

One & Other Project

Okay my name is Tim Jones and I'm conducting this interview on behalf of the One & Other project in Trafalgar Square London and the Wellcome Trust if I could ask you to tell me your name, your age and where you come from please?

My name is Mike Richards, my age is 49 and I live in Bath but I did spend most of my life in London.

Okay thank you very much. When was it you first found out about the One & Other project?

It was actually on my birthday which is the 21st of April when I saw quite a lot of promotion in, I think it was the BBC website for the project, so I thought great it sounds wonderful I'd heard of Antony Gormley before and the fact it was seen to be coming into my existence on my birthday seemed fate so I decided to apply.

And how did you feel when you received the email or the telephone call to say you had a slot?

Elated. I thought fantastic it's a bit like winning the lottery; it's an amazing feeling. Immediately in the hours after that after I emailed everybody I know and phoned a few people there was a sudden shock when I thought I'm up there for an hour I don't know what I'm going to do and then it was a kind of a busy couple of months to come up with precisely with what I'm going to do with my hour because it's a privilege to spend an hour up there. I've been coming to Trafalgar square since I was a boy and seeing the tree go up at Christmas time and things like that, it's a wonderful place so I thought I'd never get the chance to be up there so I wanted my hour to be about something.

So what is it you are going to do when you are up there?

Well I'm going to do a character which I developed about six months ago called Captain Teapot. He didn't spring to mind completely formed, he came to me in an image one Thursday afternoon and he's a classic British gent. He wears a bowler hat and a pinstripe suit and he has a cricket bat and drinks lots of tea but he's also about good manners and being nice to people and bringing back some old fashioned values and just being proud of kind of who I am and who, what Britain is all about really I think there's a lot of negativity about in the world today but I think Britain is still a pretty great place, still got some problems, but it's not all bad so we need to sing its praises every once in a while and that's what Captain Teapot tries to do I guess.

So what stuff are you going to do and what are you taking up onto the plinth? What are you going to be doing for the duration of the hour?

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Well I'll be taking up onto the plinth obviously my bowler hat, my Union Jack and a cricket bat and umbrella because a British gent always has to have an umbrella and a couple of tea pots and one of them has some wheels which I have stuck to the bottom and leads so I'll be walking my teapot around the plinth like a little dog. I'll be having a nice cup of tea or two, obviously it's very British, I'll be attempting a world record which I haven't had confirmation from Guinness but it's the distance travelled by a tea bag once you've hit with a cricket bat so I'll be attempting that as well and also towards the end of last month, I guess beginning of this month, I thought I got some physical things to do on the plinth but I don't know if I got enough to make an hour and I'd like to recite something so I was looking for some classic British poems to recite and I read some Bachman and Wordsworth and things like that but I had a bit of a strange moment while I was researching and decided I'll write something myself and suddenly one afternoon I wrote three poems in the space of a few hours and I've written another four since but they are all about classic British things like drinking tea. There's a cricket dream where I'm playing cricket with WJ Grace and Geoff Boycott and other famous names against the Ozzies and there's a village fete which goes horribly wrong which I was inspired by a fete I went to at the beginning of the month where it poured down with rain, all classic Brit things really, slightly tongue in cheek more [?] than anything else I guess but I've been reciting them and practising over the last sort of week or two. It's been an interesting journey for me and learning more about myself as well as doing this project ... I'd never written poetry before, I may never write it again but at least is something that I have discovered about myself which is interesting.

And can you tell us a bit about yourself, about your background, what you do?

Okay, well... most of my life I've been working in IT in central London. I grew up in Battersea, Wandsworth and Croydon and I came to work in central London in IT for some government departments when I was just a teenager and I stayed working in London for about twenty years and about twelve years ago I got kind of wonder lust and slightly decided I needed to do something a bit different and ended up leaving and moving up to Bath, discovering different places around the country really with the job that I was doing at the time and Bath seemed a little bit strange to me as coming from London it was a bit quiet and it was a bit mellow and it didn't really seem to be much of a feel about it but as I became engrossed into it I sort of learnt to love the place and despite having come back again to London for a few years for work I've recently, two years ago, gone back to Bath and I really love it. It's got a great feel, people are friendly, you can talk to people at bus stops. I met a number of friends at the train station in twenty years travelling on the trains into London I never talked to anybody on the train so it's got just a great sort of feel about it and everybody is quite helpful and there is quite a contingent of people in Bath who are a bit strange as well so Captain Teapot doesn't really necessarily stand out that much in Bath but nobody kind of really looks at me differently when I go wondering around with my bowler hat on and my union jack and my cricket bat it seems quite normal and I quite like that.

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Can you tell us then, you developed this character...

Yes, 6 months ago.

Yes, in what context was that developed?

Well, I stopped working. I became unemployed, I guess, in January and I'm still unemployed now but a few weeks into my unemployment I met a couple of friends for lunch one day and we talked about art and what wasn't art. A typical conversation which I think it's been had thousands of times before and when the conversation was over and I was on my way back home I was struck by the feeling that I wanted to do something artistic but I don't paint and I don't draw not very well anyway not since I was at school but I do know a little bit about art and I've been to lots of galleries in the past and have been an admirer of art for a number of years although it's not something I grew up with as a boy, never went into an art gallery until I was eighteen and that was the National Gallery across the road. And then suddenly one sort of afternoon a couple of days after the conversation I had been thinking an image came to me which was of a typical British guy in a pin stripe suit jumping up in the air with a cricket bat smashing a teapot in front of the Royal Crescent in Bath and that seemed to me quite a strong image and once I had that one lots of other images kept kind of flowing really and my neighbour Neil, who's here with me today, he's a photographer part-time and I went to see him and I said if we went to the park and I did this could you capture this image and he laughed at first but then he came with me one sort of Friday afternoon a week or so later and we did a series of photographs with me sneaking up a lot of teapots from behind a tree with my cricket bat, leaping in the air and having tea and things like that in the park and on the basis of that we got some prints made up and it's gone from there really, we've had about four or five sessions so far we've done some work for a local charity who wanted some different artwork for an art trail they are making around Bath, we've never done anything like this in the past and thought we'll give it a go and the charity accepted our work and it's great to be involved in something kind of worthwhile and interesting and kind of creative which is just totally the opposite of what I was doing for the preceding kind of thirty odd years I guess.

So what things would you say are most important to you at the moment in your life?

People, friends and family are very important. Going on, I guess, to discovering things about myself, about the world, see what I can do next since I actually created Captain Teapot. I did spend a little bit of time helping out at a local art gallery in Bath and on the back of that I'm actually organising a young artists' exhibition myself. I managed to get some space in an empty retail slot in Bath in November and so far I've invited twenty-five young artists who come and exhibit and they are all really kind of quite pleased, it's going to be quite an event but I've never done anything like that before, it's still all new to me but it feels good. It feels like I'm doing something kind of useful and interesting and every day is a bit of an adventure which I'm enjoying, I'm

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looking at all the unemployment really, that's a kind of a big opportunity to do something different. I could be staying at home everyday watching TV and drinking tea but that would be a bit boring so I'm enjoying this more than I've enjoyed my real work, it's been fun.

And what hopes do you have for the future?

I don't know. I'm not looking too far ahead at the moment, the next few months will be busy arranging the exhibition and once that's over it will be Christmas and I'm just seeing where I go from there. I'm just meeting lots of interesting people on the way and opportunities seem to be cropping up completely unexpectedly so I don't know precisely where I'm going yet but I quite like that as well so who knows.

And, going back to Trafalgar Square, you mentioned Trafalgar Square and remembering Trafalgar Square as a child.

Yes.

Can you recount some of those moments?

Yes, certainly. I mean the strongest images that I have from here were at Christmas time. At that time I was living as a young boy in Battersea and when I was about eight or ten we moved to Wandsworth but all through those years we used to come up at Christmas time particularly every year, there was a small nativity scene in the corner of Trafalgar square with kind of cart wooded pieces of donkeys and a baby Jesus in the manger and those kind of things and always a huge tree which Norway donates every year as a result of kind of the help Britain gave during world war two and there's a big choir and carol singing and that's kind of marvellous kind of event and I've been to that event a few times as an adult as well, but as a boy it just seemed like a magical wonderful place because it's a big open square, all the buildings are beautiful and you just suddenly come up kind of from where I was in Battersea in Wandsworth, narrow streets and fairly drab looking grey buildings and you suddenly come into this wide open space and there's a statue of Nelson up on the top of this huge pillar and it's just awe inspiring I found it as a boy obviously from here we used to jump on a route master bus and we would probably go up to Oxford street and see the Christmas lights and things like that looking in the window of Selfridges at Christmas time they had a thunderbird lady Penelope's car and lots of things in the window at Christmas but that and coming to see the nativity are some of the strongest images I have from my kind of real sort of boyhood I guess from the age of about four until I was about ten every year it was a kind of strong thing doing a family kind of outing.

And you mentioned the commute as well from South London into central London on the train.

Yes.

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Can you recount some of those?

Yes.

For the record?

Yes, most of them were either very, very late or very, very early in the morning so sitting on a train squashed up with hundreds of other people and everybody looking mildly unhappy and depressed that they are about to go off to work. It's strange to me now I did that for so many years from various places around London. I lived in Brixton for a while and came on the tube. I lived in Croydon for a while and came on the train but everybody seemed to be generally quite unhappy about what they were about to go and embark on doing. I did quite enjoy my job, I thought I was doing something that was quite useful over time and there was always an edge when I would get to the bridge, I would be coming from Croydon and we'd go through Clapham Junction and then we'd go over the railway bridge, over the Thames and that was for me when things would kind of wake up a little bit because I'd see the kind of buildings in the distance, you could see the top of the Houses of Parliament and Battersea power station and all those kind of buildings would suddenly come into view and I loved the river. The Thames is a beautiful kind of winding river and it's always seemed a lovely spot, I don't know whether it's pure coincidence but it's probably more in my head but I always had this image of whenever I see the Thames the sun shines a bit brighter and it seems a bit like a magical place to come into but I do love the centre of London and it's got wonderful things around it, all sorts of things you can do. I don't think you could ever get bored with it but sometimes it's nice to go and find some peace and quiet that's not anything you are getting from London any longer. It's, yes, always busy here, I was surprised at how many people are in the square even at three o'clock, four o'clock this morning. It's still quite a busy place. I used to come around here twenty odd years ago. I used to do night shifts in a place not so far from here and at three or four in the morning. I'd come out for a walk, stretch my legs and walk by the Thames and up to the square and it would be completely deserted, no night buses back then, the occasional cab but that was it and now it's almost as alive at night as it is during the day, it's quite strange but interesting.

And how does it feel to be one of 2400 to get to spend an hour on top of the Fourth Plinth?

It was great. I mean it was a real privilege ... there's a part, a thing at the back of my mind which is that I'm going to suddenly be on the plinth and I'm going to looking down and see myself naked and then I'll wake up and it's all been a horrible dream but I'm really looking forward to it. It's been an interesting couple of months since I was told I had the spot but it's not anything that you could in your remotest imagination imagining happening. Before Antony Gormley's project I'd walked past the plinth and driven past the plinth hundreds, probably thousands of times, in the



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past and looked up there but never imagined that I'd be up there myself. That is amazing and the opportunity ... I don't see how anybody could turn it down really and anybody who got the opportunity would have to be over the moon that the idea they are up there for even just an hour it's an amazing chance, so I'm really looking forward to it and I don't have any nerves at the moment, I'm not really the classic epitome of the cool, calm, collected English gentleman all the time but I got this kind of adrenaline feel that's kind of a tingle and I can't wait to get up there. I'm sure I won't want to come down; I'll take some supplies with me and maybe a few extra biscuits. I'm sure you'll whisk me off at six.

Great, thank you very much.

You are welcome, thank you.