

## **Trevor Burgess and Ambreen Hameed**

### **Back Stories**

*Reaching the age of 60 for many is a time for reflection. We wonder how we got here, and what exactly has been learned or achieved. Have these decades made us wiser people? What did we lose of ourselves along the way, and what did we salvage? What did we give up too easily, and what did we protect at the expense of the rest? What were the turns taken or not taken, the doors opened or unopened? Who are we now compared to who we might have been?*

*Unlike the rest of us, a maker of paintings may have a trail which can be used to retrace steps. Buried in the back of the studio are fragments of lost selves - paintings which contains the touch, energies and aspirations of an earlier mind and body. Excavated from the storeroom after decades, a painting may reveal the story of a path explored, consciously or unconsciously. And, examined now from the perspective of the future, it communicates meanings invisible to the younger self.*

*Trevor Burgess is widely known for his paintings of people inhabiting urban spaces. But each of his earlier paintings has a story to tell. People Coming Out of the Paint is a collaboration with writer Ambreen Hameed, to accompany the exhibition Back Stories, in March 2023, marking the artist's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday.*

## People Coming Out of the Paint by Ambreen Hameed



Standing in front of *Lavender fields in the Cotes de Luberon*, the artist, aged 60, might reach out a hand and touch the canvas, and - back in time - his seventeen-year-old body may do the same. Encouraged by an art teacher at school, this tall fair-haired youngster from Yorkshire, who loves painting but has no aspirations to be an artist, has won a bursary to travel to the South of France. He is standing alone on a hillside, having pedalled a bike laden with easel, boards and oil colours 40 miles to the top of a hill, under a blaze of July sunlight never experienced in the north of England. Yesterday, exhausted by heat and hunger, after many hours of cycling up steep roads in search of the youth hostel he has booked, this boy sat down at the side of the road and shed helpless tears. But now, he is looking at fields of lavender, and he is painting.

It is his first time away from home. It is his first time seeing the fierce colours of the Provencale landscape. He is having trouble getting the precise colour of the lavender fields. He is trying to remember what he has learned from the book about the painter Oskar Kokoschka, given to him by his art teacher; trying to understand how to make the painting feel like a unified whole with the same light shining on everything, so that what he sees here in the foreground is in the same world, with the same sun shining on it, as what he sees at the back. And how he can tie all that together with what happens in the sky - quite aside from making sure that the hills are exactly where they should be.

He is completely absorbed. He does not stop painting till dusk falls.

When he cycles back to the youth hostel tonight, he will put the painting on a window ledge. He will look at it, and think about it. Tomorrow he will paint another. He does not yet know that making paintings will become his life.



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Standing in front of *Head*, there is another opportunity for time travel. If the artist touches the picture, the fingers that meet his will be those of a young man in his mid-twenties. This person is standing in a small, dimly lit studio in Norwich which he shares with a violin-maker.

He has rented this studio thanks to the Enterprise Allowance Scheme, an initiative by the Thatcher government in an effort to reduce record unemployment figures. He is no fan of Mrs Thatcher, but having spent a year living with idealistic university friends renting a house in the Norfolk countryside - where he immediately converted the dining room into a studio - he has discovered that penury does not enable him to do the one thing he now wants to do more than anything else: paint.

By this time he has made many landscapes but - in his new studio, breathing the scented maple being shaped into violin scrolls - something else has taken hold of him. He wants to paint figures. Landscape painting these days strikes him as no longer contemporary, and he has become aware that as a youngster his choices have been influenced by other painters. He tells himself: *come on, if you're a real painter, you should be able to put figures in paintings.*

Something else. He doesn't want to paint from life. He does not want real people in his pictures. *He wants the people to come out of the paint.*

He is excited by the rich blacks which appear when he mixes viridian with alizarin crimson. When *Head* appears, it leaps out of the paint like a flame.

It is only much later that he realises, looking in the mirror, whose head he has painted.

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When he looks at *Self Portrait* the 60-year-old artist will meet his 27-year-old self. Twice. There is the densely-painted image, and - if he reaches - there is also the body and mind that made the image. This body and mind belong to a person who now calls himself an artist. In fact, he has set up the Warehouse Artists' Studios in Norwich. It is a space shared by 10 artists, and in a few years the group will grow to 30 or more.

The stairs in the background of *Self Portrait* are the steps leading up to the studio. His is the first space when you enter the warehouse. He has built some shelves in his space to stack things, and there is a brick wall on one side. He makes many paintings here, including this one, placing his easel in front of a mirror and taking this pose, his shoulders slightly slanted as though he is on the move, unwilling to be captured.

Afterwards, other figures will start to appear: a young boy will push his way out from between two adult figures. There is something insistent about this shadowy child and he does not come only once: on canvas after canvas, he struggles to emerge from the paint, from the inadequate space left by the two adults. The colours are dark.

The young painter does not like people to see these pictures. They are so personal and so *inward*. He doesn't know who these figures are. He will eventually destroy them and a future self will have to look at slides to know for sure that they even existed.

There are many failures around this time. Most of the paintings will not survive, they will be lost. Decades later,

these are closed doors, dark spaces to which return is not possible.

He paints all the time. He works and re-works the paint, creating dynamic layers, thick with energy. When *River Man* comes out of the paint, he is a creature rising from the deep. But his future self will say that some of these paintings have *lost the light*.

At 27, he has a sense that he is on his "path", but that he is also completely lost.

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When he looks at *Mother and Baby*, the 60-year-old artist meets a younger self who no longer stands before an easel. This young man is kneeling on the floor, his upper body suspended over the canvas. There is a freedom in his movement he has not felt for a long time, a mobility in the paint which exhilarates him. The woman and baby who emerge are luminous, joyous, utterly surprising to him.

This is what he has been waiting for.

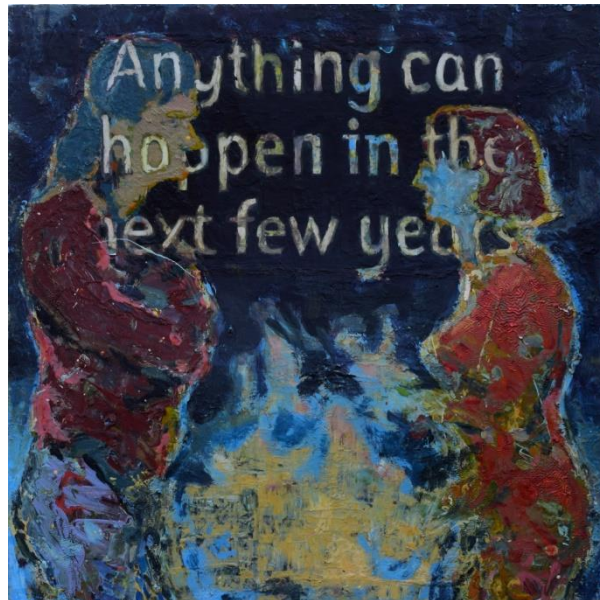
It has happened by a strange accident. The Norwich Gallery where he has a part-time job has sent him to pick up paintings from a local artist for a new exhibition. The artist's name is John Kiki and he has a studio above a meat merchant in Great Yarmouth. The studio must be reached by a ladder into a crack in the wall. Inside this space, with the smell of raw meat in his nostrils, the young artist cannot believe what he sees. This contemporary artist is doing what he has been struggling to do: he is making imagined figures appear from the paint. His use of paint is fluid and free. The results are extraordinary.

John Kiki becomes a mentor. One day he comes to the Warehouse Artists' Studios. The young artist writes in his diary: *John Kiki brought me in some of the medium which he uses in his paintings. He brought me some salad bowls and this medium, and he said, mix it about 50-50 with the turps. Mix up your colours like this, paint on the floor, and see what happens.*

He has followed Kiki's instructions, mixing a paint much more glossy and easier to manipulate than he has been used to. With the canvas flat on the floor, instead of on the easel, he is no longer restricted to using a brush. He can pour the paint, drip it, splash it, spray it. It can be spread with rags, sponges, palette knives, and whatever else comes to hand - or even just hands and feet. He works fast, in a trance of swirling movement. Almost without effort, *Mother and Baby* glimmers into view. He can hardly breathe at what he has done.

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For the artist at 60, it is not so difficult to reach through the canvas of *Anything Can Happen in the Next Few Years* and meet the artist in his mid-thirties. This younger self can also be found on the canvas, faced by another figure, this time not one who has had to be pulled from the paint, but one who has entered in from the outside world. It is the figure of the person who will become his partner-in-life. An artist herself, she has come to work at the Warehouse Artists' Studio.

An insurance company has tried to frighten customers with a slogan about an unsafe future, but the painter has transformed it into a different message. *Anything Can Happen in the Next Few Years* is a jewel-like space, like a stained glass window.

The two of them will leave the Warehouse Artists' Studios together. When his future self looks back, he will be surprised by the violence with which this institution - his own creation - was abandoned. Having grown, nurtured and fought for little else for seven years, his departure is abrupt, more or less overnight. Many paintings are left behind, and many will be destroyed while he is away.

But after this breakage will come a period of intense exploration. Having never been to art school he has been accepted onto an MA course at Winchester, and - for much of the year - will be based in Barcelona. By some timely miracle, he has had, for the first time, a major sale - a set of 18 paintings to a Swiss gallery. Now he can afford to pay for his course.

In Barcelona, freed from the need to earn a living, he paints at times late into the night, and sometimes through till morning. The journey inwards to pull imaginary figures from

the paint has accelerated. At the same time, he finds himself immensely drawn to his surroundings, most particularly to the Catalan tradition of Castellers - the fraught construction of towers of people balanced on one another's shoulders, to be topped for a brief moment by a triumphant waving child, before the entire structure must topple. Increasingly obsessed by this collective striving for transitory glory, he makes hundreds of sketches, even taking photographs - painting from photographs, a true crime! - and cannot stop making giant canvases depicting these tottering feats of strength.

People from the outside world have started to get into his pictures.

He feels that he is travelling at a hundred miles an hour in two directions at once. He wonders whether following two such opposed paths could possibly be right.

But by the time he returns to Winchester at the end of the year to complete his course, the journey inwards will be irrevocably changed. Instead of reflecting the psychodrama of earlier paintings, the latest "inward" canvases have become light-handed and full of confident, flat space. More often than not, the people that emerge from the paint now are children, but not the haunted boy of earlier years. A subterranean struggle has somehow transmuted into play.

On a giant canvas, in his Winchester studio, *Playground* appears.

It has taken over a decade. But once these energetic children are out in the world, released in joyous tumble across this canvas, there will be no more need for people to be pulled from the paint.



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In Hackney in 2001, a bus has arrived at a bus-stop. The people who have been waiting are one by one getting on. The artist, now nearly 40, takes a photograph. In his studio, he is bewildered: the photograph is so small, and he doesn't quite know how to go about this painting that is asking to be made. Yet he also has an odd realisation: *all those years I resisted painting from photographs, but somehow this photograph simplifies things.*

One by one, the people in the queue get on to the canvas. He spills white paint to make the plastic bag carried by the boy in the pink shirt. He fills in the detail of the window-panes behind. He uses techniques he has developed in his imaginative work to add emotional content to what the little photograph shows him.

The artist aged 60 will not forget this moment. As the bus arrives, so does a new understanding. He is perhaps not a rural artist after all, but an urban one. He is an artist to whom people matter - the people *outside* matter, the ones in the real world. And he may just know how he wants to paint them.