

Stephen, Some History.

Steve arrived in Cardiff in 1969, not long out of Chelsea School of Art. While still a student he had been awarded Junior Prize at the John Moores Exhibition. Teachers as different in their own practice as Malcolm Hughes and Ken Kiff had been particularly helpful and supportive to him.

I met him in 1970. The works he showed me had clearly emerged from the Constructivist side of the business. The tools of his trade were drawing pens, inks, long arm compass, rulers, templates, and sundry aids to geometry. Most works were on paper, some on board, nothing on canvas, minimal colour and avoidance of that thing we call painterly. A sort of severity prevailed. Beckett, Elliot, and the Duchamp of the Large Glass loomed large in his thinking.

In 1975 Steve and I had a show of drawings. In his catalogue statement he said he preferred to make "art at a distance", and that his work evolved "through alternating involvement and alienation". Another part of his statement, however, eased these austerities; he made "deliberate and eclectic borrowings of images, methods and conventions which are often disparate and antagonistic to each other". This seemed to relate more specifically to his drawings and with hindsight pointed the way to a future output. In one of his large drawings, "Bunker", an emphatically illusionistic bunker shape - tiled? - sits on ground inside its own spatial enclave, seemingly pasted on to the flat shapes behind. A whiff of Sieneese painting pushes against geometry.

Steve had shown in one of the early and prestigious exhibitions at the Serpentine Gallery, he was seen as a serious young artist. By the mid-seventies, however, he was increasingly worried by his own brand of seriousness and where it had landed him. He was troubled by the material constraints he'd imposed upon himself, more and more suspicious of the rigidities of his "Theoretical Position", as thoughts about art are now called. He admired Picasso, Matisse, and Bonnard more than he did Duchamp. He read all sorts of poetry and prose, was an attentive listener to classical music, but also had records by Roxy Music. On occasions, like Mondrian, he liked to dance!

He told me, probably over a beer, that he intended to make a table, top tipped forward and tilted to one side, a foray into three dimensions. It appeared shortly after - a found bench top had been given four-by-two-inch timber legs. Tipped and brought forward it implied a "modern" picture plane. It could have been wrenched out of a Braque or Picasso, one of his "eclectic borrowings", yet something like a tipped up table had appeared in the bunker drawing. It looked fresh, and ready to go places. It is hazardous to talk of periods and breakthroughs. Fifty years on, however, I remember this construction as the start of something, the flood of sculptures, reliefs, drawings and paintings that he made in the late seventies and early eighties.

Here in York we have a drawing from this "Middle Period". A figure - man or woman - has landed with firm footing on a kind of frame. I say 'firm', as the figure appears to have arrived quickly - by some acrobatic means? A pointy, coolish red hat, sits above a face with almond-shaped eyes and open mouth. The face is simply drawn, but the look could denote a successful landing - "look what I have done!" - or it could express exhaustion from the effort. Inside the frame, which has six sections and short trestle-like legs, are three piglets. Two of them are trying, unsuccessfully it seems, to escape; the other piglet is resigned to failure, sad. The drawing is in pastel and appears to have been made quickly, and altered quickly. A previous position of the figure's legs can be seen under a none-too determined erasure. This adds to the implied acrobatics, and reaffirms the solid landing of the foot. The sad piglet has had a previous, partially escaped position, which is only cursorily erased. The brown floor has been quickly knocked in, mostly with the crayon's edge. Some fingermarks and smudges remain.

It is a marvellous drawing. I have described it in some detail as it is so symptomatic of what Steve was doing at the time. I don't know how "intentional" he was when he embarked on the drawing, nor does it matter as it so clearly demonstrates amazing brain, eye, and hand skills. Thinking on his feet with crayon in hand. "Art at a distance" had gone out of the window. Dazzlingly direct skills were released, as compass and templates were put in storage. As importantly, humour had entered the fray. Our drawing would be one of the hundreds he made which provided the rich hinterland for his sculptures and reliefs.

He enjoyed the new practicalities of making painted sculpture. Boards cut to shape were bolted together. The shape, say, of a leg or tree, was drawn in charcoal and cut with a jigsaw. There were few niceties in this, the none too gentle cut of the jigsaw and its occasional splintering were not tidied up, fast drying acrylic kept things moving. Sometimes the painted images established and adhered to the shape of the cut-out, sometimes rode roughshod over it. A bewildering range of images were employed: figures, animals, vegetation, furniture, crazy hybrids. Steve somehow managed to make humour and bleakness exist, often side by side, within a complex formality. He managed all of this with a lightness of touch that was in no way flippant. In the studios we were amazed, gobsmacked, by these works. They had appeared so suddenly and had established such a change of direction.

Poet, Marianne Moore, reflecting on her own craft, made the following observations. "We must have the courage of our peculiarities"; we need to be "as clear as our natural reticence allows us to be"; and that "novelty is always a by-product". I am put immediately in mind of Stephen, of his love of art, and his dedication to the making of it.

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