

ART WORLD

50 PAGES OF NEW WORK

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BOO RITSON
on painting people



Boo Ritson

"I stood in the bathroom, covered myself in paint and my husband took a photo... then I said, 'OK, now I'm going to paint you'."

BOO RITSON achieves a skewed take on the intersections between sculpture and painting, expressionism and realism by painting people and objects as forms of themselves. This was at its most literal in works such as a melon smashed on the gallery floor and then painted to confirm its appearance, or sticks overpainted with caricature bark patterns. She also crushed a Mini, repainted it so that it appeared new in its altered form, and exhibited the finished piece as a painterly sculpture. (2-7 PAGES) *Text: Gerry Jones and Val MacDonell*



Mini (2005)
crushed Mini and paint

Trail (2005)
plane tree, emulsion paint on wood,
52 x 48 x 38cm

Godfather (2006)
Giclée print, 95.7 x 76.5cm

How did you get the name Boo?

It's been a family nickname from when I was a baby.

What was your work like before you began painting objects, and how did you make the move to what you do now?

I trained as a sculptor, but something was missing – it was as if I had to choose against painting, which felt wrong. I guess that deep desire for painting led me to paint the sculptures I was making. When I finished the sticks [left], I whittled them and they came out as three separate colours – it was like painting by numbers, and seemed a way to address painting without feeling too ridiculous about it. I realised it was an image of the thing on top of the thing – image plus object. My interest is in what the thing actually is and how it addresses painting and sculpture.

Do you feel any other artists have foreshadowed your own approach?

A wide range from Bertrand Lavier, to Cecily Brown and Pop Art, especially Warhol and Oldenburg – and an eclectic mix of mainly painters rather than sculptors.

What made you turn to painting people?

It felt like a natural progression because I wanted something more directly figurative, so I used myself. You have a stupid thought and think you can't possibly do that, but it was Christmas Eve – I stood in the bathroom, covered myself in paint and my husband took a photo... and then I said, "OK, now I'm going to paint you". Then I went to the gallery and said, I think this is the way forward for me and I'm going to need to get a photographer with a really good digital camera to do it properly. That cost £750 per day, which was a lot of money for me, having just left college.

What does the process of painting a person involve?

I write stories – just for myself – to develop characters, then find a person who fits that

character. I cover them with barrier cream and dress them in a costume which I've made from charity shop stuff. My assistant, George Buckland, hands me the paint from 20–50 pots on the go at a time and sprays water to keep it wet – I've got 15–20 minutes before the paint dries. My photographer, Andy Crawford, takes anything from six to 40 shots; there'll only ever be one that really works, where they sit like a statue and the painting is right.

Who are your models, and do you see them as subjects, or as the characters?

My friends, family and other artists are the models. And now I'm also painting commissions, which is harder as I'm more comfortable with people I know. I see them as who they might be if they weren't the people I know, their alter-egos.

Is it the process of painting that's important to you, or just the result?

I never thought I was interested in performance separately, but I think the event is becoming increasingly of importance to me. Before this work I did a performance in Amsterdam in which I dressed up as a cowboy, played *Amazing Grace* and *Desperado*, then sat in the installation for half an hour. And next year I've hired a room in the red light district and I'm going to sit, painted, in the window! And that will probably become a video.

You mention Pop Art, but you use paint in a really expressive manner. Why?

The process is so quick, it lends itself to gesture – though I am working on a print project with Alan Christea. I'll take a picture of a much-simplified still life and paint on top of it. One thing I hope to achieve working like this is a reference to the edges within the work, whereas in the portraits I'm painting beyond the image that you see and choosing the edges afterwards. I think that some of the thinking for this work did come originally from looking at Chuck Close.

And now you're producing still life works – though still with people in...

Yes, the same characters come back as part of their lap. I'm hoping to combine all three elements working in sections. I've always been interested in how I can fuse the figures with the backgrounds, in the same way that the still life elements recede into the clothes. And the floor is painted as well as the wall in the full-length pieces. The approach lends itself to painted sets.

Can you say something about the scale of your work?

Yes: they are life-size plus twelve inches for a full-length figure, because that's what you need to give the appearance of life-size – if you do actual life-size, the eye sees it as smaller.

You mentioned your writing. Do you publish your story fragments?

I've only used one so far, as background to my show *Hot Dogs and Heroes*. I did an English Literature degree, so writing has always been there.

And what do you read?

In the last year, exclusively trashy American murder novels, which are brilliant at setting a scene in five seconds flat. I enjoy reading them to relax, but they also feed into my work. I like *Raymond Chandler*, too. But I'm less interested in the English equivalents. I think because my characters relate to the received stereotypes of Hollywood films and American culture. And American characters feel more vivid to me, the English ones seem comparatively cramped and internal in their fictional worlds.

Is that reflected in your choice of music?

Yes, I love Elvis, Johnny Cash, Neil Diamond – the open road and story-telling.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

A Warhol *Electric Chair*. ☺

CV Born, 1969, Surrey, UK. Studied, Royal College of Art, UK. Lives and works, London and Chesham, UK. Represented, David Risley Gallery, London.



- 1 **Hitman** (2007)
Giclée print, 216 x 101.6cm
- 2 **Irena** (2006)
Giclée print, 208.3 x 108cm
- 3 **Elena** (2006)
Giclée print, 190.4 x 121.8cm



Donut (2007), Giclée print, 95.3 x 127.8cm



Jesse Burger (2007), Giclée print, 95.3 x 127.8cm



- 1 Slot-Player (2006), Giclée print, 95.7 x 76.7cm
 - 2 Girlfriend (2006), Giclée print, 95.7 x 76.7cm
 - 3 Miss Five-Palms Nevada (2006), Giclée print, 114 x 81.3cm
 - 4 White Swimmer (2007), Giclée print, 95.7 x 76.7cm
- Opposite: Hooker (2007), Giclée print, 114 x 81.3cm

