

## **INSIDE OUT \***

### **Joanna Jones/ Guy Brett e-mail conversation [as of 24.03.2005]**

*Guy Brett lives and works in London. He has written extensively for the art press since the 1960's.*

*GUY: Watching, at Herman's<sup>1</sup> place, your short video of yourself painting with your body - shot in close-up - prompted me to think, as I have often thought before, about why it is that a contemporary art practice should need to refer to the most ancient past. Your paintings seem to encapsulate a very long time-scale, to refer to the present instant and to the most ancient circumstances, perhaps to a form of genetic memory of the way we were formed millennia ago. Seeing, in the video<sup>2</sup>, you dragging your body prone along the canvas in the painting act, reminded me, fanciful though it may sound, of the first sea creatures that dragged themselves on to the land to establish the next evolution of the species. I would like to know why this huge backward look, which leaps over all the stages of civilisation to the first stirrings of culture, is necessary to us. I feel deeply that it is, although one could look at it in a sardonic way and say, why, when it has taken all these centuries to evolve the brush, do you go back to the primeval act of painting with your entire body!? Maybe we are astonished by these kind of temporal throwbacks because in fact they are very close to us all the time. I remember that Gaston Bachelard wrote a whole book about the experience of gazing at the flame of a candle. Among other things he said: "Obeying one of the most consistent laws of this reverie that happens before a flame, the dreamer dwells in a past which is no longer his alone, the past of the world's first fires".<sup>3</sup>*

JOANNA: My work certainly does aspire to a universality in its expression of being and presence.

What prompted me the first time to this act was an overwhelming wish to enter my painting and do away with any separation between my work and myself.

*GUY: But how did you get to this?*

JOANNA: I had studied painting. I loved the paint but I was finding it increasingly difficult to know what to paint. Already in the last year of my studies at the Royal Academy schools in London I was moving away from painting and looking for something somehow more directly connected with life.

*GUY: You were drawn towards performance?*

JOANNA: Yes, in many ways, but I was also very self-conscious and afraid of others looking at me. In 1973 I met Carlyle Reedy who was working with her performance company Monkey Enterprises. We soon began seeing each other regularly and in the ensuing exchange of ideas, Carlyle introduced me to hers on the engaging of the "receptive" in the body/being in performance.

*GUY: Carlyle Reedy really understands what you might call the non-performing aspect of performing. She used to say things like, "You have to show through body language a completely contemporary state ... There isn't anything to hide behind in such a theatre. It's only as much as I am, or as little".*

JOANNA: Exactly, this is what I so resonated with. I can't stress enough how important this time was for me and how instrumental in the later development of my work. In performance I learnt to stay with the receptive in myself, a state of attention in an active passivity like a breathing stone and sometimes reached an authenticity of

being outside my own self-consciousness. I learnt a great deal from Carlyle Reedy. This experiential way of working with the body/being which had begun in performance I eventually brought to my painting practice engaging myself, my body as my instrument.

This way of working directly with my own being – my own vibration in the act of painting – is the way I have worked since 1983. I paint through touch and not through sight. It is not my hands that I use but my whole body – which means I cannot see I can only feel what I am doing for the duration of the act. Each time I enter a work I privilege my tactile sense over my visual sense. This process generates forms, textures and fine structures that it would not be possible to create in any other way. These “body strokes” are always different. I find them sensual, some extremely beautiful; others uncanny, some almost grotesque or they can be all of these at different times or shifting in the process of looking. The results of an action are always unexpected and can bring about compositions I could never have imagined. I have kept the aspects of performance that I so value and have brought them to my painting practice but I do this privately in my studio and present the final paintings publicly. These are not by-products of an action such as Hermann Nitsch and others of the “Wiener Aktionismus” presented from their actions, but considered works – some evolving out of many consecutive actions.

*GUY: Another early collaboration of yours was with the artist Peter Kennard, best known for his photomontages. John Roberts has described Peter Kennard as “one of the very few artists – the only one, it might be said – who has had a direct effect on recent British politics”<sup>4</sup>. There must be wariness on the part of the establishment towards Kennard since the Tate Gallery does not possess a single one of his works, despite his 40-year career (the same could be said of Carlyle Reedy by the way). As well as photomontage, Kennard paints, as you know, and uses many techniques. Bearing in mind the reasons you have given for not continuing in performance and moving to a form of painting, would you say that the political consciousness you must have shared with Peter Kennard in some way persists in your present work?*

JOANNA: Peter Kennard and I met when we were both studying in London at the Byam Shaw School. He went on to the Slade School and I to the Royal Academy schools. We collaborated on photomontage work in the late sixties early seventies. Peter was always interested in how energy is harnessed and used in the world. This has continued to be his focus. Most of his work has to do with how this energy is used by the powerful against the less powerful. He has a great compassion for humanity. He is a political activist and all his work is made to affect the viewer in their consciousness. My focus has been in harnessing and using the energy that directly flows through me, all the shifts and changes in my being over the years inspiring the work.

I remember Kasper Koenig, then Rector of the Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main, asking me, in 1991, if I didn't think I was too old to work with my body. There are still many taboos around the naked body, even in the world of contemporary art, and these increase with age. When Yves Klein used his beautiful young women for his 'anthropometries' this was quite acceptable, they were young and they were still. My work is political, confronting and challenging by its nature more than by direct intention. I work with an active female body; my work celebrates the vital body and seeks to address the neglect and repression that occurs when the body is reduced to its external form. My interest is in being, in energy and the nature of thought and matter. The act of painting is the moment of action when the mind and body are given over to something outside of mental or visual control expressing through movement, perhaps tactile memory, in that sublime moment in contact with the paint. Working in this way is dependent on vitality and of course a certain agility of

movement. After my husband, Johann Rossouw, died I found it very difficult to work. I thought this could have to do with age but later realised that it actually had to do with mourning.

*GUY: In one of your catalogues you describe the way, when you began to be interested in art, you looked at the paintings of Delacroix, Rubens or Veronese and saw them in a particular way. Your eye would travel over the canvas, "over the folds of cloth and human flesh", and the title and the apparent subject-matter of these paintings became less and less interesting to you. You described the same experiences with Victorian paintings like those of Frederick Leighton and G.F Watts. I can see very clearly the relationship with the forms of your own body-paintings, and I would like to hear more about what it was in the flesh and drapery of the old paintings that magnetised you. A couple of years ago there was an interesting exhibition about clothing in painting, at the National Gallery in London, with a very intelligent and perceptive catalogue written by Anne Hollander. She pointed out that clothing appears in all traditions of painting, "often filling two thirds of the frame without seeming to be there".<sup>5</sup> She analysed the way artists had depicted clothing and its folds from ancient Greece to the 20th century, and she showed that, in many cases, the depicted wraps and pieces of cloth were essentially painterly inventions that would not behave in reality in the way they do in the picture, defying gravity, apparently not attached to the body, etc. Anne Hollander says that the role of the drapery in such paintings is 'elemental'. Would you agree?*

JOANNA: I agree completely that the function of the drapery is not there to clothe or describe the body form. I see the cloth as describing something about movement, process, life and feeling that is not possible to show through the facial or body expression of the figures. The cloth seems to take on a life of its own. Freed from gravity it finds forms that would perhaps be possible to create with a wind machine or by moving the cloth through water and yet we respond to these forms and accept them totally as the eye follows their sensual, organic flow. I believe the use of these free-floating forms has a great deal to do with how we visually travel and experience these works.

I have tried to give you some idea of what motivated me to start painting in the way that I do. What I could not know was what the results of this act would be. At first it was all very difficult but gradually as I began to find the right consistency for the paint as well as a suitable smoothness for the ground of the canvas, forms emerged out of the action that reminded me of these cloths with a life of their own. Interesting that my wish to give form to my own vitality and feelings directly with my own body would create forms that resemble those that artists have been using through centuries connected with the human being perhaps to express a similar content. Could this be described as elemental as Anne Hollander suggested?

Discussing this point with Garo Keheyan<sup>6</sup> he commented that the body itself is a kind of cloth, a fabric that envelops the spirit and that my action in painting is a way of unwrapping this on canvas to reveal its elemental essence. I liked this comment and thought it also applicable to the use of cloth in the works of the painters we are discussing. What do you think?

*GUY: Yes, there is always a dialectic between the clothing, the covering, and the naked body. I remember In William Blake's famous image of Albion, Glad Day, the naked awakening figure is framed by a cloak or mantle, or nimbus, of effulgent coloured light. I am sure this represents the spiritual in the sense that Garo Keheyan means. The tension seems to be heightened by a combination of the body's naked physical substance and the immaterial clothing made of light. In the history of art I think there's a distinction to be made between clothing and drapery. Although the drapery in Greek sculpture refers to actual clothing worn at the time, in the most*

*inspired works it becomes something else, an abstraction of rhythm, flow, of the sensuous, the organic.*

JOANNA: Yes the drapery that describes the body form and enhances its external beauty or desirability much in the same way as clothes can and the drapery that definitely has another purpose. I am fascinated by the Austrian alter pieces, wood carving from circa 1500 that I first saw in the museum in Linz in 1994 when I was part of the show 'Other Bodies' at the Offenes Kulturhaus there. What struck me about these pieces was that the individual figure seems to give way to an abstraction of folds. In groups of figures the fabric/drapery/cloth does cover the figures where clothes would be, but as the fabric is often gold and the face and hands not, what one sees at first are interrelated folds forming a continuous, rhythmic, sensual organic flow where individuality subordinates to an interconnectedness of being.

*GUY: That's really interesting. I didn't know about those Austrian altarpieces. Now I would like to move from the body to the 'place'. When I was looking at the folder of slides and catalogues of your work, again at Herman's place, it struck me that your exhibitions have taken place in two kinds of venue: one the standard white cube of the art gallery, and the other in empty buildings with magnificent but ruined spaces and crumbling walls. The fascinating projection of your paintings on the cliff faces at Dover, as dusk falls, also comes into this second category. I felt your paintings were fine in the gallery but really came into their own in those places marked by time and survival. If you agree, can you account for this?*

JOANNA: Although I find these places marked by time and survival very inspiring they have always posed a problem for me! I always feel I would like to be a mural painter! I have difficulty with just hanging paintings on the walls. I think I have been successful when I have specifically made paintings for the site such as in the Carmelite Cloister in Frankfurt/Main in 1993 where the paintings were made for the space made available by the "missing" Ratgeb murals.<sup>7</sup> But because of my attraction to these places I have been very engaged with what I find problematic and this has led to solutions such as the projection murals in the Charité Hospital in Berlin in 1996 and the ceiling in the Historischen Raum in Schloss Balmoral in Bad Ems in 2000 . One point that I should like to make about viewing my work is that I think one has to actually stand before a painting of mine to really feel it. The painting and the viewer are related in scale and energy, viewed in reproduction this is missing. I had seen Barnett Newman for years in reproduction and small works but it took the recent Tate Modern exhibition of his works for me to really experience one of his paintings. It was a completely physical experience. I stood in front of one of his larger works and filled out inside myself with the colour and composition. There was a teacher taking some students around the show. He was setting Newman in the context of art history, which is totally correct and important but only, in my opinion, in addition to the experience of letting down one's guard and bathing in the physicality of Newman's work.

*GUY: That's true. Of course the discourse of art history is usually heard, and even made, in the presence of photographs of art works, which cannot substitute for the bodily experience. This is a fascinating problem, which has not received enough attention I believe. I'm sure the mediated perception of art works through photography is today a much more frequent experience than the presence of the actual work. Of course photography is a valid medium and its relation to the artwork can be complex. For example the photos taken by Brancusi of his own sculpture and studio are quite different, more intense, more cosmic, than a routine museum photo of the same piece, although the museum picture may be technically perfect. It's mysterious. Also, the 'photographic report' is sometimes all we have left of*

*ephemeral events, which in the case of an artist like Ana Mendieta were solitary actions witnessed by no one but herself (and the photographer). Actually, I believe the photograph is an essential part of the power of Mendieta's Siluetta works, because the camera picks up all the forensic details of the site, every leaf, every glint of water, which adds to the sense of the richness of nature in which her body image is located.*

JOANNA: Last week I went to the Camden Arts Centre to see Tacita Deans' "An Aside". It is a show that I really enjoyed with an excellent accompanying publication designed by Herman Lelie.<sup>8</sup> Looking through the bookshop before leaving I came across a book on Ana Mendieta<sup>9</sup>. This is the first time I have ever seen any of her work. What you say though was my experience, what has stayed in my memory from this first view of these fascinating works is the whole photograph the surroundings being an important part of that work.

I have been intrigued with using photography ever since seeing how Rauschenberg and Warhol were transferring the photographic image to canvas or paper by loosening it with paraffin wax in the 1960's. In the photomontage work with Peter Kennard we used his method of bringing together images that were first transferred onto film. Carlyle Reedy and I made super 8 films and had our own film Company K'UN FILMS. The works I made with paint on the body of Johann Rossouw in the early 80's were photographs. I always saw these photographs as the work not as a documentation of an action. My contribution to Vera Frenkels web piece "bodymissing" used several different photographic means and the works for the Charité in Berlin and the White Cliff face near Dover as well as the Historischen Raum in Kuenstlerhaus Balmoral were only possible through photographic intervention.

*GUY: How did the presence of the White Cliffs, and the Charité's walls affect the nature of the work you produced?*

JOANNA: My concept in both of these cases was to integrate an existing surface into a 'painting'. It is a different creative process. It has always been the vitality of life and the body while alive that has interested me. What is left behind when life passes out of the body is a body without animation and in time, through a gradual process of decomposition, a skeleton.

I perceived the walls of the half-ruined lecture hall of the famous pathologist Rudolf Virchow in the Charité hospital in Berlin in a similar way. They have a patina made up of surviving traces from different times in their dramatic history. I wanted to find a way to use this surface in a painting. My idea was to combine traces made by my body with a specific piece of the patina of traces making up the lecture hall walls, bringing back, metaphorically, a sensual skin to the decomposing walls. I was able to create these temporary paintings using projection. This was possible when the projected light was stronger than the natural light. Reaffirming, also metaphorically, the temporality of our bodily experience. What happened was that each evening at dusk the paintings started a process of emerging as the natural light let go to the projected light. Up to this point I had been concerned with the two layers combining and had not considered this process happening by the daily event of daylight gradually disappearing at dusk. I had originally planned to black out the huge windows but this had proved too costly and so I was going to wait till it was dark to show these ephemeral works. The fascination of this natural slow process of becoming – as the projected layer coalesced with the existing patina to form a painting – took me by surprise and inspired the outdoor work I made at Samphire Hoe<sup>10</sup> in 2001. Here the forms made by time, weather and human intervention of the specific cliff face slowly merged with the projected layer into a huge outdoor painting – as the natural light gave way to the projected light at dusk and the reverse happened at dawn.

*GUY: It's interesting, isn't it, because sometimes it's the historical traces, or nature-traces, and sometimes it's the neutral white space which becomes part of the concept and vitality of the work. The historically marked environment is not more 'real' than the white cube. In fact the empty white cube itself may carry the charge, as in Yves Klein's emptying of the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris and declaring it 'the void', in 1958. For Klein, to do this it was necessary to remove everything that had a history, although it was still important that the white room was not just any old room but was known as an 'art gallery' – it was a polemic within the discourse of art. Klein gave great importance to the placing of his work in the museum. For his celebrated show at the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, also in 1958, he drew up a precise installation plan. He did this partly because he was dissatisfied with earlier shows of his monochromes. They had been arranged in a group and, as a result, he felt the public were "reassembling the paintings as components of a polychromatic decoration. They could not enter into the contemplation of the colour of a single painting at a time".*

*When you show your paintings in a gallery do you do the installation yourself?*

JOANNA: Yes, I like to and generally do. Each show has been so different. Sometimes in a white cube situation, I have built the whole show around works connecting, the space between works itself becoming part of the experience of looking as the eye travels out of one work over the space and into another work. I don't frame my works and my compositions often allow the eye to leave the work over the edge of the painting. I explore certain colour combinations through a series of works so that, when hung together, these works tend to become parts of a larger whole. I build some works up in a similar way from two or more pieces which makes for a similar experience of looking with the eye being led to travel back and forth from one panel to another and over the space between. Also in a white cube situation I have hung shows where it has been important to me that each work be viewed separately. It depends on the works that depend on my concerns and energy at the time when I make them. When I think back I have also treated historic sites in both ways.

Something else I have done has been to hang paintings back to back down the centre of a space, historic and white cube, so that the paintings became a free hanging body. This idea came partly from wanting to free the works from relating or covering the surrounding walls and partly from realising that we generally view works with our vulnerable back open to the room. I thought that as the viewer one could feel much more comfortable and able to open oneself to a work if one had ones back to the wall and ones front open to the room and work.

*GUY: Visually, for me, one of the most outstanding features of your paintings is your treatment of light (light is inconceivable without darkness of course). You've described this in technical terms: that the light comes from "initial primed layers which allow the forms in the painted layers to become visible. The paintings take their light source from beneath each layer being lit by the layer beneath it". But how to describe its effect? To mention Yves Klein again, this is one way your paintings differ radically from those that Klein made in the 1950s, despite the often pointed-out parallels between yours and Klein's use of the body to mark the canvas. Yves Klein's figures, as you have said many times, are static "body prints", whereas your paintings "take form" by your movement. The treatment of light, which is not an issue, which is not present in Klein's work (unless you count the scorch-marks of an absent fire with which he produced certain canvases of the 1960s), in your case the paint gives an inner light to the colour. The body-analogy becomes mixed with a generative energy, like the surface of the sun.*

JOANNA: I love your last sentence although I still do not think that I have fully understood it. I called a publication that came out in 1993 "I live in a land where the sun is feminine"<sup>1</sup> referring to the female gender of sun in German but also inferring the giving of a visibility to something that is normally invisible. Is this connected to the thought behind your sentence?

*GUY: I think I meant that the 'inner light' in your work went beyond the problem of form, even 'organic' form. It represents pure energy.*

JOANNA: That is exactly right. It doesn't represent anything but this. And the viewer, who is prepared to let down their guard and enter the visual world I have created seems to travel tactilely with their eyes through the painting connecting with it on an energetic level. But often, not always of course, some people seem to connect in this way immediately, before this happens, the viewer is making associations and looking for references. There is also the feeling that the forms are somehow recognisable. What is very interesting is that I have never had anyone know, without being told, that the forms are made with the human body.

*GUY: That's remarkable. How do people interpret them if they know nothing of how they are made?*

JOANNA: They make associations with cloud formation, exotic vegetation, billowing cloth, internal organs but never the human body as we see it. There are then the references to art history and artists that people are reminded of such as Turner or Blake, Tiepolo or Gruenewald. From these associations one can see an aspect of how the effect of the inner light of the paintings is affecting the viewer. There follows then often an uncomfortableness and irritation..."What are these works?" Eventually when the viewer has exhausted their possibilities of association and reference and given up trying to solve the puzzle they either disengage from the process of looking and move on or they start to physically engage with the work.

It is very different when the viewer knows that the paintings are painted with the body. Then there is a tendency to look for body parts. "Is that your arm? Did you do that with your...?" I try to explain that I use my body to move the paint. That they will find no direct print of a body part since I am in movement when I am painting, using the body to spread the paint. There is also often a feeling that, because I use my body, the paintings happen automatically without my having any part in the painting's creation. Something, though, that really confuses me and that perhaps you could help throw some light on is the person who says, "Oh, body-painting!" and that's it, they seem to know exactly what that is and have no interest in looking at work!

*GUY: Oh yes, the problem of reduction, which is the problem of trying to escape the difficulty, the disturbance, the complexity of things. An expression of trying to stay in control. You could say that the phrase 'body art' is of the same order as 'body count', even if the context is totally different (in this last case the need to refer quickly and painlessly to something of unbearable painfulness). Everything you have said about your painting testifies to the importance you give to the lived experience, in your making of the work and the viewer's response to it.*

JOANNA: It is true, and I also spend a lot of time as the viewer of my own work, getting to know what I have created but not yet seen.

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Lelie

<sup>2</sup> Video by Lily Markiewicz 2002

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- <sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Flame of a Candle*, Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1961
- <sup>4</sup> John Roberts, *Art in America*, December 1983\*
- <sup>5</sup> Anne Hollander, *Fabric of Vision: Dress and Drapery in Painting*, London: National Gallery Company, 2002
- <sup>6</sup> President of the Pharos Trust
- <sup>7</sup> Jörg Ratgeb 1480 - 1526
- <sup>8</sup> *An Aside*, Hayward Gallery publishing, London 2005
- <sup>9</sup> Olga M. Viso Ana Mendieta *Earth Bodies* Hatje Cantz 2004
- <sup>10</sup> Samphire Hoe is the name given to the land that has been created on the sea side of the cliffs along the coast between Dover and Folkestone. It is made from nearly five million cubic metres of chalk marl which became available from building the channel tunnel between 1987 - 1990.
- <sup>11</sup> Joanna Jones, *I live in a world where the sun is feminine*, Arnoldische Verlag, Stuttgart 1993

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