

Art, Human and Nature – Mark Gisbourne in Interview with Thomas Rusche

TR: Mark, you are one of the most authoritative and successful art historians and curators in Europe. Can you remember your first encounter with art, and what moved you towards your career?

MG: *Yes, I remember it well. As a child from six or seven years I was often given jigsaw puzzles, as either Christmas and Birthday gifts, and I particularly liked the puzzles that were reproductions of art works. As I remember it they were often Academy (what the French call “Pompier” paintings), or Pre-Raphaelite type paintings, or sometimes Netherlandish School paintings like Van Eyck or Roger van der Weyden, often of religious subject matter and I was fascinated with the different colours and composition, and my reassembling assembling the figurative images sometimes with up to two thousand pieces. Alongside these were more chocolate box type images. But I liked pattern also and maybe in retrospect I learnt a strong early sense of having visual acuity—sensitivity towards looking. It was only when an adult and much later after I left the Franciscan Order that I became an art historian in my thirties. But art had always fascinated me and of course in religious life I saw great masterpieces in situ in places like Assisi and Rome. At the same time I became familiar with the traditions of religious iconography. It is the reason why when I went to the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, that I gravitated towards the Early Renaissance and might have become a Renaissance art historian. But in the background lecture series, and supplementary to your special course studies, we were required at that time to attend the daily lecture series that covered the whole history of art of the Western Civilisation. Things have changed a bit with the global viewpoint. I went into modern and contemporary when I moved to the doctoral level of research, studying earlier periods sometimes felt like ‘dead man’s shoes’.*

TR: Your brilliant knowledge repertoire covers many centuries of art history. Which era would you describe personally as the most challenging and why?

MG: *The fact that I have an overview from the Parthenon to Pop Art, is due in large measure to the system that existed at the Courtauld Institute of Art. It is an extraordinary place that everyone who studies there on the one hand loves for its high educational standard, by at the same time is critical of its selective elitism as a specialist institute with small classes of sometimes only three to five students. So much of the Anglo-Saxon establishment in the running museums and institutions from the British Museum to the Metropolitan are often ex-Courtauld graduates. Some we often think of it as a sort of WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) mafia. This said it gave a high priority to what might be called creating within its students a strong sense of visual literacy. I love many periods of art history and I do not privilege one over another, except to say as an art historian to be confined to a narrow period of art can be isolating from the wider realities of the modern world.*

TR: In the Golden Age there was for the first time in the history of art a flood of images and paintings that were accessible and able to be owned by many people. Could we classify the state of contemporary art today in a similar way?

MG: *Yes, it was certainly the case that a new mercantile class emerged in the Dutch Golden Age, but few were sophisticated enough to buy paintings, or could afford them for that matter. However, if you mean the dissemination of images for popular consumption, things like inexpensive prints and woodcuts, this began in the fifteenth century and was speeded up with the advent of printing over the next two hundred years. Yet, it is the case that with the advances of mercantile capitalism and the art market that emerged in the seventeenth century, many more people had access to and acquired art works of every persuasion. But that also has to be seen in the context of expanded world trade. A comparison with today is therefore difficult, not least demographically, the total*

population of Europe was seventy million, today the population is ten times that so it is difficult to compare. I would say this there is a passion for art today that is clearly commensurate if not greater than the seventeenth century Golden Age. But any advance in the acquisition of art works, be they fine or decorative arts, is closely mirrored the role that is played by the increased qualities of contemporary education.

TR: Visual art has influenced fashion through the centuries, and there are modes of fashion modes that are greatly influenced by art movements, or even fashions actually coined by artists?

MG: *This is a very appropriate question in the week following the death of David Bowie, a man who clearly had a profound influence on fashion, art, and music. It is true that Warhol, Hamilton, and any number of Pop artists had a great influence on fashion in the 1960s. But this was not new because the Romantics, whether poets or painters, also influenced fashion in their day. There is a long tradition of 'fops' in the eighteenth century, and 'dandies' in nineteenth century, and this runs right through to the 'teddy boys', in the 50s, the Mods and Rockers in the 60s, the 'Glam Rock' and 'Punk' of the 70s, the 'New Romance' look of the 80s, and so on through to today. In the interactive so-called post-modern age, whether speaking of music, art, fashion, film, they all bleed into one another and traditional boundaries have become porous. Notwithstanding the undeniable power of modern marketing, the idiosyncratic and hybrid viewpoint of some artists and musicians, often today cross-ethnically derived they generate new ideas. While classic style still retains its status, one nonetheless still the effects of these subtle fashion inflections.*

TR: The new SØR Journal has the motto 'Art and Nature' 'how do you think they relate to each other—both today and in the past?

MG: *The issue of Art and Nature is extremely complex to define. We can speak of human nature, but I do not think that is what is intended here. I think Hegel was wrong to elevate Art above Nature, while recognising the obvious power of natural beauty through landscape and the environment. I would say in line with Kierkegaard that the responsible language of art is an aesthetic language, and the necessary language of nature is ethical. This means the natural world and the life forms in it, are something to be morally husbanded and nurtured. What we take from that world ethically we should replace, it is with climate change the most pressing issue of our age. But Art is not Nature since it is born of mental and visual transformation, whereas nature's systems left alone are inbuilt, animals have their instincts. We can certainly gain great insights from observing the natural world, and in that respect the clothes we wear should be the product of natural organic materials, or at least ecologically derived. It may be an old fashioned viewpoint on my part, drawn also, perhaps, from a religious sensibility, that mankind is something greater in its potential as against the forces of nature. To quote Nietzsche's aesthetic bifurcation, I would say that art's relationship to nature has to be Apollonian (harmonious and interdependent), but this said so much creative art of the last hundred years has been born of the Dionysian impulse (the disordering of the senses).*

TR: In your next art historical book or monograph you may write for any number of artists affording them some kind of written elevation to their work. What criteria do you have for selecting to write on an artist? What do you need from artists in order to write a text for them?

MG: *The criteria is simple, does the art interest me. But then comes the question of what do I mean by 'interest me'? It surely does not mean do I like it? It is rather a question of whether I can learn something further through the process of writing about the art works in question, and I don't always know if that will be the case when I start out. I have often written texts about artist's work that I thought had great depth when I began, and was to be an exciting discovery only to be disappointed. Conversely, I have written on some artist's whose work I was querulous about to begin with, and thereafter found an inner quality that delighted me as a result. Writing is process, not everything I*

write is good. It is always I hope up to a professional competent standard, but like all writing on art it is extremely transitory. When I read criticism written by me twenty years ago, at which time I was President of the Art Critics Association for Great Britain, I wrote for three art journals every month. I now shiver and quickly put it down. It is generally the case that nearly all writing on art like most lebensmittel has a very short shelf life.

TR: In one of your recent texts you wrote for the monographic essay on the artist BEZA. You wrote intensively dealing with the topic "man and nature." What was challenging about it?

MG: *I think in that case I was thinking so much about the natural world, but about the inner nature of BEZA as an artist. Her work is very physical and related to the body, hence when speaking of her landscape works like *panta rhei* I linked it to the animated aspects of Nature, using terms 'serpent-like surface to the water', sensuous and fluid, and drawing similes with her body-based poses as subject matter. Talking about flow, flux and physical change, also evoked the fact that BEZA has a powerfully present sense of her womanliness, and of the Gaia principles that govern her interiorised chthonic nature.*

TR: In some respects BEZA deals with quite traditional subject matter, with religious subject matter. In the present age this is seen as almost a taboo subject, in what ways today do you think that the spiritual in art remains relevant and meaningful?

MG: *Well even the sceptics of today are drawn, when faced with life's ultimate mystery, and retreat toward Voltaire's 'If God does not exist, we need must have the necessity to invent him'. But for all the fact that religious art and its traditional subject matter is leavened with sentimentalised layers of historical repetition, it still retains the power in a wider sense to address the fundamental issues of our everyday life. While I am aware of the present fundamentalist revival in Islam, and 'happy clappy' born-against Pentecostal or Christian movements, they lack the subtlety to produce great insight about art. A true religious art is the product of inner reflection and interior depth, and this does not today always have to be expressed within the institutional structure of a designated building. In any event the Church as we must understand it, is the world not a building. There has been some very interesting sacred art over the last hundred years, particularly that which began with the Dominicans in the 1930s, in France. Pere Marie Alain Couturier commissioned supposed non-believers like Matisse, Bonnard, and French Communist painters produced some profound works at Assy and the Vence Chapel of Matisse is a interior masterpiece. Its relevance, in answer to your question, is that the spiritual is always meaningful. With the mystery of our eventual passing this world we live a waiting life, as the psalmist tells us 'like a watchmen for daybreak'. BEZA's subject matter may be traditional but she brings a highly personal Catholic insight to it.*

TR: You have known BEZA's work for years. How and in what ways would you describe and reflect upon it?

MG: *I think BEZA is quite an experimental artist in a way. And like all experimental approaches there are times of hit and miss. She is very broad in her approach to subject matter, portraits, heightened landscapes, still life, religious subject matter, figurative engagements with the body, and all with a blending of past and present. This is to say as an artist she is sometimes over-ambitious, which in itself is no bad thing. Having said this some of her recent experiments at the interface of photography and painting are quite original and innovative. She clearly has what some call a contemporary baroque approach, and this is something that is particularly noticeable among many artists today. What I mean by that is a sort of expressive pluralism. To use a musical analogy her work is polyphonic, it sings many songs so to speak. Its performing aspect ties it to the presentational theatricality that we call baroque. In this respect it chimes with the attitudes of*

today, where tastes and foci change rapidly.

TR: We have known each other for several years, and implemented and realised many exhibitions and publication jointly. Which project has particularly remained in your memory and why?

MG: *I suppose the most challenging to be the exhibition I did with Bayer Kultur, because the foyer-type space was very difficult to work with. But more importantly I liked the concept, something I am trying to do at the moment as I finish the long essay I am writing for you on still life. The difficulty is how to deal with the several hundred works in the SØR Rusche Collections and not make it sound like a shopping list. Integrating the SØR Baroque and Contemporary collections is no easy task. It is now almost finished but given me much anxiety from what we might call an epistemological point of view. The psyche if not the subject matter of the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries are so very different. The motives of artists are very different today, and the art contexts bear little or no relationship to one another. The earlier period was a workshop age, while today artists generally work from the basis of personal subjectivity. In purely aesthetic terms of course the Eros and Thanatos photogravure book is the most beautiful, and I liked the idea that it revived what was an original format. I am not surprised that people responded well to it.*

TR: What do you think distinguishes the SØR Rusche Collection generally? How fruitful is the dialogue between Old Masters and contemporary art?

MG: *Well I think the collections are unique inasmuch as the two time periods represented by the collections are, as I have said, so very different in many ways. However, the fact that as the collector Thomas Rusche, you have a very wide vision and completely non-hierarchical in relation to the artist (primarily painters) that you collect. Moreover you collect an artist's works in great depth that allows for a breadth of perspective. The dialogue between the old and the new, like all dialogues is necessarily site specific. Things are inevitably time bound. This is to say they change over time and the correspondent relationship between the paintings and art works will quite rightly be re-evaluated differently in the future. I think it was the famous writer L.P. Hartley, whose novel Go-Between, who began with the line "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." Although it has become a saying that is almost proverbial there is a certain truth in it. There will always be a dialogue between different time periods due to our human continuity, but we cannot argue from it that experiences and motives for things are always synonymous. Things take on the timbre of their age, and the relationship between the past and the present is always in flux.*