

Urban People

*“When I am structuring a painting, what I am doing is structuring relationships.
The form of a painting makes sense to me as a structure of human relationships”*



Conversation, Oil on board. 62 x 93cm.

Trevor Burgess



Koray Gents Hair. Oil on board. 100 x 124cm.

Background to the work

Trevor Burgess is an artist who lives and works in London. The theme of relationships between people runs through much of his work. He sees a deep analogy between how relationships are structured by family, culture, social activity, or place, and the structure of relationships within a painting. His current series of paintings, rooted in the observation of the social interaction of people in urban space, have been described as “structured revelations of contemporary streetlife”.

Although people are the locus of connection in the paintings, Burgess is also concerned with the context of social interaction. He explores themes such as the interplay of signs within the cityscape, or how urban architecture creates a visually distinctive micro-environment at street level, and how momentary appearances are registered, glimpsed or over-looked in passing by on the street. The themes often direct or employ a particular style of painting or use of paint that shifts the work from being a straightforward depiction of people going about their everyday business to a more evocative and intriguing myriad of tensions, juxtapositions and details that offer the viewer an opportunity to delve deeper into the lives and interactions happening on street level.

Burgess works from photographs which he takes himself, but his attention to the material of paint leads to the creation of images which do not attempt to replicate the conventions of photography. He uses a glossy wet paint which gives intensity to the flashes of bright colour that animate the paintings. The fluidity, coarseness and texture of the paint contribute to a sense of the thickening of the air in the urban atmosphere, the discontinuity of visual experience, and the fleeting glimpse.

The paintings vary in scale, from a series of small city street scenes to medium and larger canvases. Some of the paintings use a ‘widescreen’ format where the street is treated as a spectacle or tableau with people spread across it as if in a frieze. These are presented as either single images or broken up into triptychs emphasising the discontinuity of the artist’s experience of being in busy public places.



Street Scenes 3, 13. Oil on board. 29.5 x 36cm.

The micro-environment of the street

“The only legitimacy of the street is as public space. Without it there is no city... The street, furthermore, structures the city. It puts on display the workings of the city, and supplies a backdrop for its common rituals”.

Spiro Kostoff, *The City Assembled*.

“Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more. For space, in the image of man, is place, and time, in the image of man, is occasion.”

Aldo Van Eyck.

The paintings are an eye-level take on the city. They place the viewer at street level. They aim to recall the experience of walking in the street, looking around, warily aware of things glimpsed on either side, a heightened alertness to people, movement, traffic, visual dazzle. There is something visually distinctive in this contemporary urban experience, which I am trying to recall in paint.

The concept of space in the paintings is determined by my eye-level perception, at a human level. The paintings take the urban environment as their visual structure. Everything is fitted into this urban geometry. The concept of time in the paintings is also determined by the perception of rapidity, of change, of movement on the street. It is of a fleeting moment. In the paintings, despite the scaffolding of their urban structure, nothing appears fixed.



Passers by. Oil on 3 canvases. 60 x 42.5 cm. (x3)

Recollections of the everyday

“And a thing is not seen because it is visible – on the contrary it is visible because it is seen.” Plato, Euthyphro.

I don't think the art of painting can easily renew itself for each generation simply by inventing new styles. At a much deeper level, painting has to show people something new about the world, about ourselves, about what we see in the world and how we see it.

I set out in these paintings to paint people going about their ordinary lives in the streets. The paintings take as their subject what most people are doing in public space most of the time: walking, looking, shopping, talking, crossing the road, waiting for a bus, sitting in a car... In choosing such images, I aim to recapture a perception of the socially shared space of the street. It is a space in which most of the time, people are getting on with the ordinary business of living.



Bus Queue. Oil on canvas. 129 x 129cm.

These sort of images of daily life in public space are commonplace in other media, but do not customarily appear in paintings. I am not seeking to discover or expose elements of life that are extra-ordinary or remarkable. On the contrary I want to reveal the beauty of what is ordinary and everyday, to oppose a tendency of images in all media to sensationalise or glamorize.

Paintings invite the viewer to take time and look, and in so doing they can bring to visibility things that have been passed by unseen, in such a way as to evoke recollections of experiences the viewer recognises, and reveal them by making them visible.

“The hazardous but necessary urban art of self-projection”

I think of the street as a place where people display themselves, engaged in what Jonathan Raban in his book *Soft City* called “the hazardous but necessary urban art of self-projection”.

It is not just the people who are engaged in display and self-projection in the urban space. The street itself, and the buildings that flank it, are a façade for the projection of cultural identity and display. And, on another level, the actual paintings are also a display of both the contradictions and the connecting bonds between disparate projections of identity.



Starting from now. Oil on canvas. 150 x 200 cm.

I am interested in moments where the projection of self-identity connects with the intimacy of its origin in the self. This is another sort of glimpse – a glimpse of intimate inner worlds in the public space. In some of the paintings a figure stares out of the picture directly at the viewer, and this forms a potential connection or bond to the inward source of identity – a potential bond whose power is felt in the uneasiness and resistance to meeting the gaze.



Reflection. Oil on board. 62 x 76cm.

In other pictures there is a conversation going on between people. What interested me in these pictures was the sensation of gossip, of overhearing fragments of speech, of wondering and imagining what the people are talking about. The conversations create an aura of intimacy around the people, a sort of complicity that I cannot share, and that piques my curiosity.



Street Scene 8. Oil on board. 29.5 x 36 cm.

Pictures showing parents with children also create this aura of the intimacy of family around people even though they are in a public environment. Here there is a watchful wariness about the parents, protecting the children from danger, mixed with the pride of the public display.

In this sense, the paintings bring an intimist sensibility to the depiction of public space.



Market Crowd. Oil on board. 62 x 76cm.

An interplay of signs

Pictures are an interplay of signs. The streets I paint are full of signs in the most literal sense. The function of all these signs is to attract the eye to look at them, which is also what paintings do. When I paint them, often I strip the signs of their literal message, reducing them to this visual function, which is to catch our attention.

A series of sharply defined yellow shapes dance across the surface of the *Wigs and Chips* triptych giving visual structure to the three paintings. I could list what these yellow shapes appear to represent: a shopping bag, the buttons on either side of a pedestrian crossing, a shop sign (cut into three rectangles by the visual intrusion of a post), and the absent space caused by the gap between two of the canvases), a sandwich board, and some window stickers. But in the painting, these ill-defined, disparate things are all united in their function as signs displaying their yellowness that clamours for my visual attention.



Wigs and Chips. Oil on 3 canvases. 62 x 76cm. (x3)

By conceiving painting as a play of visual signs, I can refer to complex layers of meanings. For instance, I like to include signs of what is outside the picture frame, behind you, about to impinge on your awareness, on your physical space – a shadow, a reflected red that tells you of the bus on the other side of the road, lines painted on the tarmac that tell you where the traffic is coming from. I paint clothes in the same way, reductively, as signs of colour, so they function almost as flags competing with street signs, cars and buses for the eye's attention, asserting identity. The paintings display numerous signs of cultural identity and local specificity. There are written signs, and fragments of signs. And there are also marks and peculiarities of the painting that seem to signify something that is less easy to give a meaning to.



Street Scene 10. Oil on board. 29.5 x 36 cm.



Professional Nail Care. Oil on canvas. 120 x 140 cm.

In the pictures of shop fronts I have been particularly interested in creating complex layers of meaning and ambiguity. The paintings show shop fronts in a way that creates a membrane of signs and reflection. The shop windows objectify desires and reflect them back to us. An internal world of dreams suddenly intrudes into the public space. In these pictures, this membrane of signs and reflections becomes like a projection screen of the mental or dream world of the individuals depicted in front of the shops, with all the contradictions and ambiguities of a dream.

How the signs in the paintings are interpreted depends upon a viewpoint. The viewer may see into the picture and begin to interpret the signs from within, imagining themselves as the figure depicted in the painting, or they may imaginatively inhabit the space of the painting – and place themselves in the street in direct relation to the figures.

A gap in the appearance of things

I am very aware that paintings show the appearance of things. In all painting, there is a gap somewhere between what is depicted and how it's depicted. Painting is about this gap. The more I think about this gap, the more I wonder whether you can really say that anything is depicted in a painting at all. When I think like this, the gap disappears – what I see in the painting is simply what it is – it is not trying to depict anything. Yet all paintings hold our attention by provoking the imagination to see something in them – and as soon as you see something in a painting, the gap opens up again.

Paintings are just appearances. When I look at these paintings, they have an appearance of clarity, which is something I strove to achieve in this series of work. Yet looking at them, they fail to fully describe what I am looking at.



Pedestrian Crossing.. Oil on board. 62 x 76 cm.

In *Pedestrian Crossing* each of the cars appears spellbound staring at the woman in a niqab crossing the road in front of them, yet we cannot see any of the drivers' faces, any more than we can see the woman's face. I am painting appearances – the appearance of the cars, not the drivers; the appearance of the clothes, not the woman. Yet if the picture is about anything it is about the people driving the cars, and the woman crossing the road, and it's about myself as the person who saw it, or imagined it, and it's about why I chose to paint this in this way, and show it to you, the viewer.

And so the picture calls for an interpretation, an attitude, an explanation. Paintings can be enlisted on behalf of many points of view, and as a painter it is tempting for me to begin to analyse what the pictures represent. But, for me, paintings do not illustrate arguments, or straightforwardly represent ideas. There is a gap. Paintings are open.

A glimpse in passing

Visual experience of walking or driving through the city is discontinuous. Sightlines are constantly being broken and obscured by passing traffic, window frames, posts, gates, fences, scaffolding, other people. Often the visual field is framed, seen through glass, and confused by reflections. The sky is cut off by balconies and overhead structures. The format of the paintings recreates this discontinuity.

The paintings, characteristically, are fragments. A close cropping of the image re-inforces the impression of being on the street, with people and the city pressing in on all sides. The eye gets no relief: there are no long vistas into the distance, the sky is unseen. It's all up close, on display.

I have used a "widescreen" format in some of the paintings, either as a single image or broken up into a triptych. The widescreen format enables me to treat the street as a spectacle or a tableau. People are spread across it as if in a frieze. By isolating a markedly horizontal slice of visual experience, it recreates the sense of the framing of the view through a car windscreen, or in a rear view mirror, or out of a shop window, or sightlines cut off by an overhead canopy. This is further intensified in the triptych format, where the gaps between the canvases act as a further intermittent visual obstruction, framing and fragmenting the image.

In many of the pictures I wanted to create a sense that the scene has just been *glimpsed in passing*. A moment has been caught, and has impressed itself on my mind, yet I have not retained all the detail. It passed quickly. *Across the Road* creates this effect very strongly – nothing in it is seen clearly. All the activity in the painting is pressed up against the top edge beyond the grey expanse of the empty road, and veiled behind what could be drizzle, haze or dirty glass. There are some figures on the pavement, and perhaps it was they who caught my eye. But only for a moment, in passing.



Across the Street. Oil on canvas. 76 x 152 cm.



City Series 6. Ink on paper. 56.5 x 76 cm.

Biography of the artist

Trevor Burgess initially studied literature, going on to train and work as Assistant Curator at the Norwich Gallery for four years at the time of the establishment of the East international exhibition. He founded and steered the development of the Warehouse Artists Studios in Norwich, where he based his practice from 1990 to 1997. During this period he was closely involved with the artist-run studio movement, and worked with the National Artists Association to launch a Code of Practice for the Visual Arts.

He took part in the site specific exhibition, *Wholesale*, in 1996, for which he filled the walls of a former cold store from floor to ceiling with a decorative cycle of eighteen paintings of massed fruit and vegetable produce. In the same year his work was selected for the Kettles Yard Open and the International Triennial of Painting, Sofia, Bulgaria.

The following year he moved to Barcelona, studying on the Winchester School of Art MA European Fine Art. During the MA he produced a series of large, figurative paintings exploring the relationships of families and children, which, following his graduation in 1998, were exhibited in a solo exhibition at the Galerie Daniel Wahrenberger in Zurich, Switzerland. In Barcelona he also made a series of work about Castellers, the popular Catalan custom of creating human towers as a street display. These pictures explored relationships between people engaged in a highly structured, public, social activity. The *Castellers* were exhibited as a solo exhibition at the Galeria Groc in Barcelona and toured in Catalonia. Drawings from the series were selected for the Cheltenham Open Drawing competition.

Following his return to the UK in 1999, Trevor Burgess showed alongside Colin Self and John Kiki in the exhibition, *Seven Painters and One Self* at the Dockroom, London in 2001. He led the research commissioned by Arts Council England of 20 case studies demonstrating the impact of contemporary visual art in education, health and regeneration, which was published in 2006 as *The Power of Art. Visual Arts: evidence of impact*. In 2006 he was awarded a Creative Growth grant by Cultural Industries Development Agency and paintings from his Street Scenes series were selected by Observer art critic William Feaver and Gagosian Gallery Director, Mollie Dent-Brocklehurst for *The Discerning Eye* exhibition at the Mall Galleries, London. In 2007 he will be exhibiting in solo exhibitions in cultural centres in the towns of El Campello, Alicante and Blanca, Murcia in Spain.

Trevor Burgess's work has been purchased by numerous private collectors in the UK, and also in Switzerland, Spain, the Netherlands and Argentina. Corporate collections include the Dutch Publishers Association, Vanbrugh West Antiques Ltd, Galerie Wahrenberger, Brindisa Ltd, Pan Rico SA, Prevista Ltd. His work can be seen at www.burgesstrevor.blogspot.com