary works that are vibrant, funny, serious, bold and energetic. These works can pull me out of the darkness. Transcribing the dark works allow me to engage in a dialogue with contemporary works that fuel my ambition.

Your paintings are often interspersed with text. In your work *The Funfair and the Altarpiece*, a fragment of text reads: 'The warmth of your flesh is near me as you stand so close and read this text.' This feels almost like 'breaking the fourth wall', with the work directly addressing the viewer. Is there a specific way that you intend for viewers to interact with your work? Is this navigated by the repeated symbolism and the arrows you include, for example?

Mmm, yes, that came about when I was laying down one of the signifiers that I scattered across the surface of the paintings and drawings. They litter the illusionistic space, appearing to be attached to trees, laying on the floor, floating in the air... They are there to 'suggest' meaning, but often what looks like a clue is actually a 'fly in the ointment' that denies the answer to the quest for clarification. The fragment of paper painted on the painting asked me to write something on its surface.

Art historian Isabel Graw considers the dialogue between the painter and the painting in one of her essays. She talks about the moment the painting starts to tell the painter what to do, the moment a discussion between the painting and the painter is opened up and the moment the viewer is spoken to by the painting. She continues to explore the possibility of a painting being able to think, painting as a quasi-person, to enter into dialogue with the audience. So yes, the written text is 'breaking the fourth wall'. I have seen people step back uncomfortably from it and others smile and wander away.

The first time I used the eye, it was the eye of the painting, not mine as is often asked, but its engagement with the viewer, watching them looking at it, the painting's gaze looking directly at the viewer engaging them to think about the fact that they are involved in a gaze. The eye as an opening that returns its gaze, the mouth or other openings are a way into the body of the painting, a way to enter behind its skin. The iconography of the medieval wounds and bodily openings that

encourage erotic engagements is echoed in the representations of genitalia, that are just paint, that might make us look and linger a moment longer.



Robin Mason, *The Funfair and the Altarpiece*, 2009-2013, oil and acrylic on five panels, 274 x 266cm, image courtesy of Carl Kostyál, London

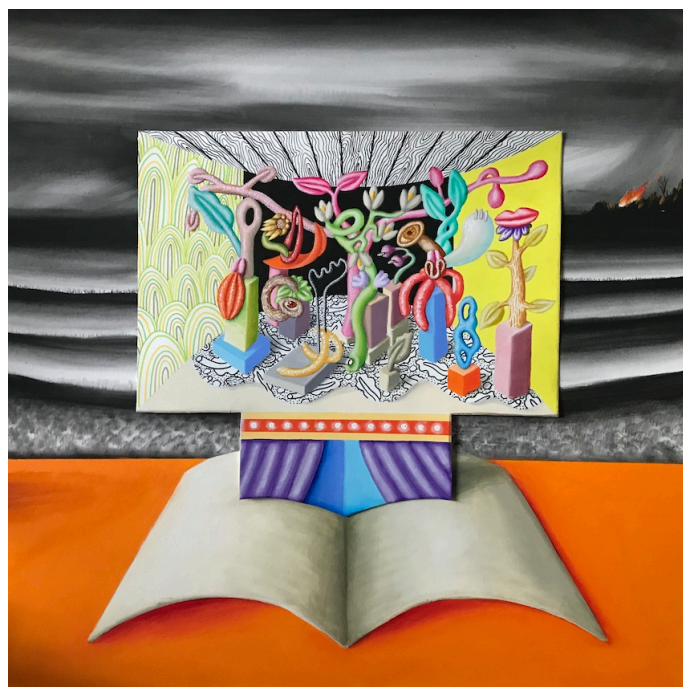
These are tropes borrowed from historic paintings that hold forms in their matter and communicate subliminally to the viewer. The arrows tell the viewer where to look next, until they realise, they are just being guided and mis-directed. The names of places are actual places, but not the place being shown, the place being shown is a figment of my imagination, it's an illusion. The paintings are not statements with clear narratives, sometimes bits shout loudly: 'look at this' and 'not that' or whisper 'come feel how important this little incidental seed is to the balancing act, that somehow allows paint to create this readable believed space, that you are thinking you're looking into' while all along they are merely looking onto its surface.

You are inspired by the darker side of art history. For example, you have cited Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, c.1515 as a key influence in your practice. The monks of the Monastery of St. Anthony in Isenheim, for which it was painted, were known for looking after plague sufferers. The altarpiece depicts Christ covered in plague-type sores. Have you been thinking about this work more in light of the pandemic and has it affected the work you've been making in lockdown? Do you think art has a responsibility to depict suffering, in the way that this work depicts the suffering of plague victims?

My first thought, just now, on my linking the pandemic to the Isenheim Altarpiece was that I was surprised I hadn't been referencing it. Then of course I remembered how long this had been going on for and remembered the first couple of months. I'd had a quite bad cold and had been laid low for about a week when the lockdown started. With all the confusion and worry associated with this situation, as mentioned earlier, I turned to reflecting on sketch books and other books that were important to me for comfort, or knowledge or inspiration at a time when that seemed to be the last sensible thing to do. The sketchbooks, the pop-up book and a book of Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* sat on the coffee table in front of me for a few weeks as I dipped in and out of them.

One morning I opened a new sketchbook and started a drawing referencing the composition and imagery of the altarpiece. The drawing developed as a series of sculptural object-images made out of bendy balloons; the sort clowns make animals and swords out of. The plastic and colourful funfair-like qualities of this, is the antithesis to the suffering of the crucifixion. But the *Isenheim Altarpiece* is not just showing us sores and suffering, the series of panels that make up the whole altarpiece is highly energised with colour, form and contradictions of death and suffering, erotic bodily openings and entrances; counter-balances to the darkness.

I allowed my image of the altarpiece to pop up out of a book, referencing my father's pop-up book, sat on an orange floor space with a background of darkness, echoing the sky behind the dead Christ. The setting isn't, but does reference, Rest Bay in Porthcawl. In the distance, to the right, a silhouette of land defined by flickering flames far off beyond the land mass. This references the steel works that light the sky at night, the place my father and his father worked. It also references a letter sent to my father in which his aunt reminisces on an evening when he visited Swansea, just around the coast. That night his aunt and my grandmother made the short walk to the beach to see Swansea being bombed in the darkness, the flames and explosions lighting the sky and reflecting in the sea of Swansea Bay. He survived and arrived home safely.



Robin Mason, *Study for Pop-Up!* 2020, acrylic on paper and archival board, 85x85cm

So yes, Grunewald's work often takes me through some darker thoughts that become transformed. I think art that depicts suffering can be some of the most compelling and beautiful, as with deeply moving and tragic music. If we allow ourselves to identify with it, we can become transfixed and journey to an experience of wonder that is the opposite to its origins, light out of darkness.

The *Isenheim Altarpiece* is not all suffering, it is political. After all, it was painted on the eve of the Reformation. The *Isenheim Altarpiece's* depiction of suffering has given many the permission they sought to depict emotions, it helped artists to speak about the unspeakable following two World Wars. Arnold Bocklin called it his mentor. Picasso, Otto Dix and Francis Bacon all turned to it for guidance.

Through its transformative ability, in 2007 it guided 130 women from South Africa's Eastern Cape to transform their sadness and horror into a celebratory embroidery transcription. They replaced all the saints and attendees with images of their own children and grandchildren who had died in

the AIDS epidemic, in the form of the *Keiskamma Altarpiece*. Elsworth Kelly's response to the *Isenheim Altarpiece* was his large scale joyous and looming colourfield paintings.

I don't think art has only to depict suffering, but amongst the things it does comment on or depict, it would be dishonest not to.

You are Head of Fine art at City & Guilds of London Art School. How does your teaching inform your painting practice?

It's an extension of studio activity really, trying to find our own voices while being part of a community of artists at different moments on our creative journey; it's enriching. I'm lucky to teach at an art school that has always understood the interplay and creative potential of exploring the tradition of studio practice as it evolves and breaks new ground. Students and tutors share new artists they've discovered and exhibitions they've seen, so I'm always getting re-informed. Taking students on study visits in London or to some of Europe's leading galleries and museums develops an ambition in the students which is infectious. I get inspired by the enthusiasm of a foundation student who attends an interview with a stunning portfolio of work and quite overwhelmed and full of admiration for the ambition and quality of work produced by our BA and MA students.

I'm lucky to work alongside a team of people who care a great deal about the development of the students' work, while being fully engaged in their own practices. So it's getting the balance right. When the students, my colleagues and my studio are functioning well, there's nothing better.