

Interview

Michael Peppiatt | Art Media Agency

After working for The Observer in Cambridge, you moved to Paris to work for the publication Réalités and, later, as the Paris correspondent for publications including The New York Times and The Financial Times. What drew you away to the city? How did it compare to Cambridge, or London? What did it offer in terms of your work as an art critic?

I went there because I was offered a job, it was as simple as that. I'd finished at Cambridge, and had spent a year in Spain: having glimpsed the country as a student and thought it was brilliant, I went back, and got a job reading books in English, French and German for a Spanish publisher, Seix y Barral, in Barcelona.

I managed to survive for a year before coming back - I didn't have a job and found all my friends were surging ahead. My impression is that I got the job at Réalités because I was a bit off-hand and superior - I didn't really want it, and had been happy in London. But I got the job, and there was not way I couldn't go - so I went.

I found Paris a pretty forbidding place - not very open or friendly. When I arrived, there was simply nobody I knew. Francis Bacon had said to me, "Do you know Giacometti?" (laughs), and of course, I didn't, and I was rather alarmed at the thought of meeting him. The only thing I had was a letter of introduction from Bacon, scrawled over a couple of pages of Paris Match. When I arrived I went - almost immediately - to his studio on the rue Hippolyte-Maindron, and walked round and round, not daring to knock on the door in case I disturbed the sculptor in the middle of some imperishable work.

But poor Giacometti had died the day I arrived in Paris, so there was no contact there. Gradually, I made my way as one does. I met a few people, and the people at Réalités were very pleasant and supportive, and I began to make myself a life there.

As a young writer, how did you meet artists? Was there a lot of hanging round outside studios, or did was it predominantly through interviews?

It did begin that way [doing interviews]. I'd done an issue of a magazine that doesn't exist any more called "Cambridge Opinion on Modern Art in Britain". Doing this, I'd met Bacon, Freud, Auerbach, Kitaj, Hockney - all of these people. And that gave me a sort of direction. My interest was compounded by my work on an arts magazine, and they made me their main arts writer - which was very nice! I got to go Rome to interview Besnard Balthus, when he had just been made director of the French Academy in Rome - it was all very impressive. That kind of thing got me going, and I began to get friends more my own age who were artists working around the city. So there were some famous artists, but there was also people struggling to establish a reputation.

The names of people you interviewed now makes for a fantastic - and rather intimidating - list.

I'm so glad (laughs). You don't see the pattern in your life until quite late on - at least I didn't. I was suitably nervous when I went to meet Balthus, and of course Bacon had been a formidable presence in my life, and continued to be a formidable presence until he died. I love talking to artists - drawing them out of themselves and letting them speak, I find it quite exciting to join in the excitement of someone who is creating a new language. And, of course, some artists more recalcitrant than others. But I like the artist writer relationship - and since I wanted to write, art seemed like a good platform.

Were there any particularly memorable encounters?

There was obviously Bacon. Giacometti was really important to me, because, although I didn't meet Alberto myself, I very nearly did. And because I failed to meet him, I followed where he left off, as it were: I met his widow Annette Giacometti and his brother Diego, who designed furniture, and who had helped Giacometti in the studio. That became a big part of my life, "pursuing" Giacometti: I did a book on Giacometti's studio, which came out two years ago, which was something I'd wanted to do all my professional life. I was lucky enough to be curating an exhibition on Giacometti, which facilitated the publication. Because that, for me, is a really seminal place, Giacometti's studio in the 20th century.

To what extent can writing be a helpful means of approaching art? Are interviews, or biographies, necessarily a helpful means of approaching an artist's practice?

I think it depends on each case. Sometimes artists are able – and willing – to take you directly into the heart of their work. Other artists are very dissembling; they don't want you to crack the code as it were. Somebody said "don't believe what an artist says, only what they do" - but it really depends on the artist.

Obviously I do think it's worthwhile, otherwise I wouldn't have spent most of my life doing it. I find it interesting, and I think other people find it interesting too; it's a look behind the scenes, and I think it can be very surprising. An artist can turn out to be someone who's quite different from what you might have imagined – their whole attitude might be very different to what you imagine it to be when looking at their work. And yes, you can view a meeting with an artist in isolation to their work - there's no reason not to. But I've always been fascinated by meeting artists in the studio: seeing how they work, what sort of techniques and tools they have, what they're reading, how they live.

When did you begin curating? And what's your approach – do you start with a central concept, or have a particular theory regarding the process?

Not really, no, I'm a fairly empirical person. But I do very often have a concept. I'm doing a Miro show at the moment, in two museums in Hamburg and Düsseldorf, for which the working theme is "Miro, a painter amongst poets". Literature was very important to the artist; he read a great deal and was very influenced by writing. He also formed a lot of friendships with writers - mainly with the surrealist poets, but also with poets from all over the world. And he did a number of fabulous books - he illustrated the poems of these poets. So this exhibition focuses on Miro's interaction with literature, and features some of the finest books he did with these poets, which are works of art in their own right.

So yes, there's a general idea- it's somewhat dictated by what you can actually borrow for an exhibition but it a basic concept at the beginning, which might get a little changed as one gets into the nitty gritty.

How do you select the artists you write about, or who feature in shows you curate?

They're the ones I like, the ones I admire – the ones I want to know more about really. But a lot of things in life are chance, and you make of them what you make of them. I'm just going out to Singapore, where I've written about quite a few artists whose work I've never written about before. In fact, that's why I took it on, because I hadn't put myself through that process.

Is it very difficult to comment on living contemporary artists, who perhaps don't have a lot of texts written on them?

It is in a way, but at the same time it's quite liberating, because you don't have that weight. I was very conscious, when I started to write about Giacometti, of everyone who had come before. I felt rather crushed by that – stimulated, but nevertheless, a bit overawed. When you've got a relatively blank sheet, it's much more liberating; it gives you more scope. And that might mean scope to get in wrong, but nevertheless, you're in virgin territory.

Does writing about artists who have already been the subject of extensive study not present an opportunity to rebel? To create your own response to their works?

Yes, to an extent. You sometimes feel that you have a particular take is not a very good word, or you have a particular sort of feeling or conviction about an artist – you try to make a new contribution.

You've spoken about your friendship with Francis Bacon. What difference does your proximity to an artist make to your understanding of their work? Does it complicate an understanding of their work or offer elucidation?

It does make it more complex, it also makes it more interesting. I'm interested in art, but I'm above all interest in life. Art, for me, is a good entrance point into life itself. So becoming closer to an artist – to their past and so on – makes the relationship more complex and interesting. Because, after all, art is about life, and that's really why it's interesting.

What are your current projects?

I'm beginning to write some memoirs – about some of the things you've been asking me about – but about life, the people I've met and the places I've been, and the things I've done – both in and out of the art world. That's probably the most important thing for me at the moment: to try and leave a record of what I've seen and done. Otherwise, the Art Plural project was very exciting, because it exposed me to a number of new artists. I found that very invigorating.

And challenging?

Yes because you realise there's a whole new world you're not aware of. But you know, I think most artists come out of tradition. They might challenge it, subvert it, or extend it, but they come out of tradition and they add to it.

How has the field in which you're working changed?

It's got much larger. When I started out in the early 60s the art world was comparatively tiny. There were 200 people, or a little more, in France, and then the same again in New York. It's vastly exploded now – there's one fair after another, one new art centre after another. I'm beginning to discover what's happening out in the East, where there are huge art fairs, and all these galleries – and then there's Hong Kong. It's an amazing sort of evolution.

And how has your work changed? Is the way you write or produce interviews different, or is it just the conversations and the people that have changed?

Well I hope I've got a bit better (laughs)! And, that's why I go on - trying to do what I do, but better. That's all one can do, and I'm delighted to still be doing it.