

Ken Currie

in conversation with Isabel Bingley

March 2021

IB: You have always said to me that you work to regular and structured hours in the studio, were you able to work over 2020 and how did you adapt?

KC: My studio building closed on March 23rd 2020; with two hours notice. I had to abandon a big painting I had been heavily involved in and it was very difficult to walk away and leave it unfinished. It was on my mind all the time.

I managed to set up a studio in a small garden shed at home. I had to completely rethink what I was doing and obviously scale everything right down. I had been working away from the domestic environment for 34 years so everything about working in that shed was challenging. My regular studio is a large semi-industrial space, so it took a while to adapt to the new working environment. But I was determined to continue to work and as it turned out the shed had certain attractions as a thinking and painting space.

How has Covid impacted you personally and how has it affected how you view this body of work?

It has been a very difficult time - with several members of my family dying - I think I was in a permanent state of shock and panic. Death seemed to be everywhere. For a while I felt very demotivated and paralysed with indecision. The uncertainty of our collective situation felt dreadful. There was in the early days no prospect of a vaccine and so the future felt very bleak for everyone.

Some of the works in the show were made in the shed and I'm very pleased that they have now gone on show in Hong Kong. I knew that, despite the uncertainty and demotivation, Covid would never stop me from working, unless it caught up with me!

***Christine's Mask* and *Interregnum* are both self – portraits, please could you tell me about these works?**

In the very early days of the pandemic my friend Christine made masks for all her friends. When I got mine, I was very skeptical about this virus - I thought: why would I need this, surely, it's not that serious. I found it amusing to wear the mask - it was like a novelty, I laughed. A few weeks later I was no longer laughing.

The painting *Interregnum* was about the idea that we were enveloped, or hooded, in a kind of darkness, not being able to see the things that matter to us, family, friends, great cities, great paintings - would we ever see them again? We were like hostages to this insidious and seemingly invincible pathogen.

You have painted largely with oil paint on Gesso panels for this exhibition. Why do you use these materials?

Gesso is a beautiful, smooth surface to work on and is very demanding and exacting. I build the images up in layers, including glazes, and the gesso ground seems to give the paintings a luminosity you can't really achieve with canvas.

How do you push yourself as a painter?

I am a very driven person and painting is like a calling or even perhaps an obsession. It is something I just have to do, it's simply part of the way I live my life. I have visual ideas in my mind, and I feel strongly compelled to realise them as paintings. It is like an animal instinct.

Do you think there is a benefit in looking back at previous artists' works?

Absolutely, it's central to the way I work. I feel everything I have done so far has been a dialogue with the artists of the past. I feel their presence constantly with me. Some people would dismiss this as an undue reverence for tradition, but I do not see it that way. I do not see tradition I see precedent, which is something different.

What outside of the artworld, has inspired you recently?

Everything. Many, many things, too long to list. My everyday experience of life and being alive here and now compels me to work. I must admit though, the creation of the vaccine has been one of the great miracles of modern science, it is astounding. It has given us all hope and restored our faith in the notion of people working together for the common good.

What is the object in *Life cast*?

The painting is based on a diagram from a book on nursing. The diagram was about how to construct a full body cast for a child, to immobilise the patient and let the broken body repair. It seems constrictive and cruel but in fact is an instrument of healing.

You have previously show medical objects elevated in some way almost as ornaments, is there a dark comedy for you in this, or is it the alien nature of the object that interests you?

Yes, the body cast has a surreal quality, like other medical objects - it suggests the presence of the human figure but with the actual body absent. It is an alien object - very much so, and as a result disconcerting. Exhibiting it as an ornament as you describe definitely has a dark humour to it. I saw a plaster cast from the leg of a footballer in a museum in one of the northern Scottish islands. He had broken his leg but continued to play the match and won the trophy. He was a hero, so they put his plaster cast on display. As I said, surreal!

Looking at your recent work you have used the islands off the North of Scotland as a catalyst for your protagonists. Why do you find these remote communities interesting?

I think what interests me are the rituals and traditions of these remote and ancient communities - their historic relationship with the land and the sea, with animals, with the whole vista of nature in such harsh places and the stories, songs and visual imagery that comes out of this. Many of these communities are still recovering from the historic trauma of their families and communities being cleared from the land they had lived on for centuries to make way for sheep farms. The beauty of these islands is so poignant because you sense the ghosts of this tragedy in the landscape.

You have talked about the naturalistic nature of your work, often showing the raw vulnerability of the human form and its mortality. Is this what draws you to subjects like those in *Salt Bath*, *Shoeless* and *Sea Creatures* where you show injuries that relate to a sensation or pain?

Much of my work over the last forty or so years has been about the frailty and, as you say, vulnerability of the human form. It's a concern that has never gone away - the fact that we are mortal, subject to the uncertainties and contingencies of nature, the current pandemic being the perfect example. Human

suffering is one of the very great themes in art and, despite the triumphalism of our highly sophisticated technological culture, never seems to diminish.

Is it the physical impact or emotional impact of the subjects in your work that interests you?

It has to be both.

How do you hope your work impacts the viewer?

I hope it gives them a new visual experience and opens up different layers of feeling - provokes, challenges and frightens them, but also, I would like them to respond to the paint itself, the surfaces, in a sensual way, beyond words.