

One & Other Project

My name is Michelle Owoo and I'm carrying out this interview on behalf of the Wellcome Trust today, the purpose of the research is to compile a contemporary portrait of Britain, the day is now the 24th of July 2009 and the time is 1.21 a.m., could you tell me your name, you age and where you come from please?

My name is Thomas De Freston, I'm 26 years old and I come from Christ College Cambridge.

How are you?

Oh how am I? Sorry hmm well slightly nervous but, yes, I'm OK, I think.

What are you nervous about, anything in particular?

Bizarrely for someone who I don't think likes public, hmm, attention that I'm going up on the plinth in my socks and boxers, hmm, I'm not quite sure I ended up in this scenario [giggles].

Could you just describe what you are wearing?

OK.

What you've got written on you?

I've written, hmm, in theory my notes are not to be seen, my notes from my reading and then, I have a very crudely made gold paper crown, a white mask as in a painted on mask, red boxes and then pink trimmed socks and a crude wooden sword.

Why have you chosen this particular outfit?

Hmm, it's quite a direct reference to a lot of the males that I use in my art work where hopefully the, there's nothing more pathetic than a man in socks and boxers, so it should strip these characters of any potential for nobleness or heroism. And they become these kind of ludicrous figures.

What's the link between that and your artwork, how does that feature in your art work?

Hmm, my art work is very heavily concerned with the history of things such as heroism and the history of painting itself and I suppose in the context of this particular performance the link with someone like the National Gallery is quite important and quite a lot of my work draws from works there.

What type of work does it draw on?

Hmm, from I suppose what we call a painterly history so Titian through to Delacroix, Rueben's and Rembrandt, Jacques Louis David, Géricault and I suppose right on through to the painters of today, but all from that history of figurative painters.

One & Other Project

So what's your academic background?

Hmm I studied fine art at Leeds Metropolitan then History of art at Cambridge for a bit now I'm back holding the Levi Plum visual art studentship at Christ [college].

What does that involve, tell me more about that role?

Literally, which is perfect for an artist, it involved giving me a studio space, pay me a stipend, I think they call it in posh terms for the year, and just let me get on with it and there are no pressures, no expectations or no like clear remits of what the work has to be about, they give you a year to breath and get on with your work.

And how do you describe your work, your approach to the subjects that you..?

They are meant to be tragic-comic but I'm not sure if they are particularly funny or particularly tragic [chuckles]. They are meant to be contemporary responses, continuous histories in painting.

Are you showing your work at the moment?

Actually I have an upcoming exhibition, 'Reflections', at Chris college from the 5th of September then a couple of large London shows from the end of September through to November. One is in St. John's Wood and one is in east London.

How did you hear about this project?

Hmm, actually through the company called Bolton and Queen because I've been in touch with them slightly in connection with the Titian campaign. So I'd heard of the project through the news, then they contacted me directly to be involved.

Tell me more about the Titian campaign?

Oh, as you know there's two Titian paintings which were in the National Gallery in Edinburgh, which were privately owned but loaned and then the collection was sold. So the National in Edinburgh and London had the option to buy them both so the Titian campaign was designed to raise £50 million for each painting so they've raised the £50 million for *Diana and Actaeon* [painting] which is phase one which then buys them. I think 18 months to raise 50 million for [companion piece] and then if they raise that they get the rest of the collection for free. Not for free as such, but I think the two. In terms of, obviously, people moan about whatever term you want to, us melt down, recession and 'how can we spend 50 million pound on a work of art?' I think their market value is something around 3 million so it's a bit of a bargain.

Why do you believe they should be kept up?

I'm very selfish [inaud] as a painter probably they are more important than Titian in the history of painting you can draw I mean, the arguments, the art minister was arguing we should be investing money in young emerging artists but the ability to have collections of great work of arts which you can draw,, from be inspired by, is

One & Other Project

probably more important than chucking money at universities and certain art course[s], which you could argue, they are important in their function anyway. And I think, and also, particularly there were examples a few years ago with Raphael's *Madonna of the paint* [?] which probably isn't so important a Raphael's work whereas Titian *Diana and Actaeon* [painting] is probably up there in his top 10 works so to be able to keep it in the country is crucial I think.

Do you have a favourite painting?

A favourite painter?

Painting or painter.

Oh, painter, really boringly it is Titian, it isn't just about coincidence but either Titian or Rembrandt. Probably my favourite ever painting is Titian's *Tarquin and Lucretia* [1571] in Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

Tell me a bit more about what you are actually going to do with your hour when you are up there on the plinth.

OK so originally I was going to be a homage to Caravaggio['s] *David and Goliath* [1609-1610] which is where the whole socks and boxers emerges from. But that it goes further; there was this drawing I've done of, taken from a Jack Louis David['s] painting of Napoleon, when Napoleon crowned himself and that was never used for the final painting of the crowning of Joseph because they thought it would be too egotistical, hence they showed the crown of Josephine. So this idea of the kind of overly powerful character who is both the giver and receiver of power through my own art work. And then when I rethought back to do the idea of things which was Nelson's Column, I suddenly thought it would be an interesting idea if I became Napoleon for an hour and even though obviously Napoleon himself wasn't involved with the original battle of Trafalgar this idea, that I've written, turned and I'm going to lead a battle against Nelson and that we will, our aim is to meet, lead this imaginary army to destruction and downfall.

Is this a total departure for you from painting to live art performance?

I think it's quite a bit departure. I normally have this process where I do these performances where I do get photographs that lead to paintings but they are normally in the privacy of a studio with perhaps one or two models and they are perhaps there to, like, mutate certain images and evolve them to a new point but obviously done live is a departure and the fact they are there for us to have a performance development rather than looking for still images in a photographic form, yes it is quite a nerve wrecking shift. I don't think I should [do] anything but paint but I'm about to [chuckles].

Are you going to do anything after you've taken part in this, are you going to extend that into anything else?

One & Other Project

I think I'll see how it goes, but I think it could be quite interesting to be staging some of these performances now live. In terms of again, there is always the painting but as a, I suppose, a direct way to evolve the idea, it's not in the same safety net of a studio so perhaps organising a few similar things would be of interest and each time, perhaps responding to the context of the place in which it exists, hence this time your Napoleon was attacking Nelson.

Do you think you might do some more site responsive ones?

I think so, yes. I think I'd particularly like to go to places where there's a certain grand history there. So ideally I quite like to do one in Cambridge either at Christ [college] or outside the Fitzwilliam museum. Whether I will get permission or not, actually you need the permission, and that's part of what you use a performance for. But I think with all this work, what I might start to do is get other people to act them out so I'm more directing in the performance and, particularly, this is probably a limit to my acting ability, they are very low [chuckles].

How did you feel when you heard you had a place on the plinth?

I think I was slightly surprised because it was a speculative application just because of the numbers game, which normally goes by the logic of a name out of a hat and then I just I didn't really think, it is one of those things you think is going to happen so you are put off, and put off, and it was only yesterday when I suddenly thought 'Oh I'll be stood up there, being looked at'. Or not looked at, because it's 2 in the morning and I didn't quite know what the numbers would be.

How would you describe yourself as a person, how would you paint a picture of yourself?

How do I paint a picture of myself? I think I would put in that when you have to put the 3 words [on the One & Other web profile] painterly, beady and stubborn [giggles] how would I paint?... I would normally say I'm quite introverted, it is quite particular. This is probably quite an extroverted performance as well and I think my paintings are probably quite extroverted so I'm probably moving more into the ground of what happens within my paintings, I'm not sure how to describe myself probably it would be more accurate how other people describe me.

Have you got any friends or supporters coming down tonight?

About 6 to brave the evening, yes, it's cold they might have left by the time I finish, I've got about 3 who are London based and 3 have come down from Cambridge.

Does Antony Gormley's interest in democratising art, does that play, has that played any part in your decision in taking part in this project?

Not really, I actually think I might be wrong. I think the more people kind of ignore any of ideas or aims and just think there's an hour on this plinth do what I want. Actually the project then starts to become interesting and then probably bizarrely it links back to his ideas of democratising and becoming a portrait of the country. But I actually

One & Other Project

think, because he talks about this idea of giving people autonomy, but I think over and above, there is this voice of his that says that things he wants, to be aware that the opposite happens. I'm still kind of thinking I'm an Antony Gormley who stood up there in some form or another, I think it's, well, again it's getting plenty of attention and that can only be a good thing.

Going back to what you said earlier, you mentioned you had some notes written.

Yes.

On your own body and some writings you brought along can you explain what those are.

OK. So the idea is that I'm obviously leading this attack against Nelson as a statue so he's going to be the ultimate stoic hero because he just ignores everything I throw at him, because he's a statue. So I wanted this, like, cyclical patterns where I keep leading these attacks and he keeps ignoring me and I get more and more frustrated so a bit like, I think I made this thing a couple of weeks ago. A bit like waiting for god where you have this performance as your own narrative and just the same thing keeps happening over and over again and hopefully the kind of tragic comic aspect is the 'it's 2 or 3 in the morning', you are obviously not Napoleon, Nelson's obviously a statue and you keep leading this attack. So I think it is important I remain deadly serious even though I am aware that it's not serious. So the things such as 'I'm leading an attack', so that the word attack will be repeated 10 times over a megaphone, and then the phrase 'retreat'. So every phrase has its opposition, so you are locked in this cycle that actually never gets anywhere. You still end up at the same point and by the end, by the time I got to the end of all of them, the end is victory and surrender. You then collapse and the whole thing starts again and I start in this jacket as one of my messengers so the messenger kind of introduces Napoleon and the messenger introduces each way of attack even though each one is the same.

What impact do you think standing on the plinth will have?

For.. for people viewing, or for myself? Hmm, I think it just provides I'm supposed, I'm quite selfish and literally my only concern is my painting and the painting that gets produced. So I just think it provides an avenue to explore things and other modes of discussion even if it is an absolute failure and luckily the friends I've got coming, for instance, are quite honest and they just said they would never do anything like that, never do something like that again, that will probably tell me something about the way I work and the way my ideas get processed, hopefully it won't be an absolute failure but, I kind of think it can't be a failure because it's meant to be ridiculous. So if I fell absolutely flat on my face, it still has got that element of the failure that [incomp] success I suppose.

What else is important in your life would you say?

Very obvious things such as friends and family. I'm quite obsessed with my painting, I love my sports, I love cricket and rugby which probably doesn't go hand in hand

One & Other Project

with art all the time. I quite like my poetry I'm a bit of a John Keats obsessive, I can't think of anything else I feel very done/down [???] now.

Which of Keats work do you like?

I think that he's like the ultimate Romantic; he still believes in ideals such as the ability of art to provide moments of transcendence from reality and even though I actually now have a cynical side of things, what's not true, and it fails, it's quite nice to hold on to this idealistic romanticism and perhaps he lived in an age where he can be unblemished and there isn't the cynicism that's been developed over the last hundred fifty, a hundred and sixty years. And on a really superficial level his writings are utterly beautiful, which kind of fits in with the whole romantic element.

Can you remember any paintings when you were younger that you saw that had an effect on you, was there anything that made you decided that you wanted to paint?

I think one of the first paintings to really significantly hit me in the stomach, where I wasn't going around thinking I should like this because of these reasons, I've been told was Rembrandt's *Late Self Portrait*, by coincidence, in the National [gallery] and it's got this strange self-reflexive glow from the inside that comes out at you almost as if there was a candle behind the painting. And, I didn't, I couldn't fully put my fingers at the time, but literally that kind of gut wrenching feeling, rather than me wanting for me to go read the label and see what it was, like I didn't care about any of that, it was just like [a] really intense connection to it. And the next, probably work of art that did that was, Rothko's murals at the Tate Modern and I think they had a very, very similar impact probably because of similar reasons, but at the time it was just like 'these are amazing' and I didn't really know why.

Your work as you described it seems to be, to suggest it is quite rooted in the past, how do you relate it to contemporary art?

Quite closely, firstly I think my connection to the past. Then, hopefully, becomes quite contemporary in the kind of inferences, if even it is [a] very contemporary idea of 'nothing is original'; there's kind of nowhere to go. That we mournfully or nostalgically look to the past, because obviously if I'm saying drawing from Velasquez or Jacques Louis David which has very serious, big important themes, I'm very aware that my work is empty of all of those. And actually it becomes at best slightly comic, it's kind of empty of its grandeur, if you like, but there is a lot of people [who] keep saying the idea that there's not much painting around, much figurative painting particularly painters such as the [incomp] school of Raoul [incomp] feature, Daniel Richter not part of that school but connected people such as Peter Doig as well, his work probably sits somewhere very, very loosely in a similar area.

Anything else you'd like to say.

Not that I can think of, no.

Thank you very much.



One & Other Project

Thank you.

END OF RECORDING