

Andrew Cranston – interview: ‘Trust in things around you being the stuff of art’

As his first public exhibition opens in Wakefield, the brilliant Scottish painter talks about Franz Kafka, DH Lawrence, fried eggs and punctums

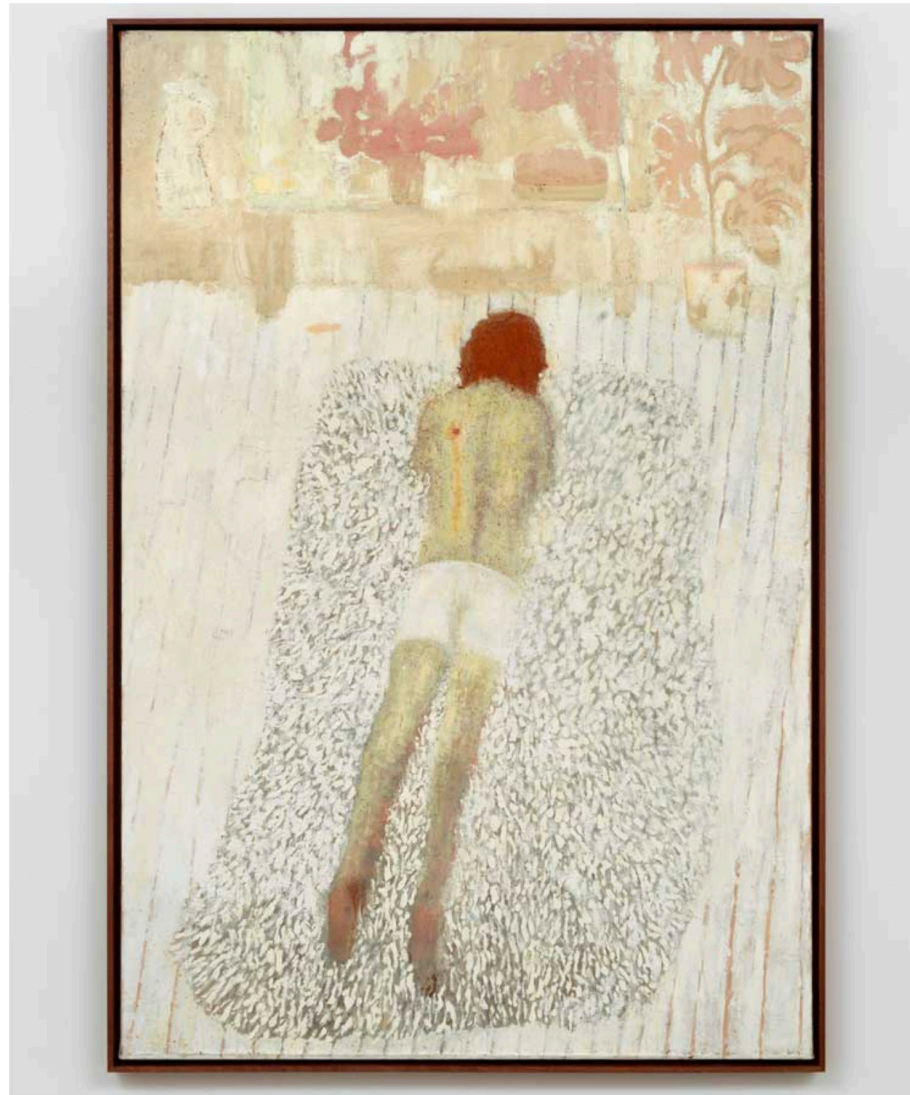


Andrew Cranston in his studio, Glasgow, 2020. Photograph: Alan Dimmick, Courtesy of the Artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh.

by JOE LLOYD

There is a snake in the front room. It crawls across the floor to take a drink from the coffee table. Elsewhere, a slender white cat reclines while surveying a cheeseboard. A schoolchild reaches into a tiled pond, as if to touch the carp that lies within. The paintings of Andrew Cranston (b1969) abound with chance encounters, disparate traces of life drawn together as if in a dream. A dose of the sublime – a lake at twilight, the sun radiating from sand dunes – is counterpoised with the clutter of the everyday. Cranston paints pots and pans, fried eggs and sliced fruits. His genres are diverse: there are landscapes, seascapes, still lifes, interiors and occasionally portrait. But his works share an irradiance, gem-like coloration and a sense of the provisional.

The obvious visual antecedents to Cranston’s searing colours and detailed interiors are Les Nabis Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard. But his work has a rawer character, as well as a duskier one; the light is that of Glasgow rather than Paris. There is an openness to his process, a process that is sometimes visible. There are cracks where two pieces of canvas join, and occasions where you can perceive the order in which different colours were placed down. Unlike the works of his modernist predecessors who painted from life, Cranston’s works emerge from a combination of memory and invention. They often tell a fragment of a narrative, real or imagined.



Andrew Cranston, *Why can't I be you?*, 2022. © Andrew Cranston. On loan from a private collection. Courtesy of the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: Robert Glowacki.

This is both enhanced and complicated by their titles. Some are names drawn from culture, such as *The Beta Band*, *Woman in the Dunes*, *One More Cup of Coffee Before We Go*. There are abundant literary references. One painting, titled simply *Joyce* (2018), depicts the Irish modernist writer standing before the sea. He is rendered yellow, in reference to fellow vision-impaired writer Jorge Luis Borges, who could see yellow after losing all other sight. Are we seeing Joyce through Borges’ eyes? This painting, like many of Cranston’s works, is painted on a torn-off book cover. You can see the cover’s grain beneath the paint, as well as a spine embossed with the word “Painting”. Cranston initially adopted this practice through convenience and necessity. He has since started painting larger scenes on canvas.

What Made You Stop Here?, at Hepworth Wakefield, is Cranston’s first public gallery exhibition. Studio International met Cranston ahead of the exhibition’s opening.

Joe Lloyd: To start at the beginning, why did you become a painter?

Andrew Cranston: It was something I did as a child, like everybody. But then it completely went off my radar. When I left school, I was a joiner. Then I was a carpenter for a bit, and then worked in the building trade and stuff like that.

I had a kind of moment where I was on a walking holiday with a friend, and I saw some rocks in a river. I really wanted to photograph them. I went to a shop in a nearby town. I had a view to buy a camera, like a disposable camera. They didn’t have any, but they had a sketchbook and pencils. I hadn’t been drawing probably for a few years then. So, I went back and did drawings of the rocks. I don’t know where this came from, or why I wanted to do it. But on that trip, I just kept on drawing. I was working in a very dead-end job, and I just thought: “This is the way out.”



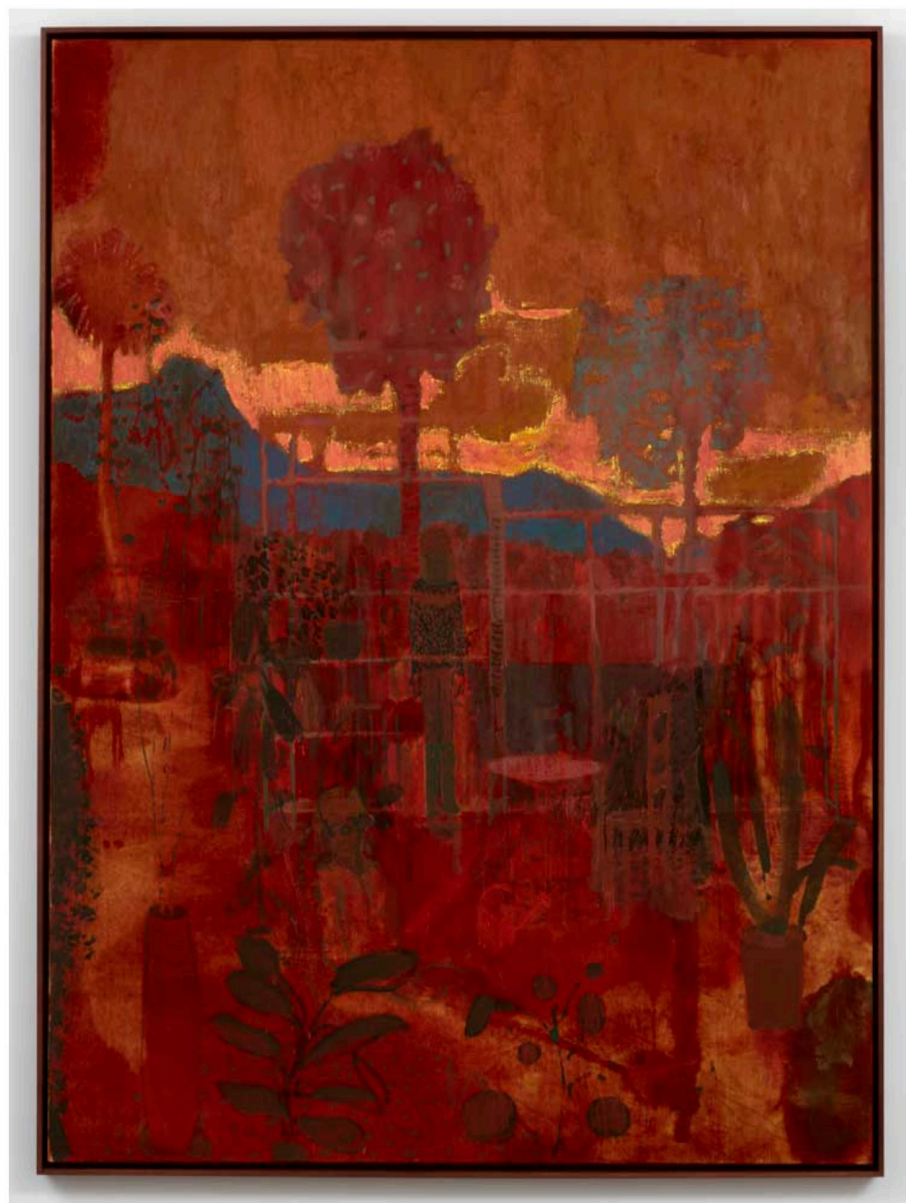
Andrew Cranston, *Why have you stopped here?*, 2023. © Andrew Cranston. On loan from a private collection. Courtesy of the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: John McKenzie.

It appealed to me in lots of ways. It was always important to express something, so I tried it in music, but I’m not really that musical, and I didn’t like collaborating with others. And it did not feel natural to do it through words. But painting, and the solitude of painting, really appealed. It has an inherent isolation. It was direct and quite – well, it can be quite – cheap. And you can make something that you think in some way could be at a level. If you’re trying to create a film, you’re miles off it. It just very quickly became an obsession. And nobody I knew did it, so it was all mine.

JL: Your works now contain an abundance of scenes, not all of which are drawn from life. Do you have an end point in mind when you start a painting?

AC: Sometimes I do, and sometimes it’s either a thing I’ve seen which I’m really translating or even transcribing. Often, it’s a mixture of things, a composite type of image where it’s a bit like this but also somehow another thing. And sometimes the materials take on a greater importance in the making of an image or the changing of an image. So, it really is a kind of mixture.

I think another aspect to it, having worked a long time before really settling on how I work, is that there isn’t one way of working. A more pluralistic attitude was more suited to me, because I was never very good at just being one thing. The different formats and allowing myself different subjects, and genres, stuff like that.



Andrew Cranston, *Stay with me, my nerves are bad tonight, the midges too, 2022*. © Andrew Cranston. On loan from a private collection. Courtesy of the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: Jude Cranston.

JL: Do you work on paintings sequentially, or are many in progress at once?

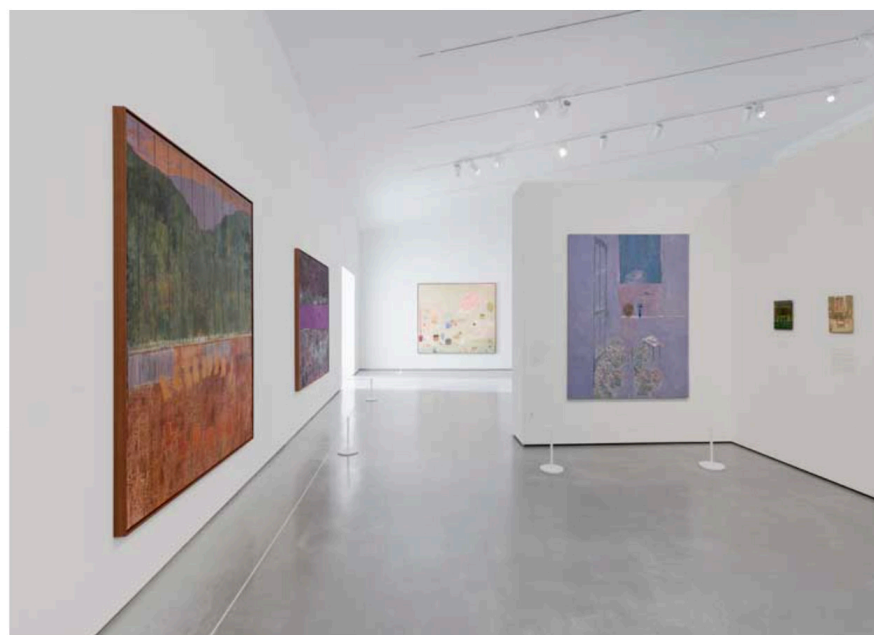
AC: Lots of things at once. It seems to be the only way to really decide what to do next or how to develop an image is to let it kind of set. And let something, maybe your unconscious, work it out. I believe in an almost sort of sleep-on-it idea where the thing gets worked out over time.

I probably had some sort of breakthrough in terms of galleries or whatever when I was 47. But I had been painting for 25 years. It was like you had reinvented yourself a few times. I'd gone through periods like a Luc Tuymans phase where everything was done in one hour and that was it, I didn't touch it again.

I think over time you eventually settle on ways of working that reflect an aspect of you as well. That's much more what I'm like, I have to keep on coming back to something and adjusting it, or destroying it, even, to make something else. So that's hugely important.

JL: Some of the works at the Hepworth feature visible joins on the surface. In another you can see the order in which different elements were painted: showing some of the working process, so to speak.

AC: Yeah, the working is kind of still visible in the work. I think doubt is quite an important, useful element for me. I like playing with the thing for as long as possible, so some of these possible choices are still there as I work. And there's a sense of time in it. I know Merlin James in Glasgow, and he sometimes dates his work "2010-15" or something. And I've wondered if I should do that myself. Because should it have the date the work is finished or the whole duration of its making?



Andrew Cranston: *What made you stop here?*, The Hepworth Wakefield, 25 November 2023 – 2 June 2024. Courtesy of The Hepworth Wakefield. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

JL: Your paintings are finished in various states. Some are coated in slick layers of varnish. Why?

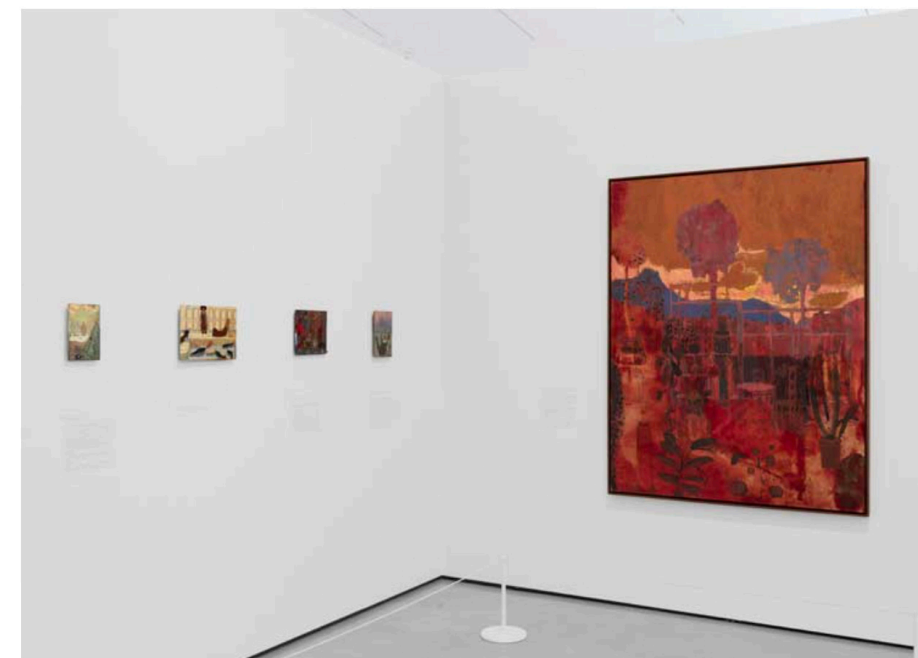
AC: I'm not entirely sure what intuitively makes me feel that an image is a dry image or this other very viscous thing. There's a thing that you want sometimes to explore which is a lushness or something with materials. And then other times a kind of poverty, which you're enjoying and relishing. And I go through different phases, doing one more than another.

JL: You often paint on book covers. Does the chosen book ever correspond to the painting?

AC: Occasionally there is some connection. Either the title or the content of the book. Generally speaking, it's chosen for its colour, surface, size, something that the book suggests. But often it's a colour that gives me a starting point. I came up with it as a way of working when I was in residency in Germany. I was in the studio and ran out of things to paint one day. I was just rummaging around in these drawings and then someone had left this pile of books and ... [he gestures scooping up].

Funnily enough, I was reading Kafka at the time, and *Metamorphosis* was one of the stories I read. And I was looking at the format of the book and I thought I could use that element of the opening of the story where he's changed into an insect and on one side of the wall his family are wondering what has happened, but they don't know yet. And I thought I could use the spine of the book as the partition, as the wall and have the two scenes on either side, almost like a cinematic device. So, the first book I used worked with the architecture of the book. But it seemed to open up all kinds of potential for ways of working.

That was 2006. And I've not just done that, but it became a dominant way of working for a long time. And it connected to my interests in narrative and literature, and all kinds of ways in which painting could find echoes in the literature.



Andrew Cranston: *What made you stop here?*, The Hepworth Wakefield, 25 November 2023 – 2 June 2024. Courtesy of The Hepworth Wakefield. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

JL: How well is painting suited for conveying narrative?

AC: It's problematic, isn't it? I probably do come much more to that modernist, anti-narrative tradition, where you want to get away from painting as a form of history-telling or storytelling. I think it is complex. The nature of painting isn't sequential. But then painting has time in it in a maybe different way as well. You know, where it's not quite – of course, a photograph has that, too, where there was a before and after ... I don't know, there is an awkwardness that I quite enjoy. It just maybe gives you moments or something. In that sense I especially like poetry and short stories because I think often poetry savours the fragment, the idea of a kind of glimpse, as opposed to maybe a novelistic approach with a whole beginning, middle and end. It's really just a fragment of something.

So, there's narrative painting, but it's kind of unclear sometimes where the story is. I like Roland Barthes' idea of punctum, where that might be a small element within an image or a photograph that opens up another narrative. I think of that often when I'm painting. There's an aspect for me in the picture that is kind of key to the image.

An example: an interesting aspect of Pieter Bruegel's *The Peasant Dance* (1567). There's a peacock feather in a hat. And for years I never knew what it was. I just thought it was a piece of surrealism: an eye perhaps. I think I've seen all the Bruegels. It's the only thing I have a bucket list for.



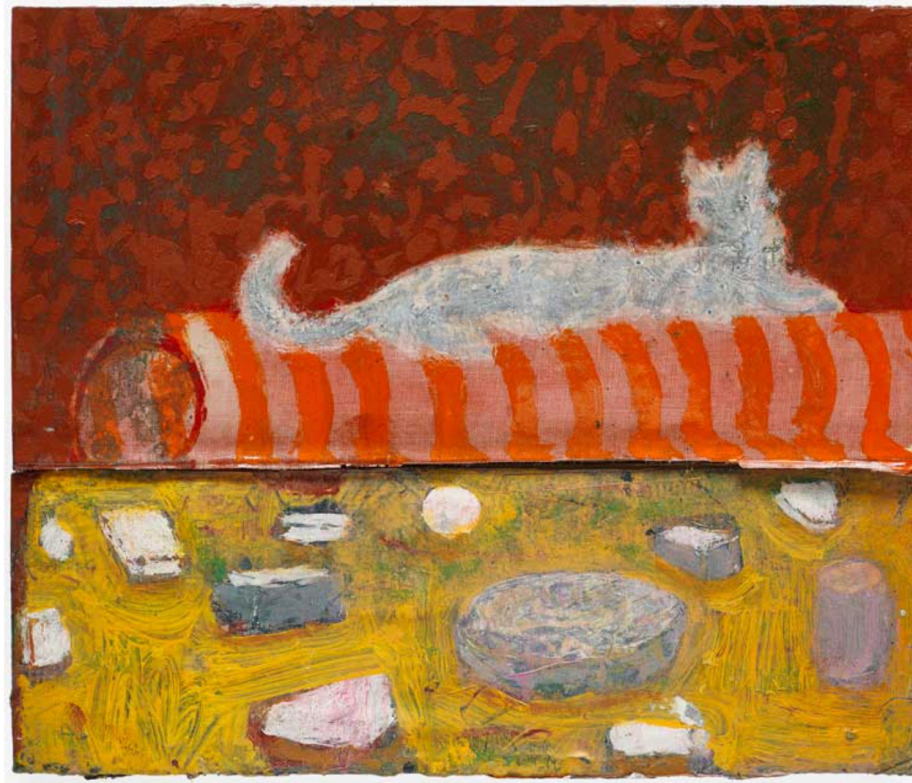
Andrew Cranston, *A snake came to my coffee table on a hot, hot day to drink there, 2023*. © Andrew Cranston. Courtesy of the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: John McKenzie.

JL: So, for instance, the snake that disrupts a domestic scene in *A Snake Came to My Coffee Table on a Hot, Hot Day to Drink There (2023)*, or the red spot on an otherwise pale back in *Why Can't I Be You? (2022)*?

AC: Yes, where something is out there on its own, or kind of marked differently from the rest of the image. Narrative interests me in an autobiographical sense. My mum and dad were great storytellers and they took it really seriously. Or even like, you know, the way a joke operates in people's worlds, where it's a kind of artform that doesn't call itself art. I have a deep interest in how important narrative is in people's lives. We're always condensing as well. Even for a day, you pick the key moments of the day and say them. We're exercising all the time.

JL: Animals feature prominently in your work. There are birds, fish, cats, dogs, midges, snakes ...

AC: Oddly, I don't have any! But they're on my radar. I think they often function as a sort of empathetic element. And maybe function a wee bit similarly to a figure. It's a kind of living thing, or an entity within the painting. And there can even be a kind of comic element to that, an anthropomorphic element.



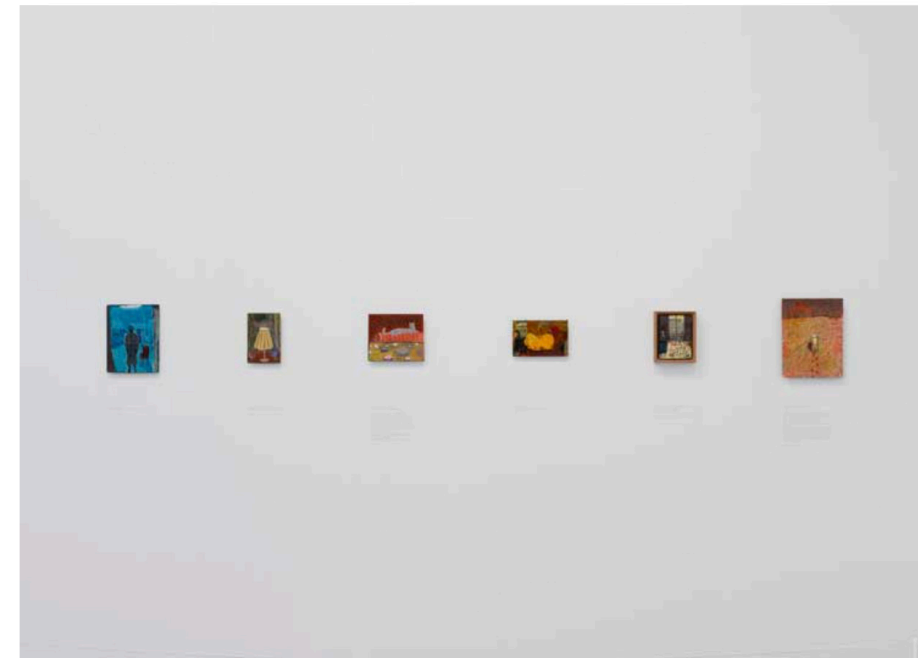
Andrew Cranston, *Cat and cheeseboard, 2018*. © Andrew Cranston. On loan from a private collection. Courtesy of the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: Andy Keate.

There's something about how different animals embody different ideas. Ones that are naturally domestic, but others that are uncanny or stranger when placed into the domestic. I remember reading about this family in Dundee that bought a lizard. They didn't know what they had bought. It grew into this huge reptile that took over half their farm.

I love DH Lawrence's poems. And they're not sentimental, they're quite honest about the range of feelings that an animal might trigger. And I think the private life that people have with animals is interesting. It's quite an often uncurated thing in our lives. Somebody I know a bit, and to me is one of the most interesting curators in the world, is Matthew Higgs, who is from Wakefield actually. And his dog has its own Instagram page. He loves that dog. It's interesting what it reveals in people. It often brings out the best in them. It's a curious thing. There's definitely a kind of pathos, and sometimes sentimentality that comes with it. But there's something to use there that's not totally exhausted on cliché.

JL: I have encountered studies that suggest people have more emotional reactions to furry animals than to other people.

AC: A book that I keep coming back to, and I've always wondered if I should try to explicitly work with, is Philip K Dick's, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* It was adapted into *Blade Runner*, but the book is very, very different. Animals in the world are almost extinct. Some do exist, and they're so highly prized. And one of the ways in which people tell the difference between androids and humans is what animals bring out in them. It's a simple idea, but a fascinating one.



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JL: When I see *Small Canvas Book/Tent (2020)*, which features a fried egg in a pan, I instantly think of Velázquez's *An Old Woman Cooking Eggs (c1618)*, in the Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh. Have other painters seeped into your work?

AC: It's interesting who feeds you. And it's sometimes not painters who necessarily look like your work. For instance, I quite often look at William Scott's books. Scott always has these frying pans, pots and pans, and I think he has eggs as well somewhere. There's something stark about it. To go back to the punctum: the yoke or the egg just seemed like the "ding" that I wanted in the image, the focal point.

There is that sometimes, just trust in things around you being the stuff of art. An almost faith, like with [Giorgio] Morandi, that these things have a value somehow through just being there for a long time and being present. It's almost like that with [Philip] Guston a bit, where the studio things become a relic of something.

I often think back to a Bruegel painting, *The Peasant Dance (1567)*. There's a peacock feather in a hat. And for years I never knew what it was. I just thought it was a piece of surrealism: an eye perhaps. I think I've seen all the Bruegels. It's the only thing I have a bucket list for.

JL: Morandi and Guston often painted the objects that surrounded them in the studio. Do you?

AC: There's stuff in the studio, and the flat. But the impulse is sometimes abstract. It's a shape you're looking for. For instance, the snake. For a long time, I was painting things like the vacuum cleaners with the flex, this kind of thing. Sometimes the wire would get caught in a chair leg and it would go straight. And I thought that was quite an interesting way to make tension in a painting. And then I thought I could make it into a snake. So, there's a sort of shapeshifting aspect. It feels very alive in your mind when you're making it. And when the painting is finished, it feels like that was your intention all along.

• *Andrew Cranston: What Made You Stop Here? Is at Hepworth Wakefield until 2 June 2024.*