Culture Critic
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CultureCritic talks to Art & Language...

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Upon the opening of the new Art & Language exhibiton at the Lisson Gallery, Mel Ramsden and Michael Baldwin sit down with CultureCritic to discuss portraits, party chains and 40 years of collaboration.

Where does the humour if any in your work lie?

MEL RAMSDEN: Some of the pretensions of art are funny. It's not difficult to make them funny.

MICHAEL BALDWIN: We've been around for such a long time and the same fatuous drivel passes for criticism and artspeak, the same rubbish and substitute for thought has passed muster in the murmurings of the art world since we began. Not that we ever lampoon it particularly, except in literary circumstances, but the fatuities and vacuities of artspeak are in some regards targets, in limited ways.

There's always an element of hidden or residual black, or even not-so-black, humour in putting the viewer in a difficult, rather deflating or alienating position. If you put someone in a position where genres appear to be working against one another, and the viewer has no hope of settling in relation to the work, you're setting them the task of trying to settle, or of wondering why they're failing. Because there's that work to do, there's a slight risk that the viewer has to take if they're going to engage with the work, and there's going to be a possibility of making an absolute tit of yourself in relation to it. And there's a possibility equally that the work has made a tit of itself, in any work that's a little bit difficult.

The idea of making a tit of yourself – that's a position you are, not unafraid of, but interested in…

MB: Well, there are tits and there are tits… or to get away form this term, there are idiots and idiots. We're not afraid to take a chance, and risk failure. But that's not quite the same as making a public spectacle of oneself. There's nothing exhibitionist about us at all. In fact, if anything, that exhibitionistic convention that some artists feel compelled to subscribe to makes me feel sick. I think it's largely a substitute for having any ideas or doing any work that's worth bothering with.

There's certainly a sense in which we seek to work in a relatively dark place so that we can fail, and sometimes we've made a public confession of that failure. As for other forms of exposure, we often play with seeming to be exposed when we're not. We sometimes get involved quite directly in academic performance and circumstances, writing articles and texts in relatively serious publications. Not art world publications, which are very rarely serious. And we occasionally make some sorts of truths about ourselves in these circumstances rather uncomfortable. Most importantly, we think it important that as artists we can chance our arms and fail. And sometimes show the world what the failures look like.

MR: There are two of us and sometimes there's a limit to the plausibility of professionalism. It can be done, but we tend to look at each other and 'kill each other's pits', as we used to call it – constantly inflating and deflating each other. We used to think the relationship between the two of us makes another person, and that other person is a woman.

MB: Or, as we used to describe it, a difficult woman.

How much time do you spend together?

MR: We work fairly regular hours, five days a week; we go home about 6.30 or 6.45. We don't live in each other's pockets though, we'd go mad.

The title of this exhibition comes from a late Jackson Pollock painting, Portrait and a Dream, from 1953. It was considered to be demonstrative of his downward spiral. What does it mean to you?

MB: The classic all-over Pollocks are certainly the most famous and probably the most engaging, interesting, satisfying and aesthetically sorted-out aspect of Pollock's production. But some of his failures, some of his attempts to live up to Picasso are nonetheless rather instructive and interesting, and suggest that the more obvious Greenbergian virtues of his work weren't necessarily that satisfying to him.

MR: I don't actually know anything about what Pollock did when he painted it, but it looks like it was two paintings done on a strip of canvas. And normally he cut them up, but this time thought, 'no, actually they look OK together'. That aspect of it is really interesting – the getting away with it, calling it Portrait and a Dream and getting away with it.

MB: The poetry of the title is somewhat adolescent, which makes it rather engaging. The work in our show actually does have a component in it that claims to be portraiture – the poster portraits. The portrait aspect, if you've worked it out, is that there are a lot of names on pages. But beware, only certain usages of proper names work as portraits. In certain grammatical circumstances they don't count, i.e. 'Of Fred' doesn't count as a portrait but 'Fred' does. Presumably therefore, the paper chains, the grey celebratory items, are the dream.

Are the text pieces, the poster-portraits, in this show, works from the 1970s that you wanted to revive or rejuvenate?

MB: No, the form may be from that time, though, good God, next week it could be the latest thing, and everyone will have forgotten people used grey bits of paper in the 1960s and 70s. The texts on the wall in the show are fragments from published work of ours going back probably ten years.

It is probably worth speculating that one of the characteristics of the genre of textual conceptual art that emerged in the 1960s is that you don't have to read it, or to understand the language in which its included, in order to have some experience of it. That would make a distinction between text as art and other genres such as literature or poetry, so it's actually quite an important point – how much of it you need to read in order to have some engagement with it?

If part of the point of making the chains from the text is to bring the texts down low, why do you have the texts on the wall at the same time?

MR: Well otherwise we couldn't call it Portrait and a Dream. I suppose they could have been on another wall, or they could have been in a book. Look at the relationship between them. Are you sure that the things on the wall are the same as the things on the ceiling? Well you'd better check hadn't you?

MB: That's a little job for the viewer. They are, but in what order? And so on. You could actually spend quite a lot of time figuring out whether there's any connection. There are worse things to do on a wet Wednesday.

Are you treating your own works in the same way as you are treating art historical works?

MR: Malevich's black square has a history in our work too. I think that that Malevich's black square is actually Michael Baldwin's 16 false supremacist squares, that's what it's a reference to, rather than to Malevich. But of course the work from the 1960s had a direct reference to Malevich's black squares. However, I don't think we just 'go into' other people's work, except when we've used Jackson Pollock. We used him for a specific reason however.

Sometimes it sounds like we go around loving or appreciating great moments of art, whereas I think sometimes we just treat them like they're kind of junk.

MB: The postmodern dispensation has meant that more or less anything can be related to anything, and I don't think we have that approach at all. In the 1960s I was doing Malevich squares on the wall. At that time, a lot of research was involved in getting hold of anything about Malevich as he was by no means as fashionable then as he became. He was legendary in a certain way. Very little was shown, because it couldn't be gotten hold of. So there are two narratives involved in this, first of all messing with the genre of the black square, a reductive icon, in the 1960s, and there is also the difference between how that looked at the time historically, and how that looks now.

We are not by any means simple postmodernist rummagers. At the same time we are pretty handy with paste, we tend to tear off bits and bobs and glue them down in funny shapes and sizes. But treating our own work in the same way? That is and isn't true. Looking back at our own work is in part looking back at our own actions, but it would involve a bit of strain to claim that Malevich's black square has got anything to do with our action, although it has to do with our 'construction'.

I don't think that we're so deluded that we don't know the distinction between some act of borrowing from the outside and an act of borrowing from the inside. There are often fuzzy edges.

In the 1960s and 1970s Courbet was seen as a model of the avant-garde by some (such as art historian Tim Clark), then in the 1980s his painting of female genitalia, L'Origine du monde, was taken on by Feminist discourse. This image appears in your show. What do you think it means now?

MB: I'm inclined to agree with Tim Clark, who thought Courbet was pretty good – he bloody well was. At the same time, we were actually involved in debates with him in the early 1980s. We've been involved in aspects of Courbet's work for all sorts of reasons. During the 1980s, L'Origine du monde was not available, it was in Lacan's shed, or consulting room, if that's what you could call Lacan's places of abuse.

Our interest in it was connected to an interest in the black square, and to our interest in portraiture, and an interest in the debate of the male gaze. We had written a libretto for an opera called Victorine, in the early-to-mid 1980s, which concerned a policeman who could not tell the difference between the forensic

evidence of murder and images of nude women. One of the star turns in this was Victorine Meurent, who was a well-known model in Paris, for Manet and others. Our interest in L'Origine du monde was to do with its history of concealment, that's the important thing.

Our interest was in concealing it both absolutely concealing it and not concealing it at all, so we produced large, sometimes two-metres sized images, which were covered in flesh-coloured glass. As a male viewer, you became rather exposed, as if you were trying to look at something that was not to be seen. In the centres of these large paintings we often would put a little greeting, 'hello', in order to supply this torso, this female pudenda, with a head, so that there was a virtual gaze engaging the male viewer, who was busy trying to look at her bits.

Is the bush discernable?

MB: If you work hard,

And does the viewer have to be familiar with the image to make it out?

MR: Possibly, yes. I mean, tough…

MB: It's a pretty well-known image. It's a national treasure now in France, school children are trooped in to look at it, but it's appearance as such is relatively recent, since something like 1995 when it was hung in the Musée d'Orsay.

What critical purchase can painting have now compared to what your texts were doing in the 1960s? Do you see a possibility for painting to put up that kind of resistance?

MB: You have to choose your paintings very carefully. One might argue that painting is simply one among the other products in the art cake.

MR: It's another readymade.

MB: And that could easily be true of painting that gets slightly fetishised, such as the work of Chris Ofili, which I think is absolute tosh. It's not interesting formally, it's generic stuff, and the fact that it's compulsory viewing – it's on the BBC – is good reason to regard it as that. Radio 4, that sort of thing, the middlebrow. The avant-garde is very middlebrow, but there is a sort of painting that can still have critical power, no doubt.

Our studio paintings from the 1980s referred to the modernistic conventions that coveted the authentic look associated with the idea of distortion and expressivity, and with male aggression. We painted these seven-metre-long pictures by mouth, on our hands and knees, so there was distortion inevitably. We got lost being so close to the work, so we were undermining any sense of male aggression – we were the opposite of Jackson Pollock pirouetting with a stick. We did write about it, but there's a certain sense in which dealing with an enormous painting and the bombast of its distortion

confronts us with a strange kind of bathos. It certainly deflates any sort of confidence you can have in that whole discourse of expressivity and authenticity.

MR: We did those paintings ourselves in order to figure out some of these problems. And it's interesting that someone came to see us recently and asked: 'did you get someone else to do it for you?', a real 1990s or 2000s view. It absolutely shocked me that this person wasn't interested in productive relationships, but only in the thing as a stunt. Strange.

You have a self-imposed rule that you only make what you can yourself, is that right?

MB: It's not a fetish of craftsmanship, it's a way of limiting any sort of Wagnerian tendencies that we might want to exhibit. You have to remember, this sort of self-denying came to us quite a long time ago, when we began to realise that the very creature that we had helped breathe life into in the mid to late 60s was now turning into something of a curatorial and managerial monster.

MR: We found out that we'd invented white-collar art…

MB: Quite a lot of post-minimalist art was made of very little, and unless that kind of work has some way of developing discursively, and developing a sort of complexity and an internality then the only way to go is on the Wagnerian route of making your little rather gnomic phrases bigger and bigger or out of neon. That degeneration happened very quickly. So that self-denial came from a recognition quite a long time ago now that that was on the cards. The curator started to emerge. Again, conceptual art was one of the great opportunities for the ambitious and manipulative curator.

MR: That we did see coming.

MB: Now it's nothing to say that the curator and the artist are virtually interchangeable.

MR: We were in a show by Jens Hoffman in Lisbon in 2007, and all the work was so exquisitely chosen to embellish the curatorial role that what that showed needed more than anything else was a fucking painting! But he couldn't choose such a thing. It made you long for a small, messy abstract painting.

MB: Our contribution to that show consisted of a painting whose text gave an ironical backward glance at some early work of his. We guaranteed the text on the painting, and adjacent to this guarantee was an endorsement of the initiative of this curator, but in fact it was an extremely intemperate denunciation of him as a little twerp. But that's a small joke in a small show.

Are there any other art forms have fed into your practise?

MB: French authors like Flaubert and Proust. One of my children is a scholar of this so I get to read about it a lot, and aspects of the discourse of that do bear upon my thinking quite powerfully. Certainly writers like Kafka and Joyce have meant a lot to us, Beckett equally. The observation in his play Endgame, 'if you're really in the shit, there's nothing left to do but sing', does seem singularly appropriate. And we've used Beckettian tones of voice in various ways, in this shift from a neutral exposition to something very slightly more menacing.

We write lyrics for a band called the Red Krayola, and have done so since the 1970s. But writing the lyrics for music is essentially a literary project. We do not have input to the music; it is a milieu that we're rather unfamiliar with. The music press is a rather distinct thing from the art press.

MR: And really fast. 20 or 30 reviews are on the Internet before the record has come out.

MB: People are often shamelessly opinionated, shamelessly ill-informed, but also sometimes extremely well-informed. It's a strange world.

MR: We released a record with the Red Krayola called Five American Portraits. One review said 'everybody should listen to this record at least once'.

MB: The purpose of the project with the Red Krayola is to produce records – that kind of simple, nice, cool thing. It's not a way for us to contribute to the genre of arty, art world band performance, because the Red Krayola has a reasonable career of performing at art world gigs, unhappily. Better really to be performing on the TV. The chances of that are pretty remote…

MR: And the art world pays well. Better than ordinary venues.

What art do you live with?

MB: In the studio, there is a small Hogarth print, a self-portrait. We are not collectors in any sense. I understand why someone would be, but I think it's a rather dangerous thing for an artist.

MR: A lot of artists are.

MB: Good on them if they can stand it, I don't think I've got the strength to do it. If I start to collect, then I start to see myself as exercising a certain taste and backing that taste with my money. Until he died last August, we worked really quite intimately from time to time on literary projects with a person who was a collector, and a very avid one. And the sorts of shenanigans that he would get up to in order to get hold of certain things struck me as being very worrying. If you pile up that set of desires, can you think clearly about your work? I suspect not. Plus there were certain moral dimensions to it, which bothered me. I have, of course, lived with the thought that [our] work might be collected. It's a complete double standard.

If you hadn't have become artists, what would you have been?

MB: At grammar school I was being lined up to become a lawyer, probably because I could chat.

MR: My mother wanted me to be a typesetter because that way I'd always have a job, which is really funny because I actually wouldn't.

MR: I was going to be tramp.

MB: That could still happen.

Art & Language - Portraits and a Dream is on show at the Lisson Gallery, London until 27 February 2010. To see the latest reviews, click here