

THE KENSINGTON SOCIETY

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Feature

By
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Anthony Whishaw

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A VERY DIFFICULT MAN TO CATEGORISE – Anthony Whishaw paints large pictures and really very small ones – from about 15 cm to 7 metres – some are abstract, some figurative, some cubist, and some tending towards abstraction while quite clearly being identifiable as swirling water, landscape, sea crashing on the shore, or inspired by his car catching fire in a Tesco car park.

“I don’t like the idea of making a product – I am not trying to make something that is instantly recognisable as by me”. So he goes where the fancy and fertile imagination take him and produces a bewildering range of pictures. “I belong to no group or school” with each picture making “its own demands”.

And his studios are cluttered with scores of them. That is not because he cannot sell his extremely beguiling paintings but because he is working on a very large number in parallel. And they come in groups or series. There is for instance one set of pictures that are not exactly fully representational but unmistakably windows of various shapes, mostly with metal grills over them.

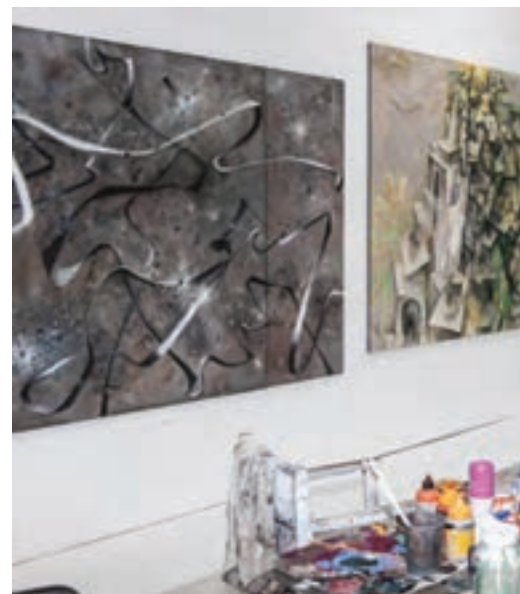
Those were inspired by a set of pictures he did some years ago as a set of variations on *Las Meninas* by Velazquez, sort of leapfrogging Picasso who was also inspired by the distinctly eccentric painting of the Spanish royal family. Though Mr Whishaw’s pictures may in turn have also been nudged into existence by his love of Spain and his love of Goya’s etchings and ‘black’ paintings.

But he takes his time. So his Kensington studio, which is part of his home, has a about eight or nine variants on that window theme. But there are also pictures which are very much more abstracted and are more landscapes, some with quite clear trees appearing in them. Some of those have a distinctly odd feel because they seem to have multiple viewpoints: one looking up and one down with correspondingly variant horizons.

A painting of a fragmented St Paul’s has a similar



Anthony Whishaw at work, looking like a Michelin man as he has “about nine layers of clothes on” in a wintery unheated studio in south London.





approach, with at the bottom a view from lying at the bottom of the front steps while another part shows the dome from above. This is part of another set of very different pictures in which he enjoys playing with point of view and the consequent optical illusions, to disorient the viewer. One set of pictures even has shaped canvases, some in plinked pairs, so one is never quite sure which is the forward one and which the back.

Even portraits, when one looks more closely, are in fact multiple images and sometimes multiple people.

Some of this work in progress is on the working wall because he has got stuck. He knows it is not quite right, or not quite finished, but is not quite sure how to improve it. It may take quite a long time before he spots the way out. "As I want to discover rather than copy or illustrate, the painting dictates its own future, in the sense that I cannot work on it unless it suggests the next step." That is the reason he has so many pictures in his studios – at any one time he may be working on a dozen or more and stands contemplating them, saying things like that picture seems to asking for something. "Often there are mental or emotional blocks and the work will remain dormant sometimes for weeks, months or even years."

On the other hand, for most of them completion will probably not be as long as the portrait he started painting of his landlord when as a young man he got a scholarship and worked in Spain for almost two years. That picture, of the batty proprietor of a sherry bodega and a crumbling chateau who spent his time driving nails into bits of wood and drinking prodigious quantities of fino, took fifty years to complete.

In fact Mr Whishaw had not one but three scholarships when he finished his training at the Royal College of Art. One was to go to Italy, one was a general help to work up a portfolio and one was from the Spanish government to work there. So he went to Italy, bought a Lambretta scooter, then in 1955 went to Spain with it and gravitated to the Cadiz area where he painted and started his portrait of the sherry-marinated landlord.

With his scholarship finished, he rode the scooter back to London and when he married his sculptor wife Jean Gibson, he took her on the scooter back to Spain for the honeymoon.

Inevitably he went into teaching – how is else a young artist to earn a living while he produces a portfolio, gets his name known and starts finding buyers? He taught variously in Watford, back at the Chelsea School of Art where he had been trained, and St Martin's. It was at first rather fun – "teaching is enjoyable because you meet other artists". But gradually it "got weighed down by bureaucracy and I did hardly any teaching".

For example, after he had seen, assessed and advised his allocation of around a dozen young artists, he had to write a

report on all the students' work. "That was enough to turn me right off." He is not too good at writing. He claims that is because although his mother rushed back to Britain to give birth so her son would not be obliged to do service in the Brazilian army, he was initially brought up back in Brazil and did not go to school until aged nine.

He does not come from an artistic family though his father doodled sketches of their Ascot hot water geyser. It was at school in England that his art master inspired him.

Fortunately by the time bureaucracy detached him from teaching, he was getting known. He had managed to get into an exhibition of Young Contemporaries which led to an offer to be represented by the Roland Browse & Delbanco gallery (now Browse and Darby) and some influential critics said nice things. "Terence Mullaly liked my work" and "John Berger wrote something". Mr Whishaw becomes wonderfully vague when asked how he managed to reach his current eminence.

He joined the Royal Academy in 1980 and has been a full RA since 1989. That very exclusive and limited membership puts him right at the top of his profession, as does his membership also of the London Group of distinguished artists. It is a long way from the early days.

His first studio in the 1960s was in a hall at the back of a church in Notting Hill. It was trifle hazardous as "people were firing air-gun pellets through the window and one learned to lie flat on the floor when that happened". But his wife worked with a potter who had a studio down a Kensington cul de sac.



All photographs: **photoBECKET**





It had originally been a studio for drawing horses, Mr Whishaw explains, which accounts for the huge doors.

When the potter retired she let the two young artists buy the premises “for what we could afford” because she wanted it to continue as an artists’ studio. Mr Whishaw’s wife died in 1991 but he has continued there ever since, though he also has an unheated studio in Bethnal Green for the really big pictures.

But his representation has been less constant. “I don’t stay long with galleries.” As he shifts his approach and his type of picture, Mr Whishaw moves out of the area of expected product that gallery’s customers have learned to expect and for which they go there to find the latest set of paintings. At 83 he is still changing and trying new approaches and does not expect to stop until physical incapacity prevents further work.

Left is Whishaw bundled against the elements, below in his heated Kensington studio.

