

ANDREW CRANSTON IN CONVERSATION WITH PETER DOIG

PETER DOIG: I've always been interested in biography and I think it's quite central to your work. You come from an interesting family – your past, and your present, are obviously important to your work, so if you don't mind, I'd like to start by asking about that. I hadn't realised that you'd left school so young. Why did you leave school at this time?

ANDREW CRANSTON: I just couldn't wait to leave. School was a disaster. But I think it was the culture you know? Hawick then was in full employment and I wanted to be a joiner, and I suppose anything kind of educational wasn't on my radar at all. There was just a whole other set of values, really, working, making money – staying within that community was much more valued at the time. Hawick had its own immersive culture so I kind of thought that my life was going to be completely there. I never thought anything else. And so I left when I was 15, just a few months before I was 16. You could leave before your birthday if it fell at the right time.

PD: Had you done any exams?

AC: I mean, it's comical in a way. I became a joiner but I failed woodwork at school. That was a sign. I got one O grade. In art, weirdly enough. Failed everything else. So I did become a joiner, I got on this training scheme – YTS, £26 per week – it was a government scheme, they paid a company or person to employ you.

PD: Like an internship.

AC: Yeah, and then at the end of that year you either got taken on or not. And at the end of that year I didn't get taken on. Which was... yeah, no loss to the world of joinery. I mean I was okay, but I wasn't very quick at it, and you sort of have to be really. So then I did a few other jobs before I ended up going to art school when I was 20.

PD: Oh, you went when you were 20. Very similar to me actually – almost exactly the same trajectory. When did you decide, then, that you might like to go to art school?

AC: It was a kind of drift, but I had a friend and we were close, and we'd go on holiday but it'd be like hiking rather than what some of our other pals got up to – so we were a wee bit different in that sense. And I kind of tried everything, I was in a band, kind of... sort of maybe slowly looking for a way out, in a way.

PD: So you're interested in music and literature? AC: Yeah, that came first actually, I would say.

PD: And film, then, as well?

AC: And films... but I can remember a moment. Me and this friend were walking near the lake district, and we went to this town called Kirkby Stephen, and we were by this river, and there were incredible rocks in the river – kind of shaped rocks – and I thought that'd be great to photograph, but I never had a camera. So I went into the town, into a shop, to get a disposable camera. But this shop never had any. But they had sketchbooks. So I actually bought a sketchbook, and a HB pencil or something like that. I hadn't drawn for a couple of years, since school, but went back to the river and did these drawings of these rocks. Terrible, I'm sure – but I kind of thought 'ah, that's interesting'. So for the rest of the trip I drew people in youth hostels and things like that, and I remember feeling this is really compelling.

PD: How old were you?

AC: I think I'd be about 17.

PD: Yeah, so still 3 years before you ended up in art school.

AC: Yeah, and then I went to night classes, in English - you know - basically sort of tried just to piece together enough qualifications.

PD: With an aim - were you already then thinking of going to study art? AC: I had no idea... I was sort of lost in general, really.

PD: And were you working at this time?

AC: Yeah I was working in a factory. After the joinery came to an end, I worked in a factory making timber frame houses, like kits – and there were benches, and big heavy duty nail guns, and you made these huge kits that were then erected on site, but we were just in the factory. It was soul destroying work – half 7 to 6 at night every day.

PD: How long did you do that for?

AC: I did that for 2 years. PD: 2 years!

AC: Yeah, funnily enough I remember a thing – the guys used to go into this room to have our lunch and stuff. I remember the first day, there were like 12 or 13 guys in this room, everyone reading the Daily Record or the Sun. Apart from this one guy who was reading Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, and I, I knew him a bit from years ago – he was a wee bit older. We quickly became really good friends, and within a week I was sort of reading George Orwell or something. We were castigated as the freaks, but during that time I sort of thought, you know, this is just a job to get money. But I thought I have to get out of here.

PD: And did you have anyone there who was helping you put together what would become a portfolio?

AC: Yeah, when I went to the night classes, that was really good. And then when I was in the factory I applied to go to Carlisle for a foundation course – never got in. Then another year passed, then I left the job, and did a year at college – met people in the town, you know.

PD: An art college?

AC: Well it was kind of a tech college.

PD: A community college.

AC: Yeah, and they had an art course. And quite quickly I made friends with the woman that ran it. And I said, look, I'm not really interested in these modules, I want a folio to get into art school. And she seemed to get that right away, she was hugely supportive. So I went to an interview at Manchester because a friend of mine had been, and he'd said 'go, its great, there's free materials!' and it was true there was free materials, I think they were sponsored by Liquorice Allsorts. And at the interview, there was this painter, Don McKinley, who taught the course, he was looking at my folio and he said 'well, you've not got enough qualifications here, the only way I could let you in were if your folio were exceptional. And it's not exceptional.' And I sort of, I had a moment where I saw my chance fading... so I said, 'aye it is', and he looked sort of taken aback, and said 'really? Well, you pick a piece and tell me what's so great about it'. So I picked this drawing, God knows what I said – total rubbish. And at the end of the minute or so, he said 'okay... I'll give you a chance'. So I kind of sneaked in, not having enough qualifications – I just kind of got in on his whim. And once I was there, it was great – holiday camp.

PD: So how long were you there, just a year?

AC: One year, yeah. That was 1989-1990.

PD: So you went to Gray's after that

AC: Yeah.

PD: Why did you choose Aberdeen?

AC: I wanted to come back to Scotland. At the time I didn't think I'd get into Edinburgh or Glasgow, I thought that only supermen, ubermensch, should get into Edinburgh or Glasgow. Nonsense, but...

PD: So you didn't apply for them?

AC: I only applied for Liverpool and Aberdeen, and then I got into Aberdeen and I didn't even go to the interview for Liverpool. And it was a kind of North thing, a bit, as well. I thought it was the most northerly art college. It was as ridiculous a notion as that. I looked on a map and saw it was near the Cairngorms, and I was quite interested in walking and stuff like that. So I didn't think it through really, but it was good.

PD: Was Aberdeen good for you? Was it a good time there?

AC: I mean, I know it's a cliché, but it was quite dour compared to Manchester. Gray's was very, very structured. You had to do anatomy - you'd do a life drawing and you had to name the parts! I sort of refused to really do it properly, but there were things like this, and if you didn't pass any of these bits then you didn't pass the year - at least that's how I remember it. It seemed quite harsh in a sense, but then in third year you were sort of cut loose. Drawing was really strongly emphasised and I learned a lot at Grays, it gave me a real discipline, but it was very hard - I didn't quite fit with the regime there really. I mean, I think about it now - I can remember things like hiding your photographs when tutors came round, like that was cheating.

PD: Who were the painters that people were talking about, can you remember?

AC: Yeah, Alan Davie was a big sort of hero, and William Scott - there were quite a few people working like that. Good painters - you know, I still like them a lot, and think of them. James Cowie, Keith Vaughan, some St Ives painters, hard-won painting generally. And the collection there at Aberdeen is really fantastic for the post war period - they've got a Bacon, Freud, Spencer, Nash, Lowry - strong in a certain period, and Scottish painters like Joan Eardley and William Gillies.

PD: Is that part of the art school?

AC: No, it was Aberdeen Art gallery, but there was quite close links. It did feel a wee bit like it was stuck in a certain time. I had no knowledge of contemporary art or contemporary painting, really.

PD: Just to get the dates, is this the 80s still?

AC: No, this was 1990-1993.

PD: Okay, early 90s.

AC: So it existed in a slight vacuum. I mean there was the Scottish 80s figurative movement and people like Baselitz, he was thought of as an 80s painter.

PD: The Scottish painters you mention, I guess Stephen Campbell, and Adrian Wiszniewski and Ken Currie and Peter Howson - were they influencing the school?

AC: People were influenced by them, their energy and ambition was infectious, but it was often a bit frowned upon I must say.

PD: Was it too close?

AC: Yeah, I remember a tutor sort of disparaging Glasgow - *pfft, fur coats and nae knickers*. It was like they were sort of flashy, typical Glasgow... I think in a way Scottish art schools had very distinct identities. The biggest influence that I remember as a student was Kitaj.

PD: For you?

AC: Yeah, for me, aye.

PD: And how did that come about?

AC: There was a tutor there, Frank Convery, he might have introduced me to his work. Frank was very supportive of me. At that point Kitaj seemed to sort of chime with me the most and he allowed himself lots of subjects as well as mixing various formal concerns. I was remembering this thing – that there was a sort of way in which you could be insulted – and it was kind of if your work was illustrative or decorative or narrative, there was that kind of trinity of things that were levelled at you.

PD: The trinity of horror.

AC: Aye, and I was interested in all three of them! But the important moment was between the 3rd and 4th year, I was back with my folks for a summer and I was kind of wanting to make a painting. In Hawick you couldn't get any art materials or anything, but I found this upholsterer who sold me this really rough canvas – like sort of hessian canvas – and I thought well, that'll have to do. Then going through my dad's paints, like house paints – he had this massive tub of yellow paint, and then things like enamel paints, airfix paints – these were the only paints. So then I basically got this canvas, and I just covered it in yellow paint. Like, just as a starting point – a yellow ground kind of thing. And then the other colours that I had, I only had tiny amounts of them. So only this amount of red. And I sort of accidentally came across something.

PD: The way you describe this...I associate this very strongly with how I know you paint. So you feel like this was a...

AC: That was the start of something, yeah. I liked the totality of colour, and the idea that this is in a field of blue or red or yellow or something – I think I've come back to that, in some ways.

PD: Still at Gray's at this point?

AC: Still at Gray's. So I took the painting back up, and it was like at the start of the year, everybody had to put up a painting done in the summer. So I put this painting up very nervously – I thought to myself, it's interesting, I think I've got something here, but couldn't be sure.

PD: Can you remember, was there imagery?

AC: It was broadly a landscape, but it was all yellow, and it had a kind of figure – it was based on a photograph of my mother with a scarf on. So there were scattered figures about it, but broadly landscape. There were motifs like cows, and trees, but always just getting parts of them. So the legs would be cut off the cows, so it was like a sort of over the hill – it had a kind of space, but it was flat at the same time. And the tutors – I remember it being one of the first times they were positive – they really liked it. And that was all I needed really, to set me off.

PD: Suddenly you've got a response to what you were doing – like a response to what was good about it, rather than what could be better about it, or what people didn't like about it. I think that's a really big moment for an artist – where you have made something and you can actually feel the sense of surprise in the viewer, and maybe you've never experienced that before.

AC: It felt risky in a way, because I remember seeing some other students looking at it and laughing at it – like actually sort of ridiculing it, and they didn't know who I was, and I'd kind of stand by and kind of listen to what was said...

PD: So you were seeing how it could operate, rather than just being inert.

AC: Yeah, and it wasn't like it was super risky or anything, but there was enough of me feeling 'could this be really bad?' You know, like 'I think its good but...' it felt such a departure to me, and like I'd thrown a lot of things away, that

I thought 'maybe this is terrible'. So that's how I think I remember it – in a kind of way that was like 'I don't know what this is, but it feels right, it's somehow interesting'.

PD: I think you get these moments in your life where you're painting things and that happens ... you surprise yourself, and you don't know if its good or bad, but you can tell it causing a genuine reaction in others and this is a important moment. Was this the beginning of the last year in Gray's?

AC: Yeah, that triggered the big explosion of paintings - I remember the working period between September and December, this would be 92, and just painting like mad.

PD: Did you feel you were working alone, or were there other people... AC: It felt very alone.

PD: There weren't any contemporaries who you felt close to there?

AC: No. Funnily enough, the second year – 2 years below me – they were a good year, sort of quite bolshy, and in a way I was closer to them. I had good friends but yeah I did feel quite alone. Then, during that year, there was – I just was allowed to get on with it really. I had the worst space, it was like a corridor. I was always in the worst spaces. But I kind of perversely enjoyed that – it was like, everything's against me, can I make paintings in this worst possible space? Somebody's got a great space, I've got the worst space. I remember round about Christmas, people were applying for MAs and stuff like that, and again I thought 'there's no way... I'm not good enough for that', but there was this thing called the NatWest art prize, and you sent in photographs, and I took it upon myself to take photographs of everybody's work, other students, and when I got them back from the developers – everybody's work came out, almost, apart from mine. I was at the end of the roll, and maybe about 3 photographs of mine had come out, and they were all fuzzy. So I remember sitting in the pub and thinking there's no point in sending them. But I got talked into it, you know, 'you may as well'. You had to send 5, I only sent 3, so I sent them away and then I got shortlisted, and it was a show in London. And then, months later I won it. But then you had to send the work – so you got down to a shortlist of 20 or so, and I won it joint 1st with somebody else. And one of the judges was Craigie Aitchison, and Chantal Joffe was one of the other judges, she'd won it the year before. So I went down and saw them in London. That was kind of massive. I remember going down for the opening and meeting Craigie Aitchison – and he loved the paintings. He was like 'these are great' and I just couldn't believe it! I was like, you know – so amazed.

PD: Let's talk about the Royal College of Art where we met, I was working as a painting tutor there. Did you go to study there straight from Gray's?

AC: No there was a year - I went to Italy.

PD: Just on your own?

AC: It was a travelling scholarship to Italy. There were a few people from Aberdeen there, in Florence, so we met up a lot in Florence. But I went off myself quite a lot and I stayed on a bit longer travelling all over Italy and ending up in Sicily. You know – that sort of travelling alone in Europe, it's quite... I remember feeling quite solitary. You know, no language... it was hardcore wandering, in a kind of way.

PD: Did you look at a lot of art or was it more about travelling?

AC: It was sort of based around art – my motivation for going to a place would be like here are the Piero della Francescas, or I'll go to Assisi and see Giotto, and I went through different phases, sort of soaking up the Renaissance (especially the early Renaissance) then Etruscan art. All kinds of things, but not much modern and no contemporary. I remember seeing late Caravaggios in Sicily.

PD: And then you went to the Royal College the next year. I remember it being a very strong place for painters at the time which was interesting because not much of the work that was being made there was of the kind that was being looked at by those in power... at the time. And yet there was this strong force happening there; people seemed compelled to make their own type of work, which hadn't much to do with current trends.

AC: I remember some great talks, and one of the talks that had a massive influence on a lot of people – people felt changed – was when John Currin came to talk. And I realized then that the shock of the paintings was they were straightforward in a way. There was no big kind of stylistic thing in the way of the image. You could read the image, in a way. He had a tiny show at the ICA, at the same time and they just blew everybody away.

PD: I invited him in and I remember that talk well, and his work of this period - his early work which I still believe is quite remarkable.

AC: It felt like a real moment when certain subject matter and certain approaches to painting were allowed, or somehow valid.

PD: Yes, seeing those works made the idea of making paintings feel exciting and valid. All of a sudden here was someone working in a quite traditional way but still giving you that hair standing up on the back of your neck feeling. It suggested there were other ways forward for a painter...

AC: Yeah, and it just wrong-footed everybody in the best sense. I was always interested in things like this, like Balthus, or Picabia's nudes – quite awkward things. Currin's very different, but they felt like a way in which you could use your skill. Not deny it, but use it. They seemed so shocking in a way. Straight, but strange at the same time.

PD: Sometimes it takes a contemporary artist to kind of wake you up and make you think that actually its okay to look back. Picabia, Balthus – yes they are great artists, but maybe it takes someone new that you can see has connected themselves to them and yet is doing something that feels utterly contemporary, to give you that kind of jolt.

AC: Merlin James is big in this, in sort of redefining the chronology of art - you know, there was futurism, and cubism, surrealism etc, but there are always people working outside that all the time. And Balthus is a bit like this, isn't he, with sort of 19th century paintings in the 1930s. But I remember that having a massive impact. Not that the paintings I made were anything like John Currin, but it's sort of like 'right, that's all I need to just think, this is all right' ...

PD: A few individual painters – John Currin, and I suppose Luc Tuymans and Marlene Dumas – opened up possibilities for your contemporaries.

AC: And yourself too of course. It made me look at whole images in a sort of way. Paintings were more pieced together by me, then. I mean they still are a bit, but I became much more interested in looking at whole readable images, and having that courage just to stay with that.

PD: How old were you when you were at the Royal College?

AC: I was like 25. Probably a good age for it.

PD: Can I ask about the collaborations that you made with your friend John Maclean's band when you were at the Royal College?

AC: The first thing was probably the stickers. To promote the first record. I was doing these wee drawings on stickers, which were cruel little jokes, and John thought they were as good as the paintings, so he said can we have the stickers? So I did a series of stickers and he went round pubs in London and stuck them in toilets.

PD: What did they say?

AC: They were just like, *Dry the Rain by the Beta Band, coming out on...* but then like a little wanking Scotsman on a mountainside. Absurd things. A lot got stuck up around London, lampposts and stuff. They were things that I was doing sort of as a distraction. And in a way over time I've realized that the two, the serious paintings and the distraction, have come much closer together.

PD: That's a very good point.

AC: You see it with students right away; sometimes their little studies for things, or something they're doing casually, their asides have much more life to them than this thing that they're doing very earnestly and seriously.

PD: Reminds me of Bruce Mclean when he used to come into St Martins, he'd come into your studio and say 'Stop! Leave it!' and you'd only just started... he was probably right, you know, but you have to have the courage of your own conviction to say this is done, you know, and this can take a long time.

AC: It takes a long time to be simple. Like, Craigie Aitchison who seems so brave, just to do that and to leave it.

PD: But there's a whole history before that.

AC: I think the Beta Band stuff is massively important. I think when I first started, when I got into art, I was really interested in stuff like record covers and, you know, graphic art. And there wasn't always such a big difference in some periods in art history – between fine art and design – artists did book jackets and posters.

PD: Well you've continued to make posters and I remember one you made for a group show with lots of icebergs. It seemed quite connected to the work that you made for the Beta Band.

AC: Yeah, it allows you off the leash, in a way, to make things that weren't part of what you perceive to be your persona. You know what I mean? Like I could just explore all sorts of imagery – it was kind of freedom.

PD: Materially as well?

AC: Yeah, aye. I mean, we didn't care what we were using, we were just using things at hand.

PD: That's been a trait going back to when you discovered that pot of paint in your father's garage...

AC: Yeah, I mean I think I'm still a bit like that in the sense that sometimes I try to use really good paint, but sometimes I've got terrible brushes, so good paint and terrible brushes... and you find a way of using a terrible brush, rather than using a really good, best brush. That somehow doesn't always work for me – I have to always use to the most perverse, worst possible thing, and I find myself making a painting with tea or something.

PD: Why varnish?

AC: Hardware shops have always been as interesting to me as art shops, and you can often get the same materials, just a lot cheaper. I came across it in Germany – I was just sort of experimenting on a residency, and I was just in a shop and saw this varnish, and there was that kind of jewel-like thing that you got with the varnish. I think in a kind of way I'm a bit of a printmaker when it comes to painting. I was always quite interested in that, in how you could do this bit of the painting, and that bit of the painting, and there was this slight separation of the parts. It allows me to explore negative spaces, to work in the gaps. And I think the varnish slowed me down a wee bit, because I was working on paintings in a kind of wet-on-wet way, in a kind of one-r.

PD: It does create depth and also a window like effect, like you're looking through and into something. You also work on top of the varnish as well.

AC: Yeah I do that. And it allowed me to bring collage elements into it, the kind of fly caught in the amber – you know that sense of things being embedded in the image. Lots of reasons why I think once I had used it, I could see ways to apply it differently, and it just sort of seemed to have lots of possibilities.

PD: Do you use it in almost every painting?

AC: No, not at all. Sometimes they just get stuck at a certain phase, and I don't know what to do, so I intuitively just think 'I'll varnish it' and leave it for a while. But this painting for instance, I had this palette that I was using, and there was this big clump of yellow acrylic.

PD: What's the title of it?

AC: *Poor Poet*. So the yellow was there, as a leftover bit of paint, and I had squashed it flat – or, it had got squashed flat. So the thing just sat there for a while, and the varnish just, in a way, slowed me down. And I think one key element was that, for a long time, I was going between Aberdeen and Glasgow. And for quite a while – a few years – I had two studios on the go, so I'd go back and forth between paintings.

PD: You talked about being on the hunt in one of the texts about the paintings – you say that as an artist you are always on the hunt for the next painting

AC: Oh yeah, yeah... Well yes and no. In some ways, the wisest thing I heard an artist say – I can't remember his name, he's a Norwegian painter, is it Jossen?

PD: Olav Christopher Jossen.

AC: Yeah. And I went to a talk by him, and he said 'I just allow things to come to me, I'm open to things – I don't try and find anything, they just come to me'. And I think in a way it's a bit like that, sort of keeping an eye open for things all the time, one part of you is always looking and you don't have to really try and think up an idea.

PD: Do you make lists, then?

AC: Yeah, often the titles come very early on, or they're just a trigger for the thing, or there are little thumbnails for years. And I don't know if you do this, but sometimes I'll try to paint something and it's terrible – it fails – and then I try again, and then eventually, it might be ten years later, I find material to use... do you know what I mean?

PD: I'm trying to do that at the moment – to make a painting of a subject I've tried over the last 15 years, which is from a newspaper photograph I saw when I first moved to Trinidad, it's of a man pushing a one legged man in a wheelchair, I tried to make a painting; a few small paintings of it, but I've never actually been able to get it right...

AC: So you've got the newspaper cutting?

PD: Well I don't think I've got the cutting anymore, but I've got the attempted paintings and drawings I made after the cutting. But I don't know, I'm not done with it yet – it keeps coming back to me as one I have to have another try with.

AC: That's it, it comes back! Actually I don't chuck very much away because I recycle things.

PD: Paintings?

AC: Yeah. Or you find a really easy little thing that just transforms it enough so it was in the bucket, but now it's good or really interesting. But I know it'll come back round, and I'll be better equipped somehow, to do it.

PD: So let's go back to the biography, you left the Royal College when you were 27. How long did you remain in London after that?

AC: A year or so in London. I had a studio in Peckham, but about a year or so after leaving I moved back to Scotland, moved to Glasgow. Which I kind of thought was just going to be a temporary move.

PD: Why did you move back to Scotland?

AC: I was a bit lost, a wee bit. I was sort of too sociable for my own good in London, out all the time, and I wasn't getting that much work done, and I don't know, I just felt a bit lost really. I thought I'd go back to Scotland... then there was what sort of became devolution as well, bubbling under, it seemed a kind of exciting time to be in Scotland. And these days maybe it doesn't so much matter where you are. I think I've always quite enjoyed that sense of exile. It's too strong a word, but ideas of a sort of exile – like Hemingway or someone perhaps, always at a remove from where he was writing – he'd write about America when he was in France, and he'd write about Spain when he was in America. I've always felt that was quite a strong idea actually, a sort of sense of exile.

PD: I think it's interesting, the way that – as an artist – your work allows you to travel. Not necessarily literally, but people keep in touch with you through their work, and so the work travels, the images travel, and so you're not static, in a sense. You're not just in Glasgow, you're not just in Trinidad, or wherever you choose to be.

AC: Yeah, and I was always a big letter writer as well. It's that kind of message in a bottle type thing – the idea of being physically based somewhere but with ideas of other places.

PD: Do you still write letters?

AC: I do aye, not so much, but yeah I do. The post – and that idea of cause and effect – you put this in the post box and it travels. I think I was always kind of interested in that. Did you ever do that thing when you were wee when you wrote your name, and then your address, and then the town, and then the region, and country, and it was like a sort of sense of being... I'm actually just physically in this wee room, in this wee town, in this country, but you sense the outside. I think that was a strong feeling as a wee boy, but I've kept that.

PD: When you decided to leave London, was it always Scotland you were going to go back to?

AC: I didn't think it'd be permanent, I thought I'd probably move back to London after being in Glasgow, but then I met Lorna.

PD: Do you think your work changed when you moved back to Scotland?

AC: I think that slowly it did, initially I think I was just trying to carry on what I'd started in London. And I got another travel scholarship just before I moved. I went to Norway, Sweden and Finland. I went for about 2 months or something. I travelled about maybe for a month or so, and then Lorna came out with Lewis who was a baby in a pram, and we painted all over the place. Paintings draped over the pram... And actually, I've since been thinking about that quite a lot. Its funny, a lot of work is still kind of Norwegian influenced. In Norway I made quite small paintings of landscapes, which felt like quite an interesting paradox. You know, in Norway, with such a massive sense of space. It was the first time I was being figurative without using the figure. There was one – I don't know if you remember – but it's like a hanging wetsuit. That's probably one of the better ones.

PD: You and Lorna have now lived and worked together for two decades. Can you talk about what that's been like and how it has affected your work – what I assume must be an almost daily dialogue between two artists?

AC: I wouldn't have kept going and developing without Lorna. Not to the same degree anyway. We're both obsessed with painting and as you say it's been a daily conversation. And having kids together of course there have been a lot of just practical things to keep on top of. But there's very particular things that we say about each other's work, like if something is awkward or not reading right. Or if it's too obvious. Colour has come back into my work more and more strongly – at least partly through her influence – and broadened my palette. But often it's just that subtle support that I mentioned earlier. The thumbs up to go ahead, that you're onto something and at those times when the work is changing direction you can test it through that other person's reaction. We met in studios in 1997 and she was always there working until late. The studio was in a pretty rough area of Glasgow and we both lived on the other side of the city so we'd often walk back together, talking, usually skint, looking for tenners on the ground. We talk about these walks a lot and that's when and how we fell in love. We really did seem in the same boat.

PD: The paintings for the new show and in this book are all quite small aren't they? They're book cover size.

AC: Yeah they're all on books.

PD: How did that come about?

AC: It was in Germany again – I mean, I'd probably painted on books before – but it was at the same time as the varnish, and I'd run out of things to paint on. I had these books in the studio and I just ripped the covers off. When I was wee we didn't have many books in the house so it was quite like "Aw wow, books.

Can't destroy books." But then in Germany it was like they were a basic material, waiting to be used and sometimes they became a kind of source. In some sense it's important because the books, they often give me a starting point. Their colour, the shape of the book, there might be a motif on the book. I sometimes incorporate that – there's a starting point rather than just a blank white canvas. But on the other hand, sometimes it's just something to paint on like a board. So there's a bit of a mix where there's something important about them as objects, or they'd be just a support. More and more, I've tried to retain something of the book, the original book.

PD: When I first looked at the images, I kind of flicked through them. First of all I didn't know that they were all on book covers, and secondly I didn't take in the size of them, because they all have a great deal of scale to them, they don't look like either small or big paintings, they just have a lot... they have a lot of scale.

AC: Yeah, I always find that a bit – it's a bit like in Norway, painting a huge mountain in a tiny painting. Its that absurdity of, you know – you've got this tiny painting, but you're speaking of big space, but yeah, sometimes it's a way of making a painting and I've then made them into bigger paintings.

PD: I don't see why they should be bigger, you obviously have the choice though.

AC: Yeah. I mean there's that interesting thing with scale and size being sort of different things, in a way.

PD: There's a lot of story-telling going on in the paintings and I know you weave all sorts of things into them from your interest in film and literature and from fragments of memory and your own life. In relation to this I was going to ask you about your father's house.

AC: My dad was... well, art completely missed him, you know? He never had a single thought really about that. But he was a great story-teller, and he would tell stories all day. I find it quite curious that he had a kind of aesthetic life through telling his stories. It wasn't just the facts; he would tell them and embellish them in such a way. It's funny that story-telling is such a universal impulse – even for people who have nothing to do with art.

PD: But it's the same thing as poetry, it's quite like painting; using the mind to put thoughts into words or pictures.

AC: So my dad's quite important for me in that he had quite a romantic view of life. PD: A magical view of life?

AC: He could be very practical – he was a mechanic – but I think he sort of got across that idea that there is a whole other set of possible values as to why you might be interested in something. We walked a lot as kids. On holiday we would always be in Scotland, or the Lake District. I had one brother, my parents were from the 30s, well, born in the 20s, my dad was in the war – they were quite old. My mum was 45 when she had me.

PD: And that was quite old in those days. Was your dad a similar age to your mum?

AC: Yeah, slightly younger actually, a few months younger. So that was quite strange in a way, that sort of sense of connection to completely different times. Because I think, my subject – if I were to choose a single, overarching subject – is something like history. Which is obviously such a vague notion, but the idea of histories. Personal histories, but also little pockets of history that are there. Like I always like to hear, for example, where someone was when JFK was shot, or something like that. These wee fragments of stories are so interesting.

PD: You said your dad was in the Second World War, my dad wasn't old enough to have fought in the Second World War and I'm at least ten years older than you – so the span of your direct influence is deeper in this sense.

AC: It was weird; the music that was played in the house was like Glen Miller. PD: That was their pop music.

AC: Yeah, so in a kind of way it was quite good. It was more like when you hear of people getting brought up by their grandparents. In that there was such a jump in generations – there was no competition in that sort of way. I was quite an early punk – at the age of about 9 or something like that. I had this jumper that I liked, that my Auntie had knitted for me. So I got my mum to sew a Sex Pistols patch in the front of. It was a Shetland-y style jumper with a Sex Pistols logo on the front. So that was my world and they left me alone in that. But I would listen to my dad's stories. He had quite a strange, eccentric upbringing. His mum and dad were communists and they kind of opened their doors to everybody. This was pre-Second World War. They moved out of that house in 1940.

PD: So your grandfather must have fought in the First World War?

AC: Yeah, I never met him, he died just after I was born. They got the house because he had a big family and he was a bin man for the council. They had six kids, but they took in other kids. I don't know if there was adoption then, they kind of just fostered kids.

PD: Could you describe the house?

AC: It was like a big baronial type thing – it had a big central dome, like a tower, with these bits jutting off. It was also a working stable; so they had horses on one side (where the council kept its horses) and they would live in the other side. So you'd hear about this house and it seemed totally like a picaresque novel. They had loads of pets, a pet monkey – his granddad brought all sorts of things into the house. It seemed pretty wild. And so I always loved hearing about that. There was this painting of the house made by an uncle of mine – his one and only painting. It hung in my granny's house, and so that was an early image that I used to see quite a lot. I'd wonder about it. The house had been knocked down by then and there were no photographs of it, so this painting was the only image. It sounds corny but mystery is quite important to me. A sense of mystery, still.

PD: I think all your paintings have mystery. And curiosity.

AC: You try to demystify the thing, in many ways, to talk about it. But still in that sense, mystery is quite important. I went looking once for a photo of the house and somebody said to me, "Maybe it'll be really bad if you find a really good photo of it, maybe you need the elusiveness." And I think that's kind of true – sometimes you can have too much reference and too much information. Sometimes you just get a glimpse of something and you think...

PD: Well there are a lot of "glimpses" in your work. A lot of glimpses that give you just enough information to give the painting context or a sense of place. Like the one with Arthur's Seat in the background, for instance. You often use this window motif, it's in the gymnasium paintings, and in a way the window motif allows you to set a scene. I guess that's something you see in Renaissance paintings; you get the view out of the window. But you do it in a different way; you do it so that what you see of the window almost becomes the abstract element of the painting – the "glimpse". I really like that, if you zoom in on the paintings you can only see material, but if you bring it back into the frame of the entire picture it adds tremendous atmosphere or light, or whatever you need from it.

AC: The point of view, in a way, in a painting, can be interesting. Like the one under the table, with the legs under the table. You would see dogs or children under the table, so it's that kind of idea of the world. Do you remember that feeling of being under the table yourself? They're useful triggers to take you into states, certain types of states in a way. Do you find a problem in the glut of images in the world? The amount of imagery that you can use, or you could find, or just gets given to you – the question is what not to paint in a way?

PD: Yes I do ... that could be a good way of ending this– what you just said.

AC: Yeah.