

Video Transcript

Title:

Ken Currie | Painted Interpretations

Summary:

Scottish artist Ken Currie has spent his life being haunted by paintings – artworks that have stayed with him over time, asking to be revisited. We visit him in his Glasgow studio to learn more about his own paintings (provocative, often ‘nightmarish’, filled with dark humour, and always theatrical), and why he believes that artists only do 50% of the work.

Duration:

07:35

Transcript

[Ken Currie](#)

I don't sit down with an idea and illustrate it – it's the visual idea that occurs at the very beginning, and then... my feelings are then transmitted into the image, and all my experience as a person, as a human being – all the things I've read, seen, thought, felt, they come through in the making of the work and I would hope that the little images that I make within that – they'll allude to these things, and people will connect with them.

Paint is really a very, very interesting substance. You're trying to make this amorphous substance congeal into something meaningful [laughs]! You know, you think you've tamed it but you've never tamed it – you know, it's still got its own ideas about what it wants to do.

[Hammering sounds]

Before I'd went to art school I'd gone to Paisley College of Technology, and the environment there was intensely politicised. I mean, most of the professors there were all Marxists and, you know, I got sucked into that and became very, very politically aware. It was the first years of Margaret Thatcher's government, which, as we all know, had a particular impact on Scotland. The industries that had defined Scotland, that were central, in a way, to its identity – particularly Glasgow – like shipbuilding and steel, these were slowly dismantled. A lot of people lost their jobs and so on, so we felt very – this was something that had to be militantly fought. To come from a small town just on the outskirts

of Glasgow, where, with no artistic background whatsoever, into Glasgow School of Art, this sort of world opened up, it was quite a - it was fantastic actually.

I found myself involved with artists who felt like they could use their work as a way of trying to communicate that change and offer possibilities for the future. The curators of the People's Palace, they were interested in my work, and they had this idea for me to create the series of paintings about the 200-year period of labour history in Glasgow. The struggle that they had been involved in themselves was actually up on the wall for people to see, I think that was a really important experience for them, but the interesting thing about that commission was that they - most of the criticism I got from it came from the left itself, and that a deeply disillusioning experience for me - to have people that I thought were on my side attacking the work. A lot of people on the left felt that artists should be working with the public to help them realise their ideas rather than them presenting their ideas to the public. You know, I'm not preaching to people, it's not a classroom they're in, you know. I want them to have a visual experience, so it's about the composition, it's about the colour; it's about the energy of the thing, you know? I want them to look at what they're... is in front of them, that they have a visual experience. You know, that's the way paintings should work- they should kind of haunt you, because I've spent my entire life being haunted by paintings that have been made by other artists, you know, by great artists, and I've had to go back and look at them and every time I go back the mystery deepens rather than is solved, and I think that's the mark of a really great work of art.

You know, my work has always had that theatrical look about it - I have this great passion for film and for cinema, you know, and I quite often work in sequences, when I make triptychs which are one scene, one scene, and another scene, I'd been reading Kafka's Metamorphosis, you know the idea of something changing from one thing recognisable into something which is unrecognisable, into something which is slightly nightmarish. I mean, these are the stuff of horror, and we've seen the horror genre, for example in cinema, uses that kind of change thing all the time. And I'm fascinated by that. It's a medium that I love but I never really got a chance to explore properly.

One of the things that astonishes me about the response to my work is that I can make this imagery which is quite difficult to look at, it's quite bloody sometimes, it's quite gory, quite horrific, and people come in and they'll look at the work and they say, 'I can't look at that - that's horrifying, that's horrendous', and then they'll go and watch a crime drama that night, and there's people being - having their heads chopped off and strangled, and they'll sit and watch that with a cup of tea. This old-fashioned medium still seems to have an

ability to shock. When I made the oncologists - the Three Oncologists painting, a lot of people saw them as spectral images and ghostly images, and of course that immediately had some sort of supernatural associations with it. But for me, what I was trying to aim for was just a technical thing - I was trying to paint these single figures, or forms, against a really black background, and I wanted them to shimmer within that - to have some sort of movement within that, so it meant I had to really soften the edges down. Because people will bring their baggage with them to an image of three cancer specialists, all you have to do is have a cancer specialist standing, looking at you, to make you quake in your boots, and I suppose that's all that needed to happen in that painting.

It's interesting that people will bring to it all these different other feelings that they have, and in a way that's their business you know? Marcel Duchamp used to say that the artist does 50% of the work and the viewer does the remaining 50% and I totally agree with that. Once the painting's completed my job is done, and then the rest of it is up to the viewer