

IN CONVERSATION

WITH SIMON CALLERY

WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY WORKING ON AT THE MOMENT?

Right now, on my studio wall, or heaped on the studio floor are a number of works. There might be up to 10 works on the go and they are all at different stages. Some are part of a growing body of paintings I call Pit Paintings. These are circular stacked and layered paintings that are cut away to expose their interior. I also have a number of different sized soft paintings. These are hanging canvasses that have had all the usual stretchers and woodwork removed. The most recent of these are full of holes where I have begun to pick at and pierce the marked and pigmented surfaces with scissors or blades. Some of the paintings in the studio at the moment were begun during this summer when I was working on an archaeological site in North Wales.

'SOFT PAINTING' - INTERESTING TITLE, CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS?

I was looking for a title that drew attention to the actual physical qualities of a painting rather than a title that might label an image or suggest a narrative. Since I am not working with images, I am interested in making paintings that communicate on a physical level. A painting can be soft or hard as much as it can be red or green.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING IN THIS WAY, AND WHERE DID IT START?

I have been developing this way of working for over five years now. An important time for me was my AHRC research fellowship, called the Thames Gateway Project*, which ran from 2006 - 2009. It was a period of great focus and I was working in the field with Oxford Archaeology, a commercial archaeology unit, at a number of excavation and construction sites within the changing landscape of the Thames Estuary regeneration zone. The emphatically physical character of these sites led me to question the capacity of image to communicate the material qualities of landscape in painting.

YOUR PAINTINGS HAVE A VERY PHYSICAL PRESENCE, IS IT THE PHYSICAL PROCESS THAT DRIVES YOU AS AN ARTIST?

The physical character of the work is a result of recognising that if you remove image from painting, as I have done, then you must develop new physical forms and qualities to fill the void. I might well start a work with an idea of what I want in mind but it always dissolves away as the physical reality of making a painting gets underway. The final outcome of a painting is determined by what materials can do as I work them.

YOU ORIGINALLY TRAINED AS A SCULPTOR. HAS THIS INFLUENCED THE WAY YOU WORK?

Yes, I finished my degree at Cardiff in the sculpture department although I started it in painting. I think what I was doing then is what I have done a number of times since. This is to work outside the parameters of the conventional territory of painting in order to get a better understanding of painting. I call myself a painter and I call my works painting. I recognise that these paintings often share qualities associated with sculpture. I embrace this

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR ONGOING WORK WITH THE INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD?

I have worked with the Institute of Archaeology for many years now. I am very fortunate to be invited to their digs. The relationship grew from a residency where I was invited back each summer over a seven-year period. Recently I have been invited by archaeologist Professor Gary Lock

to work at the excavations of an iron age hill fort in the Clwydian Hills in Denbighshire. I always go on site slightly nervous and unsure about what I will produce. It is always experimental. These experiences of landscape and exposure to evidence of past human activity has provoked me to think about painting in a completely new way. The relationship between time and material is tangible in these places and this has had a profound impact on my approach.

WHAT EXCITES YOU ABOUT THE PROSPECT OF WORKING WITH STUDENTS AT NTU?

Most of the time I work on my own. It is solitary and in general this is what is needed. There are times when it is important to collaborate with other people to create an energy and a dialogue, to have to think out loud, to generate masses of material and to work as part of a group to make large-scale work that you couldn't possibly do alone. I want to do this at NTU and I want to expose the entire material-generating and decision-making process when making work for an exhibition as an integral element of the exhibition. Perhaps the most exciting prospect is to see how working with a group of students will influence what can be made.

*Simon Callery Thames Gateway Project Arts & Humanities Research Council Fellowship, University of the Arts Wimbledon and Oxford Archaeology, 2006 - 2009.