

Christopher Bucklow: In Anticipation of The Final Three Minutes

Interview by Addie Elliott

What sort of child were you?

I was absolutely amazed by things and fascinated by all kinds of natural phenomena. I was into botany for instance - fanatically. In my early teens I was interested in cacti, in one particular genus, I was obsessed. I took it to extremes and would write to collectors in Bolivia and get them to send seeds. I wanted everything to grow true to form.

You were also interested in physics?

Yes - At one end you have cosmology - the really big answers to fundamental questions; universal evolution or whatever, and then at the other end you have the particles, which are just as infinite .

Are you attracted to the fact that things can't necessarily be explained?

I thought that answers were possible; but thinking subsequently I realise that the physicists and the cosmologists are all just as much in the dark as anyone else. You can fantasise that the physicists know a whole load and they've got answers, but all of the scientists I've met just end up having bigger questions.

You were an art historian for many years before you made art. Why did you initially decide to study art history and not art?

Because I thought the best way was to go and find out everything about art history first. Art can be one kind of deposit that you sift amongst to find evidence of what went on in people's minds – deep down that's what I was interested in.

When you became a curator at The Victoria and Albert Museum were you still planning a route for yourself into art?

No, I got seduced by the academic. From 1975 to 1989 I completely forgot about wanting to make art.

How did you become landscape specialist at the museum?

On the conscious level I was interested in phenomena external to the human. There's an irony - and a story here - when you think what I make now - images of human figures either drawn or photographed.

Did you feed off the museum's collection?

Only as an art historian. I had no idea of making any art. I was satisfied and fulfilled by the puzzle of the history of art, all the questions and the trying to intuit what a mind in the 18th century was filled with aesthetically, philosophically, scientifically, morally, physiologically - all that was so mind-blowingly interesting and complex and tricky to discover. But what I didn't know was that my career as an art historian and curator was basically me exploring the things that I needed to know about myself – only indirectly through my academic research or the thought processes as an observer.

Did you wake up one morning and decide to become an artist, or is it something that gradually evolved?

Something in me woke up to the fact that my writing wasn't just academic, that it was springing completely - but covertly - out of my needs for answers to my own questions about life.

So do you see your time as a curator as a learning journey about yourself?

Yes, but I was asleep until I was 32. "I" was an automaton directed by another part of me that had its own agenda. Some people have it easy - they see themselves quickly, but I was finding myself vicariously through another discipline.

What were the first art pieces you made?

I made sculptures out of plant material in 1989. One of the first was a pear tree and a hawthorn grafted together. Up until that point I had been unconsciously attracted to the idea – which is hidden in science - that "mind is not properly part of nature" – I'm paraphrasing Alfred North Whitehead, I think here. Deep down I had problems accepting that mind was legitimately part of the universe of phenomena. The change in my attitude emerged from a dream – actually a whole series of dreams. I woke up on August 8th 1989 in Assisi having dreamed about a set of sculptures made of plants. They related to a moment in my childhood when I had rejected a specimen from my collection because it was grafted and not growing on its own roots. Saint Francis clearly selected this memory from my unconscious as paradigmatic of a whole attitude towards consciousness and nature.

What was your motivation to explore this daydream?

I was compelled to explore it. I saw what I had been. My whole mind-set up to that point became clear to me. My fantasy was that my former way of seeing was a general condition in our culture at this moment in its intellectual and emotional history – and that my insight would be valuable to others.

So, was sculpture naturally the next stage on from your writing?

I think it was an evolution out from it. An evolution away from my life as an observer. It was a reaction to how I used to relate to the world in my writing. I had begun to recognise the writing as a self portrait – and what I was doing with the art was again a very personal, very self orientated portrait – just now an overt one. I hope that the project is not solipsistic – but more of a testimony – an offering of a very personal account as a means of communication. There is a whole tradition of this act of confession – St. Augustine, Rousseau, Wordsworth, Blake.

How did it emerge?

The crux of it was that I understood the Pear-Hawthorn sculpture as grafting nature and culture together – our genetic inheritance and our social inheritance. The Hawthorn tree as a symbol of wild nature – unruly; and the Pear tree - which has no known natural geographical origin because – as a valuable commodity - it's been in the cultural realms so long -totally a product of design – was a symbol of culture. By grafting them I was saying that culture is a phenomenon of nature; that is, that consciousness is a legitimate phenomenon of the universe. Genetic modification, or just grafting – all acts were as natural as anything else. Inside me nature and culture had married. This was in the late eighties. The ramifications and interpretations are still going on.

What followed the sculptures?

I started doing paintings of dreaming as a phenomenon. They were visualisations of what dreaming would look like from space – if you could somehow plot the location of the electrical activity on the earth. You've seen those images taken from orbit of the aurora - it's like a halo around the top of the planet. Well, I thought if you plotted where - at any given moment - people are dreaming - dreams lighting up in people's heads - then this would go around the planet once a day as a vertical line of dreaming following the terminus of day and night – like a line of aurora. It has done forever and will do forever. I was lit up by the idea.

Why did you begin to make photographs?

The photographs came out of paintings. The paintings were using clusters of suns. But I thought to myself, "these images are good - but they're not really extraordinary"... if I want to communicate how amazing the idea behind them is to me - how am I going to get that across to other people?" I realised I would have to make photographs, so that I could use actual solar images. So I was going to try to build a camera that had a thousand lenses on it and I was going to shoot the sun with it. But that didn't seem very practical - and then it hit me that a pinhole array could do it. And that came from a memory of when I was a boy about seeing the images on the pavement made by the sun shining through the trees and asking what they were. And a girl I knew said they were camera-obscura images of the sun's disc. That was a beautiful idea to me.

What finally made you decide to leave the museum?

By 1994 it had become obvious that the two couldn't co-exist. I'd just sold a few pictures and I thought, now's the time to jump and worry about income when it occurs.

That was a very brave step.

Not as brave as the step I am making now by concentrating on painting - now that I have had some success with photography.

What did you work on after leaving the museum?

It was the early days of the Guests. I also made more video and I began to draw. I had just started to get interested in making a self-portrait which was more straightforward than the symbolic selves of the grafted plants or solar clusters. I mean if you tell someone this grafted plant is a self portrait, they think 'well I don't know about that'. The plants and the star clusters were definitely meant as pictures of the interior of my head. But it was still so abstract, so scientific and impersonal in a way. With the Guests I could begin to define exactly what was in here - in human terms. And I started to realise one's friends are psychologically significant mirrors of one's own interior.

How do you select your sitter?

I have to have dreamt about them. That's the essential criterion for selection. And you know psychologists say that every person in your dreams is a sub-part of you - the dreamer. So they are people that rub me up the wrong way, people that I am attracted to intellectually, emotionally, people I admire and aspire to. I started to think, who impacts on me? It's not only people you find pleasant. Who do you obsess about more, the people you hate or the people you love?

So the Guests are portraits of your own interior?

Well, it's like a cast of characters in a film. They represent sub-selves. I think I was casting for my 'film' even before I knew that I was about to launch out on a narrative - the autobiographical narrative that followed later in the videos and drawings.

When you are painting, you still include the occasional character from this cast of Guests?

All the painted characters were once Guest people. It's all one thing. New Guests just help define the details of the portrait, and new drawings refine the account of the way they interact within. The new people who come into it seem to be increasingly more like the whole. At the beginning they were all definitely symbolising fragmentary parts.

So to clarify this, there could be an individual that could do the job of several Guests?

That individual would be a kind of amalgam of all of those others, yes. And that's what's happening in the Tetrarchs series. The project - my life - has been a regrouping of all these fissioned split areas, whether I knew it or not, that's what was going on.

What are your ideas behind the Tetrarchs.

I thought I should begin to show what the Guests do when they relate to the group, so I made panoramic Guest-type things with several figures interacting. Then it occurred that what they were actually doing was fusing, marrying. Marrying is grafting in the botanical world, so there is congruence there. And in the meantime I realised that what will happen perhaps is that it's all going to collapse into one thing - the cosmic Big Crunch, the final three minutes - in the sense that may overlap with them. The eventual result of the Tetrarchs series could be a total whiteout.

Why return to painting with your British Museum Residency, when you've had so much success with photography?

I've always made changes as my nature has changed. It's hard on my galleries perhaps. But I need more than one medium for this work.

So you see your work as a whole rather than in separate sections?

The obsessions underneath the styles are all the same, but they're a very complex set of obsessions that one medium can't contain.

Are you aiming towards a specific target?

Being precise. And making my visual language more powerful emotionally. I need the drawing and the painting, because there's touch involved, and that is very appealing – it appeals to certain emotions. The photography gives me light - which has another specific feeling as a metaphor. The video gives me time and narrative - and that appeals to the understanding. I think I've got the mix pretty much how I need it to be now, but it was a long birth - with complications.