

THE ARTIST FROM WITHIN

By PETER WEY

THE DRIVE to make art comes as an urgent invitation to engage in a work of such importance that to refuse would be to deny the potentiality of life itself. It opens up visions of knowledge and wholeness far beyond my personal capacity to comprehend. Relations between this artist's reality and normal person's reality are not easy and sometimes they seem to be mutually exclusive.

I will do anything to avoid getting involved in the process of painting. Sloth is there, certainly, but the avoidances often themselves entail great labours and are worthy activities in their own right so that completing them brings the compensation of a glow of satisfaction. Yet underneath there is a deep disquiet that this labour was used to avoid engaging in a fundamental task personally allocated to me. If it is sloth then it seems not to be physical for me nor apparently for most other artists; indeed a common way to break through the rising barrier of resistance is to initiate a mechanical or physical activity associated with the technique of the craft but innocent of content, such as stretching a canvas, or exploring the possibilities and properties of a new paint. There is an intimate physical relationship between the artist and the materials used and soon one becomes immersed, losing awareness of all except, at first, the physical sensations of becoming in tune with the properties of the materials and the rhythms of the process of preparation. Awareness returns, now no longer involved in preparation but deeply in the process of the art work itself. But the awareness seems to have returned to a different person; perception, knowledge and constructs of reality and the sense of certainty and direction and energy are all changed. The work carried out by the artist in this state may seem strange to the same person when returned to normal later. Often the work is acknowledged with a sense of shock or awe or disbelief that such a work was possible. Many of the most powerful paintings have come when my knowledge of what happened in the studio was minimal and it is as though someone else has been at work not I, someone akin perhaps to the angel who taught William Blake to draw in a dream.

This type of experience does not seem to be unusual among artists. But the price demanded for entrance into the art experience with the uncertainty of rewards only hinted at, not promised, may seem too great. This is a point where it becomes impossible to find space or time to make the commitment to set up a studio or find time to indulge in this selfish activity.

For the change does not only affect me—a sense of cut-off when involved in the work is absolute. Even when a loved partner understands the need and encourages—further even, actually pushes me in my indolence and resistance to begin the work—knowing, as I know, that whatever drives me on will make life untenable if I do not engage in the work—and even knowing from previous experience that this time passes and I return to the more normal self—even then, when the work is in progress, the degree of exclusion is frightening as though one can at the same time hold the notion that time passes and this will have an end, and yet have a glimpse of the awfulness of stepping into eternity and the loss being absolute.

But how can this be? I am only starting to paint and a landscape at that—people often say ‘that must be relaxing—I would love to paint landscapes’.

There is great pleasure in exercising skill both for the participant and the observer. In art the two skills of handling the materials and seeing and selecting are necessary to the making of the work. Getting in tune with the materials is part of the process of working. Although a new work seems to have its start at the moment when paint touches surface, in some ways it has begun at an earlier stage perhaps long before I came into being, perhaps when I selected the paint, or ground the pigments or put the paint on the palette. The tools become part of me. Fingers are the first mark makers and other tools are extensions of these. My nerve endings seem to extend into the brushes or other tools to sense the appropriate mark, into the medium to know its viscosity, on to the surface to feel its qualities.

There is enormous thrill and excitement when a pattern of interaction between myself and the medium, e.g. the way a colour explodes into the wetness of the paper and infiltrates other colours, achieves a resonance with the perception of the landscape which is then held by the painting. Part of this thrill is in the pushing of experience to a limit and playing with edge—

the nature of edge is worth considering
up to the edge confirms boundaries
it shows powers and control to that extent

it relates to 'beating the bounds'
 it confirms the status quo
 it not only confirms that which is within
it also confirms that which is outside.

That is satisfying and makes for security and may have something to do with the strength of feelings people have about paintings. They are reinforcing known and agreed structures, or denying them.

In terms of skill the physical properties dictate the limits.

In terms of perception a selection is made from the great mass of available stimuli. Much of the selection may be based on schema formed in early childhood or on habits of seeing within a cultural group. These enable an agreed perception of reality which is useful for the coherence of the group. The danger is that these habits of perceiving become mistaken for reality and other constructs of reality become excluded and, in visual terms, invisible.

The work becomes a questioning and an interplay between the elements and forces in the landscape, the experience and forces within the artist, and the nature of the medium surface and tools being used. Sometimes it is difficult to separate being in tune with the materials from those habits of using them to produce a piece of work within the schema—so then I start crudely making marks which deny both skill and schema until a discussion builds up.

What am I doing in the landscape? Why have I come to this wild place? The rhythmic activity of walking, then of mark-making, questioning the landscape, provides a new pattern of reference which gradually allows the catching of circular thoughts, the untying of knots, and the dismantling of the barriers of noise around our active lives. It is difficult to keep in mind the brilliance and timescale of the stars in the near brightness of the city lights.

Now I can begin to listen to and watch the interplay of elements. Water, air, rocks, stars, microbes and human life each have different powers and timescales yet each influences the others. The hills shape the clouds and in turn are shaped by the wind and rain in a pattern of continual interaction and change. This is a place where perspective on experience is altered. There is a sense of excitement, danger, the unexpected, of being at the edge of human control, chaos and infinite possibility. In the wildness of the moorlands the limits we impose on our perceptions are released—rocks, hills, air, time and spirit interact bringing awareness of a universal order and of a force that drives through all things.

This is a place where for me something of ineffable beauty and power has been experienced. St John of the Cross seems to speak

of related experiences, especially in 'Verses written after an ecstasy of high exaltation':

So borne aloft, so drunken-reeling,
 So rapt was I, so swept away,
 Within the scope of sense or feeling
 My sense or feeling could not stay.
 And in my soul I felt, revealing,
 A sense that, though its sense was naught,
 Transcended knowledge with my thought.

The man who truly there has come
 Of his own self must shed the guise;
 Of all he knew before the sun
 Seems far beneath that wondrous prize:
 And in this lore he grows so wise
 That he remains, though knowing naught,
 Transcending knowledge with his thought.

(*Poems*, trans. Roy Campbell)

The vision is such that I must return even though I cannot command the return of the experience any more than I could live in it and remain myself.

I can however set up the conditions in which it has previously occurred. By going into the type of landscape which triggers the experience and by stepping from the path of agreed reality and losing myself and my tight local boundaries and purposes to become open to something beyond, I abandon myself to trust in ultimate meaning. Perception changes; stimuli are no longer translated into information and I am in a terrifying whirlwind, blaze, confusion, an overwhelm of colours, shapes, sounds and smells. There is no meaning I can recognize, no coordinate system, only raw stimuli in abundance and time and space seem infinite until new juxtapositions give new insight and meaning or after an endless time I find myself again. The contact with the work provides the stepping stone and the link but there is always a fear that one will never get back.

It is only as I start to draw that I really begin to look. I think that I am seeing yet with the first marks my perception is heightened. At first I do not know how to begin. There is too much there. There is nothing to grasp hold of. It is too difficult, too complicated. I start, putting everything in, and if I continue this way may produce an acceptable looking landscape. But this was not what I experienced! It is weak, it misses the point—any point really except

a representation of a view. But it is a view without 'view'! Without a sharpness of perception.

Again I look at the landscape, am in the landscape and giving attention to my experience here. I am excited, awed, impressed, bewildered, fearful, triumphant, humoured, amazed, overcome, have sense of insight . . . by something in this situation, but by what? If I paint automatically, producing a picture, I miss it. Am I moved by the whole situation? I don't think so! This time I select. I start asking questions more specifically. What moves me? Could it be this combination of colours; the harmony or dissonance between them; the way the forms in the clouds here echo the mountains or form a counterbalance, the reversal in form here; the humour of these repeated forms suddenly throwing in a surprise ending; the feeling that the sky here seems solid and the land full of infinite space; the stability of this vertical form against that horizontal; the contrast of these textures; the way that here one is aware of the solidity of the air and standing within it; the energy of these dynamic diagonals, the fluttering dance of that butterfly; rhythmic waving of the grasses; the pouring of the wind into the valley; the way clouds form on the edge of that mountain; the slow movements of the mountains; the meeting, clashing, forming of the elements; the brightness, the darkness, the songs of the birds, sound of the air touching, changing, caressing, blasting; the falling and rippling of water; the distance of those stars; the change over time; one's place in time; the impossible solidity of space, light and dark, contrasts and harmonies; brilliance, contrast and richness of colours, the surprise of colours?

Starting to paint can be like scales falling from the eyes—colours get brighter and are rarely what one expects to see. Rhythms and relationships bound through the landscape and through me resonating deep inside and with the materials. I keep on selecting, rigorously asking one question at a time and disciplining myself to leave that painting, usually watercolour, when I have put down the result of the interaction between my question, the medium and the landscape response.

At one sitting there will be many questions and many replies.

The whole experience and interaction is often like being caught in a great symphony—as composer, conductor, instrumentalist, with its sequencing and time. At the end I am exhausted and exhilarated. Although moods may be happy or sad, somehow the feeling goes beyond and deeper than this sobering—may be nearer—overawed—amazed.

When I later look at the works produced during this experience they are like the footprints in the sand. They are keys. All have

something. Some may be strong statements which carry a lot of power of the experience, others not so, but they carry part of it. And when I work in the studio I surround myself with them—not to copy—but to work immersed in them.

Any mark made immediately sets up dynamic relationships. It has a certain weight, intensity, thickness, direction, size and texture as well as its position in relation to the edges of the surface. The surface too has its own properties including texture, size, colour and tone, and the dynamics of its shape. The mark is not just a point in space, although it has that property also, but it exists as a physical manifestation of an interaction between materials. It has qualities from the tools, the medium, the surface and the artist. It is a record of a part of the activity of the artist, but only part. The process of painting involves a great deal of activity, physical and mental and, at intervals, marks are made which themselves interact to form a construction focussing the experience of the artist. The painting is not the experience, it is rather an external record of a journey through an experience which later may make this vision accessible again by providing keys and reference points.

Memory is held externally as well as internally—the structure of a room, especially a work room such as a studio, and the positioning of objects within it, the movements one makes in walking across it, the colours, smells and sounds hold keys to internal thoughts and experiences. And so it is with painting. The physical and mental actions in the process of making a painting create a construction not just out there on the canvas or paper, but inside within the artist. Each is in tune with the other so that when a painting works well, artist, subject and materials resonate. Apart from the texture on the surface the painting may seem two dimensional, but the experience it reflects exists in space and time. As the eyes of the observer follow in time with the pace and rhythm of the composition, forms and structures are created within the observer, that is, if the observer will allow this experience. This structural experience of the painting is quite different from the experience of recognizing an image or object, and the tension between these two forms of seeing creates a powerful dynamic for carrying qualities of experience of harmony and dissonance. One is not always aware whether one's response is to a recognizable object/image or to the body feeling evoked by the structure. For example, I may think that I have a strong visual memory of someone or something well known to me but when I actually start to draw I become aware that the image is hardly visual at all. It is somewhere there in body sensations, in feelings of posture, rhythms, masses and tensions but I cannot call up a visual image.

Einstein talked of his ideas starting as feelings and hunches, becoming shapes which he manipulated and only later on in the process being focused into the medium of mathematics.

It is in the medium, and in the interactive process of drawing and painting that the image builds up, is drawn out of memory, almost by a right/wrong or yes/no response to the marks made. This is very different from having a visual memory image which is then projected and recreated externally. Such a strong visual memory image may actually shut out non-visual material. I find it very difficult to work from photographs because of this exclusion.

By allowing the interaction with the materials to form the image all sorts of knowledge and experience, ideas and prejudices about the subject, much of it not consciously held, is made available and brought into play in the making of the painting. The canvas then becomes an external place, where these internal elements which may have been kept in quite separate internal compartments, are brought into view and held there until a resolution or equation is worked out, or at least until a way is found of holding and acknowledging the irreconcilable within the same frame.

One of the great values of painting is that it can enable this to happen.

When painting, thought seems clearer and energy flows. I can feel cold yet within moments of starting be burning hot—it is as though every aspect is brought into play, mental, physical, spiritual; there is a feeling of total involvement and access to knowledge beyond description. A sense of wholeness, at the same time of unity, belonging, growing into and being part of other life—interdependence.

Sense of time changes as though in a moment a lifetime may be lived. The sense of time seems peculiarly important as a constant in our society. Our timepieces commonly are now accurate to miniscule fractions of seconds, totally irrelevant to any normal need. As though we need to hang on to this coordinate against a fearful suspicion that reality may not be agreed and something may fall apart. Certain coordinates for reality are regularly drummed into us; time is one. The daily lesson of the news—a few simple points with similar pattern each day, repeated until we learn them. The fiction 'soap opera' exchanged so that people have something in common. Yet our experience of time is quite other—time flies, or drags, at moments of intense excitement or crisis we perceive qualitatively and quantitatively at an inconceivably faster rate than normal. Time exists in paintings too in the time and rhythm of movements of the eye across and around the painting. A form in painting may feel weak when the eye is led too quickly

through and out again. A strong form is experienced where the eye continues to return so that over time a multitude of contacts are made.

Yet in painting one can have simultaneously the experience of time and the instant perception of the whole.

Sometimes works reach a point where they can continue no further. I do not know where to go next or why. The work may just feel unfinished or it may be that I have become aware that it has been moving towards a too easy conclusion; one that looks good but I know is wrong, where perhaps I have been seduced by colour, form or image which pleases me and I know will please others but an uneasiness at another level of my being tells me that this is wasting an opportunity and betraying a vision. I stop the painting with a sudden mark or slash of incongruous paint, a deliberate discord like a slap in the face to bring me to my senses. I do not know why at that point but I know that I have to do this.

This painting sits in the studio like a bad conscience, uncomfortably reminding the artist of a vision half remembered, nearly lost, and beyond my present knowledge, resource, experience, grace or insight to bring to a resolution. To my more normal prosaic self it sits as an accusation of almost beauty wantonly vandalized.

In time, contact and familiarity bring me to the point where neither artist nor normal self are shocked and the painting is merely in the way. It is then removed to store until perhaps years later without having consciously thought about it I find myself pulling it out of the rack now knowing how to resolve the disharmony and find the vision.

I have changed and grown and come to the point where I have caught up with the leap that was at the time too far. The painting and I continued to work even when unremembered and this confidence from experience that things grow even when not watched or remembered is crucial. What is important is to keep working and find some continuity and relationship, meaning and direction in the work. But life does not allow continuous work. Consciousness is not continuous but a sporadic phenomenon, we lose it regularly for many hours each day but even in so-called conscious time we slip continually through states of sharp focus, diffused being, and daydreaming so that the constructs of our conscious moments depend upon leaping the gaps to make a coherent whole, just as we will link disconnected marks on a surface to make lines and images, to maintain a sense of meaning and direction based on relationship, even when the marks are random. We do not even need to be conscious for most of life to carry on perfectly normally. We can make our way from place to place along a known route

even driving a car, taking decisions which are matters of life and death, and arrive safely at the destination without being aware of how we got there. Only when something new or unexpected arises do consciousness and a new level of decision making become necessary.

The art work too continues to work and develop at all levels of being not just when the artist is aware that a work is in progress. My first powerful lesson in this came in a dream. It was at a time when I could do very little art work because of constraints of time, space and finance, but when the opportunity was there I was very deeply involved. One painting especially would not be solved although I struggled long; some vital element was missing. Then I had a dream in which I was showing someone around a gallery and there were many variations on the painting, including the painting I was working on, and they were all complete. Before the dream was over I knew that I was showing myself around and that I had actually made all these paintings as inner resolutions even though I had externally only made the one. My difficulty in completing the one was that I was trying to solve them all in the one production. When I woke up I was able to complete the painting.

That the art work, like the seed growing, like the autonomous nervous system, continues whether one is aware of it or not, is an enormous source of confidence. This activity provides a link between physical, mental and spiritual experiences; a bridge between the conscious and unconscious; a meeting place for irreconcilable opposites and a means to open up perception and awareness.

Making a painting can mean engaging with fearful forces and being involved in the progress towards making all things alive, conscious and whole.

NOTE

For readers interested in a more objective account of the creative process, especially in relation to notions of control and surrender; mobilizing contradictory qualities; and the search for meaning, I recommend: Rosemary Gordon: *Dying and creating*, (Society of Analytical Psychologists, 1978).