

BEING ANGUS COCKBURN

by Gillian Bintcliffe

Before I've even met the artist Angus Cockburn I get the message loud and clear about his life-style choice as he suggests we meet in the Dordogne in a small hill top village between Les Eyzies and Sarlat as yet untainted by tourism. In the morning the old men of the village still take their bicycles for a leisurely amble down to the village shop to buy a fresh baguette, before stopping at the café for their daily Pastis, Gitane permanently stuck to their bottom lip, their trusty steeds lined up out the front, like the saloon in some old black and white western. The views over the Perigord countryside are stunning and you can see why artists would want to come here.

After much negotiation we meet for lunch at the village restaurant primarily filled with locals, one of those unprepossessing frontages that mask a hidden epicurean gem within. In researching this article I looked through existing media, including his own web site, where I did find some of his 'Travels with my easel – notes from the road' section entertaining. As to who he is I felt I was being given the bare essentials, after all everybody chooses what to tell, what they enhance and what they conveniently forget. It is only human that this makes you more intrigued as to what you may find: bohemian, a prima donna or tunnel vision workaholic.

When he walks in he exudes a mildly bohemian prosperity, of average build and height, but very much a Scot with auburn hair that is slightly greying or has been bleached from sketching outdoors. He has the gait of someone in no particular hurry but has a firm hand shake which is still not totally devoid of *conté* which also makes an appearance as a slight smudge on the right side of his nose and intense dark brown eyes that are subconsciously absorbing. "I wanted to take you to the local fast food joint for a laugh, but since you've come all this way then we might as well celebrate what the region has to offer," is his opening gambit.



As we peruse the menu he orders the wine - a 1999 Castell del Remei Oda. One-to-one his manner is serene to the point of inaudibility. For someone who likes to maintain their privacy I ask why he has agreed to do this interview.

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"I suppose I am ambitious for my work and it is only natural that people are inquisitive about the person who created it. That is not to say that I see the need, despite this age of celebrity and media world we live in, to constantly regurgitate the minutia of some distant experienced angst even if I had any, 'it is so last century'," he murmurs. A back handed comment to the psycho-biographical art form of some Y.B.A.s if ever I saw one.

He is in the Dordogne for a couple of months where he is currently working on some paintings. "I am fortunate we have a friend that has a farmhouse nearby with a barn I can use as a studio. Our nearest neighbour is the Chateau de Commarque, which sounds very grand and creates images of drinks on the terrace, if it wasn't for the fact that it is a ruin." Which as perks of the job go seems pretty good to me. But he insists is just part of the working life of a landscape artist.

We order lunch, he orders the Perigord black truffle risotto, followed by the Dorado braised in mild curry with girolle mushrooms, Swiss chard and onion stalks. I order the pigeon served rare on a bed of sorrel and followed by the spit roasted Pauillac lamb with assorted seasonal vegetables. There follows a foodie discussion in praise of seasonality and the slow food movement, which we're both enthusiastic about.

He was born in Inverness where his family lived on Culloden Moor overlooking the Black Isle, all atmospheric seascapes and the Northern lights, not that he remembers much of this as they not long after moved to near St Andrews and the picturesque villages of the East Neuk of Fife. "Throughout this time we had a base on the west coast of the Highlands where we spent many weekends and holidays, literally a stone's throw from Loch Linney, looking past Ballachulish and towards the pap of Glencoe. When you grow up you take your surroundings very much for granted but perhaps you are absorbing more than you think, and the love of landscapes re-surfaces later in life. It can give you a distinctive sensitivity with the landscape its physicality, its scale, its moods and its luminosity."

As our starters arrive, I ask what his earliest artistic memories are and he explains that his family were always keen Edinburgh Festival goers, but in terms of painting, his parents had close friends in the village who were avid collectors of the Glasgow Boys and the Scottish Colourists before they came back in fashion. Their collection included paintings by D.Y. Cameron, Hornell, Mackintosh Patrick and Peploe. "When we visited there was always a tour to view the latest acquisition, in some ways it was an art education although I didn't know it at the time."

He went on to study design at Chelsea School of Art followed by over twenty years working in design consultancies and marketing communications agencies both in the U.K. and Milan. As to any career highlights he claims as with his

education he “attained consistent levels of mediocrity”, but when pressed: “I suppose going out to Italy just after college to work during the height of the Memphis design movement was a bit of a buzz”. What then made him change to pursue a painting career? “I guess I just fell into design and marketing communications. It wasn’t until I was standing in front of a J.D. Fergusson painting ‘The Blue Hat’ at a Scottish Colourist exhibition during an Edinburgh Festival in the late 90’s, that I was struck that this is what I wanted to do. It was a bolt out of an ultra marine blue and I had to borrow one of the attendant’s chairs to sit down and take it all in.” “But having the idea and actually doing it is quite a sea change, it took a few years before I could give up the day job, but once you step across that threshold it can be very liberating.”

Our mains arrive and there is a lull in the conversation as we tuck into our dorado and lamb, appropriately fine cuisine for a discussion about art, - I say that prior to our meeting I looked at many of his paintings, the two-dimensionality of the computer screen giving no sense of the vibrancy and texture of his work, brimming with colour and light, and that I am now starting to look at the landscape in a different way, which is a tribute to his art.

“I don’t like to be flattered” he says abruptly “it doesn’t suit my Scottish presbyterian upbringing and as someone for whom success has come late in life, who you are is pretty much set in stone as supposed to being determined by any increased interest in your work. The art market can be fickle and beauty is subjective, so ultimately I do things to please myself. That’s not to say one is totally immune from the extra income increased interest brings.” “There is a Japanese artist and all he does is paint the date – 12/6/07 – generally white letters on a black background. Then tomorrow he might make another one – 13/6/07. It would be such a relief to be an artist like that, to find something that could satisfy you that is so easy. But I am not like that.” He pauses a moment, then continues “I used to think I just had a low boredom threshold, but in fact I have always had the need to keep trying new

things and to constantly challenge myself both physically and mentally. That’s how I like to live, having several projects and new experiences ongoing at any one time. Of course you can have too many projects on at one time, and that can be disastrous not giving enough attention to each, but having only one project on can be monotonous and boring”. “When painting you are always looking for that little bit extra, always trying to take the next step forward, which can make every new painting a new adventure. Alive with ideas you start to crave the new challenge every painting brings, as you would crave a new lover”.

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Like other self taught painters success has come as yet without the recognition of the London art establishment, damming with faint praise with comments like, “easily accessible”, “not too challenging” and “easily hang-able”. But this is something that he is remarkably relaxed about. “When it comes to the extending of the artistic envelope we have made no real progress since the middle of last century. It is supposed to be the job of each new century to re-invent the artistic life of the one before it, but as can be seen in the Tate Modern anti-chronological re-hang where they put Pollock next to Monet, time shrinks differences. Art obsessed with gesture, iconography, branding, with its own superficiality of cleverness and complexity for its own sake, its effect is instantaneous and can also be forgettable. When this happens in sport or business it’s called hitting the wall. Admittedly there have been new vehicles in terms of digital media but the content is just more of the same and other disciplines produce far superior work using this technology. For me and other artists of this generation one has to come to terms with the fact that we are not going to push this envelope and leave no lasting contribution, anything we do is merely tinkering around the edges.” This is a subject that Cockburn clearly has strong views on: “maybe we are in the

death throes of this civilisation and that no great art will be produced until the next big cataclysmic world event.” Much to the consternation of the waiter and me, Cockburn declines any of the mouth-watering desserts and opts for a hot water. I’m with the waiter on this one as he mumbles something indeterminable on his way back to the kitchen.

I ask if he is happy with the label of painting in the colourist tradition. Whilst he acknowledges his early influences he tells me over his hot water, that he regards himself more European. “Having spent time working and living in other countries, the siege mentality that seems to dominate an island nation is not one that I subscribe to. We as a nation have been constantly influenced by outside people and cultures and continue to do so, long may it continue. Which brings us back to the influence Europe and the Expressionists had on the colourists tradition, so I suppose the answer is yes. There is antecedence in all professions and therefore it is only natural when image making one references past art history, if even sub-consciously. It was Spanish abstract artist Joan Miró who said, ‘I try to apply colours like words that shape poems, notes that shape music’.

Before a second bottle of wine becomes a distinct possibility, our time is up and I am back where I began trying to get an understanding of the person. Whilst he is charming and engaging company, he is uncomfortable being observed preferring the role of observer. It was poet and critic Baudelaire, one of literary modernism’s founding fathers, who identified and championed the *Flâneur* (man who strolls) a botanist of the side walk, an observer of life, remaining detached, just another face in the crowd. After saying our goodbyes he ambles off into another sun-kissed Dordogne afternoon and you somehow feel that this is how he likes it, experiencing and being involved in his surroundings yet wishing to maintain his personal privacy, letting his work do the talking for him.

Gillian Bintcliffe – Art critic and freelance writer