



Phil Johns

Phil Johns reflects on his life in art...

"I am convinced that people that just look for words to describe art completely miss what is in a good work, for words describe the known image; good art is indescribable and that is why it's usually an irritant... I like the idea of reverie, image and imagination, but reverie and imagination are the true art, indestructible, because whatever your medium it is not the image."

Whenever I'm in a fog about my work, I frequently turn to Terry Frost for clarification. Disambiguating abstract art can be 'irritating' when perhaps a little 'reverie' is the simpler and more prudent option.

I always feel that I was born too late. How I would have loved to have been working at the time of the Abstract Expressionists in New York or to have been around the St Ives school in the Fifties and Sixties when the truly ground breaking work was being perpetuated by the likes of Heron, Nicholson, Hepworth, Frost and Hilton. I suppose part of me feels that painting isn't really taken seriously anymore and it is the conceptualists that grab all the headlines. The genie is out of the bottle and I suspect it's not going back in.

From the very earliest that I can remember, I always wanted to be an artist. My career has meandered through many phases and adventures. Although I had always painted, I started as a lowly paste-up artist in a London design studio in the early Seventies. In this pre-micro-chip era, a tub of cow gum, a sharp scalpel and a couple of decent ruling pens were de rigueur. Graphic design was a very hands-on and time-consuming business, and during this time I was able to hone many skills which have come in handy frequently throughout my working life. I became a freelance designer and managed to develop reasonable business skills and worked on a great many projects. I worked on accounts for Tate and Lyle, and Nestlé; illustrated various publications; designed album covers, book jackets and greeting cards; and much more. By the

late Eighties the studio Apple computer had arrived, which meant I had pretty much become an anachronism.

I threw caution to the wind and decided that I would become a 'proper' artist: do what I had always wanted to do and paint for a living. I applied the same work ethos to this new practice and painted a much varied portfolio of work. After all, illustrators can do anything, can't they? I say this seriously because when working commercially there is no time to develop a 'style'. You have to be able to adapt to whatever the brief – at least, if you want to feed the kids, you do. I painted portraits, musical and Venetian themes and I started to publish my own limited edition prints. I soon developed a group of galleries to exhibit with and supplied the likes of Harrods, Liberty's and John Lewis. On top of this I was running two galleries of my own. Then the nightmares started! Galleries and outlets were devouring more work than I could produce and the pressure was horrendous. I became a sort of human sausage machine churning out work; I

wasn't enjoying any of it and seriously considered giving the whole thing up. I had read that before his untimely death, the comedian Eric Morcambe was tired of being funny. I thought that if he could feel that way about his career then I certainly could about mine.

It was now into the new millennium and I was disillusioned and depressed.

My wife suggested a holiday. She suggested St Ives in Cornwall as it was somewhere she had been before and was convinced that I would like it. She was right! I did like it and it has become a regular sojourn ever since. The place just does something for an artist. It was here that all those great artistic luminaries that I had heard of, but not paid much attention to, had ploughed the ground, so to speak, and very often in the most difficult of circumstances. Even Mark Rothko had checked the place out. For these artists, figuration had been pretty much abandoned for abstraction. Because of my background, abstract was something that I admired, but felt was from another orbit. It was, however, intensely compelling. So it was back to square one. I studied the works of the St Ives artists alongside those of Diebenkorn, Soulages, Rothko, Motherwell et al and this brings me back to where I started – where was I when all of this creativity was going on?

Where was I to start? Terry Frost provided the answer. 'Reverie' – a state of dreamy meditation or fanciful musing: lost in reverie. Pulling an image out of your imagination is no small thing. It was much easier to refer to a piece of reference material or paint in front of the subject. Now, for my part, the painting is the subject.

Simple shapes and forms form the basis of a piece of work together with the use of vibrant colour. Some of my shapes can be informed by an ancient place of worship, something imagined from a piece of music or simply from something that has stuck in my memory from times past. Colours can be an emanation of light or can be concerned with the sublime.

It seems only right to finish with a turn of phrase from Sir Terry Frost. When the 1968 painting *Colour down the Side* was used by British Airways on its plane tails, he referred to it as "one of the best I've ever done; a real humdinger". It may not be the usual art speak, but I can only hope to produce the odd 'humdinger' of my own.

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opposite: Hinba series No. 10, monotype

left top to bottom: Abstract series No. 12, acrylic and collage on panel.

Hinba series No. 14, monotype

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