

'Identities'

Clare Bonnet, Toni Cogdell, Henrietta Dubrey,
Veronica Wells

Sarah Wiseman Gallery

4th-25th March, 2017

Clare Bonnet

Clare is based in Cornwall, having graduated in painting at Leeds University in 2004. The figures in her paintings are mostly women, who are known to her. She sees the painting process as a collaborative one, where she and the sitter talk and exchange ideas and experiences.

Can you describe a typical day in the studio?

A studio day normally runs from 8.30 - 5ish, with longer hours if I have a deadline approaching. I'll work for intense 2 hour bursts and then need to re-focus with a break. I arrive, get the heater on, make tea, check emails and look at the previous days' work to assess what has worked and what needs attention. A pause before starting is really important - if you have worked a long session the day before you can sometimes become blinded to poor decision making. I'll normally fiddle about for a bit, preparing a pallet or a surface, but I aim to be painting by 10 at the latest. Lunch is always an after- thought and is frequently skipped, late or inadequate. Sometimes artist/friends drop by and will give me feedback, but on the whole work is a solo mission. I enjoy being in a large collective of studios - it's important to stay connected to other artists.

Which artists do you identify with most?

I find this question tricky! In terms of work, I try not to look too closely at the work of other artists. There are plenty of artists that I admire for technique or skill or originality - their work inspires me to be better at what I do, but I couldn't say that I identify with them in terms of their creative journey. I also believe that although it is important to view other works to stimulate ideas and keep things fresh in your own work, it's also necessary to tread your own creative path. Having said that, having a studio with other artists around is bound to be an influence, consciously or not.

When did you decide you wanted to paint?

During my degree, I explored paint in a fairly tenuous way. Then I went to a Helen Frankthaler exhibition in Edinburgh and I experienced one of those awe-struck moments. Such huge paintings, with such deep colour and endless freedom. I ended up writing my dissertation on her. In my own work, I began pouring paint and ink over stitched drawings and then stretched canvas over light boxes. They were rubbish, but I loved the process. University left me a bit crushed creatively. After a break during which I trained to teach and had a baby, I came back to painting. A friend, colleague and artist, Richard Twose taught me a bit about oil paint - the rest I have figured out by just doing.

What are your thoughts on how far women have come in the arts - do you define yourself as a woman artist?

The truth in my mind is that there is no difference to the way a woman makes art and the way a man makes art. Making art is an expression of humanity, filtered through one particular human's experience. However, historically it's clear that the traditional role of a woman as a mother or carer, reduces the time and attention that a woman can invest in art making and this imbalance is evident in a whole host of gender based issues within the Arts. This might sound obvious, but making any kind of art for a living is a struggle - it takes over your life and puts enormous strain on a family unit, if you are also known as the 'primary' carer then just getting to the studio feels like a triumph.

The women in the paintings

Having a child was a pivotal moment for me - there was some kind of connection I made with the essence of female experience. I began to look more closely at what my female friends were doing. Every single one was striving for better. Whether it was developing sustainable energy initiatives, creating performances on gender issues, bringing up children or leading community projects. Painting was a way of capturing these young women, pushing forward, with a desire for progress and essentially, love at their core.

Most paintings start with an exchange of ideas between me and the person I'm painting. It's a shared experience and a collaboration- and the most productive sessions involve creative suggestions from both sides. I also like to know how the person is feeling as that can lead the process and alter the outcome. It's a very personal experience. Some people I paint I know very well, some only a little and some not at all, but talking before and during the sessions, and knowing a little about their background contributes to the work.

Clare Bonnet, February 2017

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