

Oi Oi

Sam Bassett interviewed by Matthew Collings

Matthew Collings

How much does the picture you end up with match an image-idea you had in your mind before you made the first mark?

Sam Bassett

I get excited about an idea but usually, as I progress to see that idea through, it almost becomes too much of a conscious thing, too contrived, almost awkward to be with. I don't know if this is lack of confidence or because there's been a lack of personal discovery. In any case there is definitely a need to see these ideas through but also, to be able to obliterate and destroy them.

In the process of making an image, I believe play is important. In over stepping things, through mistakes and destruction, I find better steps.

The paintings progress over days. My experiences and the world outside of the studio both change day to day. And progress and the final result is a deconstruction or representation of that time span. They exist or become my past and future on one plane. My concerns, my celebration, my inside and outside are experiencing constant change so the work mirrors this. Figures tend to exist within and between made up interior and exterior spaces, losing limbs or getting lost for days and then reappearing. Maybe staying lost. They're pretty autobiographical. They move as I do. Making work is a responding, growing thing. The work and the process beget its own world. My ideal is that it should be of this world but also beyond it.

When I draw I work fast and the idea occurs during the making. They retain a snapshot of an instant, maybe a quick diary entry, and one straight act — whereas the paintings have layers and layers, many encounters, many levels of thought, I suppose. Working on lots of things at the same time, I feel like a bee. I'm working and pollinating, going from flower to flower.

So, I suppose the end point is far from the initial idea. The idea is just the motivation to do something and then it drops into line with, you know, constantly running themes in all the work. The doing, the act of doing, keeps producing routes to new and changeable outcomes.

Matthew Collings

It's hard to define what I'm seeing when I see a whole flood of your pictures. You do something that's popular and for everyone, but also much more abstract than fine artists who happen also to be popular usually are. To me your work overall seems like Roger Hilton joined with comics. Not full-on comics. The Hilton part is the surprising space making. And the way he is wildly linear, and spiky and wiry, and explosive — all that. But also, he respects the calm visual balances of Mondrian. He's always resolving things in terms of those large balances. He can be organic and at the same time the viewer senses the big powerful hold that the geometric has for him. A calm order. I do see that in you. The comic's aspect of your work is also kind of associative of high art: David Hockney at the Royal College, or a little bit of Basquiat. But those two are always immediately suggestive of comics (I mean Hockney in that particular time period) where Roger Hilton never is. His version of the popular is children's art not comics.

This comics thing in what you do, to me is fun and interesting, because it's a direct connection to



everyone's interests. But unlike David Shrigley or Raymond Pettibon, say, current figures who are fine artists but in their different ways also offer something widely accessible, there is a definite hold, in your work, on abstract space as a thing that can be expressive and exciting on its own. That's why my first thought was to wonder how conscious or unconscious the whole process is, for you. And if what you end up with is ever anything much like the thing in your head before you began.

You offer this image of your work process as a bee buzzing about from one piece of paper to another. One canvas to another. Or from paper to canvas to paper. And the pictures grow organically via a process of things being done and erased, other bits done, other erasures. It's this thing in your mind at this minute, then it's something else. And the end is a mixture of all those moments. You say you do have a strong idea at first, but from experience you expect it to change. That suggests to me that mutability as a state is almost content in itself for you.

Sam Bassett

Change, yeah. The idea or notion of change is a huge part of the work. Personal change, and the general change we witness around us. Mutability I suppose reflects the mind, the seasons, the changes of a place — outside the studio. It has become an important part of the whole, the content for me in the work and maybe I'm interested in how I, or we as people, deal with it. I'm interested in the consequences of it, the realities of cause and effect. That may come from a playful and changeable practice in the physical sense but also bearing witness to many changes and shifts in a community. Or the geography of a place. Again, the materials and process of play echo reality directly, not visually as a sign but as a process: changeability and swiftness.

I suppose growing up in Carbis Bay, St. Ives, the art I saw, or connected with, was Roger Hilton, Hepworth, Frost, Blow and Heron, among others. I didn't know what it was about, but the Belgrave Gallery in St Ives usually had some on display and I soon became friends with the gallery whilst toing and froing between art and doing my job cleaning the beach and doing dishes down the Porthgwithden. I never got introduced to those artists. But I really got something from the work. Maybe a push to be confident and playful with materials. A pass to create, without being too descriptive. They introduced me to modernism. These large abstract paintings that gave me more to think about than they gave me answers exactly. I liked that. The work held the links to landscape, this place, home, which made sense to me. I saw a lot of work in this small gallery with those big elements, balances maybe hidden under a veil of energetic enquiry into what paint can do.

Yes, with big spaces, like Mondrian's more definite and — for me — colder and more composed images. I'm a big fan of his paintings of dunes. I found the later paintings too stark. Too clean, maybe. Now I see them as beautifully balanced and confident.

These artists remain of great interest you know: the character of Hilton for sure. But back then, when I was young in the late 90's I didn't even know this lot had work in the Tate, which was opened in St. Ives in 1993. I didn't know what was in that place. I never went for years. I didn't know it was for me in there. When I was younger it was something many took the piss out of, 'Tate,,, shit art in there'. I think I can safely say I'm not a product of the 'art lot'!

'You need a job' — my family were obsessed. Keep your head down and get paid. This kind of attitude, I suppose, took me on to do illustration at college. I didn't really want to, but hey. I learnt software. I tried my best to adapt but I found working to briefs really wasn't me. The information sharing, text, numbers, et cetera, that may make up the illustrated image, I used on a bigger scale in my paintings. Those from 2005, picturing the landscape, became half text. Descriptive words linked things and provided structures.



I feel when I'm making paintings, they have the sky, the sea and the land, and it's pretty literal. It's grounded. There's a base, maybe. Maybe they just mimic my everyday space, the space we occupy here out on the peninsular, sticking out into the Atlantic — it's kind of comic, yes, as you say.

But I want my work to be a place where you not only see a world, something familiar, but also you experience something removed and abstracted. There's a narrative but one that's open to interpretation and conversation. They give, yes, but not enough to be black and white. So hints of things stick through, and if these are easily readable, they're also only slight directions or hints, which sit in a more abstract place: the painting.

I'm not brave enough yet to be more subtle. And I'm a drawer. Linear elements don't just help me and my mind personally but also offer variety in the surface and suggestions of readable emotions, placed personalities. I see many eyes a day. I like the gaze, the opening. Like with words, I struggle but I like reading painting, I like reading faces, I like the people in my mind.

Matthew Collings

It's very nice what you say about those historic St Ives abstract paintings getting into your mind somehow, and the effect of that absorption having a place in what you do. But it not being obvious. It's there but subliminal. The most apparent thing in your work is life. But the way you make life seem compressed and captured somehow — that's much harder to explain. It's got something to do with several things equally I imagine. The visual ambition and sophistication that older art offers. Your own poetic sense of things. Your own visual rhythms.

Sam Bassett

Yeah, I suppose, as someone who doesn't read really well, I've found myself totally sucked in and reading paintings in the Real. That excitement and fucking belly thing that happens, the excitement of colour, marks and details or just ahh, like 'How...?' They make me want to walk out, go hunting those feelings for real in the outdoor space. To witness those big spaces or dappled bits of light, those raw energies of the sea you know? Apart from my fear of cows, I'm into it.

The paintings I have learnt from are transportive and I get totally moved by them. Why or how an image gets a hold on you, makes you cry or makes you buzz. I fucking love it, like from the absolute joy of Hilton's 'Oi Yoi Yoi', Lanyon's haunting and tragic 'St Just' or Christopher Wood's beautiful and telling 'The Fishermans' Farewell,' I get that urge, that sense to give emotionally what I can, reflective of my past or present.

I suppose I'm pretty melancholic in my work. I get more from expressing my personal lows and losses. There, then, are probably those subliminal links to older paintings. Where I'm informed, I want to be an abstract painter. I'm pushing for it. But the reality I live now, which I'm describing and discussing through the image making, is just too hard to break from. I suppose it's not lack of confidence, it must be my need to confidently portray my Real. A step beyond that purer abstraction, to a place where I feel it's right to share these personal memories, losses, inequalities and joys.

The paintings are usually a mass of marks, outgoing, building, but the whole conversation, the entire thing, is too much, so this editing back, as I said, the obliteration of so much, is needed. Setting things in a more barren space helps focus on something made up or needed as an area of discussion. Maybe I feel like I'm trying to somehow place my reality into these artistic enquiries. Helping it become art. Work for me should derive more from life. I feel you can tell if someone is living their work, like it's a total extension of them. Maybe this is the aim, to be honestly discussing more from my everyday rather than art. Trying to record as personally as possible. But all this wealth of other people's art that came before me totally enriches me, and, in turn, it enriches the work.



You say I make life seem compressed and captured. Well, my time in the studio is short. I work quick, reacting to whatever the outdoors is doing, or to that news report, or to a personal thing, to the Now. I'm getting better at it. But I don't like being in the studio for too long. A good time out of it really supports good progress in it. I feel isolated generally and staying in a room alone doesn't help. My studio was always a little filthy hole, a space to abuse and let nothing restrict the character of how I needed to work. But now I have a space where I can also watch Gardener's World and feel all right, I can see what's on Netflix. I have hit some sort of domesticity at work. Maybe it just took me a while to realise I could do that. I wasn't wasting time if I sat and learned and thought.

As I said earlier this work spans time. And this recalling of memories mixed with Now and things I've personally witnessed or learned from, help tell a tale. Images of Rose Wall Hill through a sweaty bus window. Memories of mushrooms with mates climbing granite tors up Trevalgan hill. Or sitting by a peaceful sea at night and seeing all the way across the bay to Gwithian, a boat on fire. Empty vessels on a table. Empty homes that now sit still. Souls lost. A last call for help. Distress signals and worried families. A boat's gone down, haven't heard from your Dad at sea. Buckets of fish brought home to be filleted for the neighbours, and my brother and I getting the heads to play with. Drink, pubs and lost heads. Hiding, scared, but in love with it all. Lying in flowers. Sweeping up a sandy path. Picking up ice-cream wrappers. Smoldering barbecues. It all goes into the images, it all helps.

The whole combination of things may be apparent. I haven't sophisticatedly whittled it down. I'm not very economic in my language, maybe, but then, I'm not that either in my life.

After ten years of really working, I'm seeing these rhythms, elements and patterns coming round again and again. I use myself to make images: self-portraits. Not just my experiences but my body, also. They're me, my world. Myself in others' shoes and placed as a character in a story I feel I'm building. A distorted view of a life by the coast. An insightful, descriptive view of a surreal existence.

It's all fucking surreal though, isn't it? Us. All of it. Maybe my work strikes a Normal for me and life otherwise is too much. My themes and concerns are tightening to a point where my needing to make this art is settling with me. It's got reason. I'm so appreciative of art and how I learn and live by it. Not a lot else makes sense.

