

Hidden UK, Hidden Ireland

by Sean Scully

I met Angela Flowers in 1972 when I was escorted to her gallery by my friend Ian Bennet, with a view to her being interested in me. She turned me down, and subsequently humourously referred to me as her 'Jasper Johns' because Leo Castelli in New York had turned down Jasper when Bob Rauschenberg took him to visit Leo in his gallery. Then, I suppose as a gesture of revenge, Angela would on occasion ask me if she could kick me in the bum. I said she could but she never did: so I imagine, fondly, it was metaphorical. I'm always sentimental about these early encounters, so my affection for the gallery, has endured decades, and now inherited by Matthew, who I like as much as his mother.

I've even visited the family house, somewhere in the green hills of Ireland: so of course when Matthew asked me to curate an exhibition, I decided to say yes, in five seconds, or less, I'm not sure.

I first decided only to choose UK artists, but given the affection the family has for dear old Ireland, I wanted to scoop that into the pool of my eccentric choices.

When I was in Barcelona during the 90s, I had a wonderful friend who was a writer: Maria Lluïsa Borràs. She used to write on me, and strangely she wrote a book on Arthur Cravan. He was the nephew of Oscar Wilde, who was a genius. Arthur wanted to be as famous as Oscar, the problem, or obstacle being: talent, ability. He became a stunt artist, and he even managed to hustle himself a shot at the world heavyweight boxing crown, against the mighty Jack Johnson. Arthur was knocked out in 4 rounds, and Jack remarked that he didn't think 'he had been in training', which besides being very amusing, is not the point. He was a Dada artist, and he wanted to get knocked out, and even more than that, he wanted to be famous, or famously knocked out. Well and truly down for the count. I've been knocked out, or nearly knocked out, and it's not that bad. Besides which, Arthur got lots of press. He was one of the prime movers in the now established tradition of the tabloid hustlers, which becomes part of the Art, and since Arthur was a snappy dresser, who toyed with his sexual identity, Arthur was also a conceptual dandy.

One minute by foot from our house up in Hampstead, lies Ben Nicholson's studio, opposite Jacqueline Du Pré's house, who broke herself for Art, on her sonorous wooden instrument. Piet Mondrian visited Ben's studio one day, and when Ben asked him what he thought, he said 'too much nature'. How our situation is transformed. Nobody could say that now, without being rebuked. Now, we don't have enough, and we know it. It took New York to loosen Piet up, to the point where he got rhythm, and he dedicated one of the 20th century's greatest Artworks to the Boogie Woogie.

Between these two polarities, one extrovert, one puritanical, resides an entire society of devoted, dedicated, faith based painters, who work quietly in studios large and small, in towns and villages all over the UK and Ireland. For the most part, they make something with their hands, that is material based, coaxing an image with a body, into being – working, not so differently from other painters throughout history. I haven't actually curated an exhibition, I've chosen work and people who interest me, and put them together, with myself included. So, in fact, my exhibition will probably be as chaotic as the RA *Summer Exhibition*, which is apparently the most popular exhibition in London, judged by the people. I wanted to bring what I could of this work together, and shine a light on it. Some of these artists are more well-known than others, but that's not my fault. There are about 55,000 artists working faithfully in the UK and Ireland: so this is a tiny fraction. But we do what we can.

Though, maybe in vain, we work. My 8,000 trees, seem as if they all together, with their silent breathing, inhaling rubbish exhaling life just for us, are like a small child reading a haiku poem, in a war zone. I write this, a week before I go to Poland. Am I discouraged? Yes. Do I have verve? Yes. Is my verve still 'all in', still in love? Yes.

When I was 17, I worked in a graphic design studio on Chancery Lane, and there, still as a working class boy, I was closer than I was in the print factory, to the citadel of Art, but I still couldn't quite make out its location, or indeed where the gate was. Slightly before my encounter with the great Van Gogh chair painting, someone

in the studio, who knew I loved painting, told me about an exhibition on the famous Charing Cross Road, where the theatres are. This was a painter, who seemed approachable. This was a painter, who painted kitchen sinks, windows, and flowers (big, clumsy, enthusiastic blooms) and Volkswagen parked cars on streets in suburbia, in a manner that was guileless, rough and exaggerated, in perfect harmony with the burly sunflowers. This was a painter, first, last, and foremost: whose name was John Bratby. In this work there was no hedging his bets, no in between, and no appeasement to sophistication, I loved it. Here was the key to the gate of the citadel of Art, even if the citadel, or my working class teenager idea of it, turned out to be a barn, I still loved it.

I don't want to be like Burt Lancaster in the movie Atlantic City, who while standing on the balcony of his hotel room, turns to his young escort girlfriend, played by the radiant Susan Sarandon, and says: you should have seen the Atlantic Ocean, back then. Though I must say the gallery was charming. As they were, in those days. With wonky walls, rough painted windows, they were really just shops, spruced up, so they could moonlight as Art Galleries. This one was owned by Mr. Zwemmer, who was a Dutch working-class boy who by pure luck escaped the draft to fight in the First World War and moved to London in 1914, bringing with him a deep sense of culture. Art being a bulwark against militarism, he ran a bookshop also. The gallery is now a hairdressers, which is weird, because my dad was a barber. I was asked to make something for Mr. Zwemmer's birthday, a long time ago, so I painted a 'Z' in watercolour, which must be slumbering somewhere in a drawer. I always adored him, because he was a beacon, of knowledge and caring about what happens in the world: and he'd seen plenty of the other; the dark.

I remember standing among these paintings with my eyes popping. My own personal doors and windows flying open with bright London light streaming in. I couldn't have been more privileged if I was having tea with the Queen. Its impact on me was abiding, and I started, kind of, imitating these beautifully vulgar paintings. Bratby's reputation is a bit shaky. However, I bought 3, and two of them are in this exhibition. They seem to stand for something forceful and innocent. Roughness in Art, of all stripes, is important, because other people can feed on it. Like the Rolling Stones, feeding on Lonnie Donegan.

The big Bratby we have, of his son sitting in a chair, is in Berlin. Why I don't know, I wouldn't even like to explain it: but it is. Though I'm not sure it fits the exactitude of Berlin, so I might have to move it.

After this, I was ready for Van Gogh, and his own sunflowers, his own cornfields, and his chair. His wonderful, rough-hewn, uncomfortable, rural chair.

Sean. May 2, 2022. Oisin's Birthday