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Q & A James Johnston

You are widely known primarily as a musician. How did painting become your main focus?

I was loving working on the PJ Harvey tours, and had hit a bit of a writing block with my own music, with Gallon Drunk not playing. We'd made two great last records in Hamburg with Johann Scheerer, and it felt like the right time to end it. With painting I was able to throw myself into it without a plan as such, and subject matter suddenly became totally open. After being frustrated by waiting around to tour, make records etc, it felt so totally free going into the studio and just losing myself in painting every day, and really exciting. Different every day.

Your first paintings were created in hotel rooms while on tour. What shaped these beginnings being on the road?

It all started on the PJ Harvey 'Hope Six Demolition Project' tour. Polly showed me a load of her artwork on her computer while we were bored in an airport one day, and that led to an idea to do a drawing a day each. I went to an art shop in Chicago and bought anything I thought could be useful, and just started. I had no real idea if I had any aptitude for it at all, but almost immediately became really involved in doing a small painting every day, in the hotels we were staying in, and then when I got home I realised I needed a studio to work in, and it all went from there.

How would you describe your own visual language? Which themes or figures recur in your work and why?

A voice, or visual language seemed to come about fairly quickly, maybe because I started later, and in a way I knew what I liked and reacted to myself in paintings, and wanted to go that way from the start. Initially the more expressionist end of things, and then going from there. Being on tour and visiting an incredible amount of museums and galleries probably helped fast-forward my focus as to what I really liked and was looking for.

I work initially by chance, and go from there, so any recurring themes or motifs must be all part of my background and psyche, but I do often use animals and the natural world as a way to convey the human condition, and use humour as a way in.

You have made music for decades, including for your own band Gallon Drunk and playing with Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds and PJ Harvey. Do you see a connection between your musical and your painterly work?

I'm not a particularly technical musician, there's always a rawness and immediacy, and hopefully heart to what I do, and why I do it, and maybe why I've been invited to play with other bands and musicians. I think that attitude is pretty similar in the way I approach painting, and what I respond to in art.



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Is painting for you more of a counterbalance to the life of a musician, or a synaesthetic continuation of the same expression in a different language?

I definitely feels like the latter. When I was painting on tour and swapping between the two it felt totally natural and just another side of losing yourself in something, disappearing off into another world for a while.

Do you paint in silence or do you listen to music in the studio?

The first thing I do when I get into the studio is turn the radio on. Always the classical station BBC Radio 3. Silence feels uncomfortable, and loaded with tinnitus, and anything vocal or in any way related to music I've made myself is completely distracting and snaps me out of it. Not thinking of anything else is certainly my preferred state for getting an image out.

Nick Cave described your work as „paintings full of mythic power“. Do you recognize yourself in that description?

I hope so! A psychotherapist friend has definitely recognised the mythic in the paintings. It might reflect the approach I have to creating or recognising an image that I want to develop.

Are there motifs or cycles that are particularly important to you in your current phase?

Again, the natural world seems to frame a lot of it, solitary figures, animals, but mostly I only recognise anything recurring once I step back and see the work together in a show. Mostly it's just on to the next painting as soon as possible, and see what happens.

What can visitors in Berlin expect from your participation in the exhibition?

I'll be showing new and very recent work. Loose, colourful, figurative paintings. Quite a few smaller format paintings, too. I love how contained smaller paintings can look, really have a power all of their own. I'm really excited to be showing in Berlin finally. I'll be in the studio working on new things today.

What do you associate with Berlin?

Probably the thrill of coming to Berlin to do my first gigs there with Gallon Drunk, and all that went with it.