

## A conversation between Michael Sandle and Terry Setch

MS We first met at the Slade as I remember, an awful long time ago now. The next time we came together was in Leicester where we'd been recruited by Tom Hudson to teach with him at Leicester College of Art.

TS Yes, Tom was a formidable force. I feel very lucky to have been associated with the way he challenged the centuries-old classical tradition in art schools. I'd already started to experiment with different material and methods and the teaching certainly fed into my work. What Tom did was to instil in us the freedom to choose materials and to express those materials in new ways that were very personal.

MS And then seven of us moved into the old rectory in Kibworth Beauchamp that became a commune of working artists. The Leicester Group as we became known. That was one almighty experimental workshop. I remember clearly the work that you did there leading up to the shows at the Grabowski Gallery and the work that Victor Newsome did, Mike Chiltern did, Laurie Burt did. And then in the 60s you came to Cardiff to teach with Tom at the College of Art.

TS Tom asked me to join him. At the time we were just building our reputations in London and my career did slow down but the south Wales coastline became the source of my imagery and since 1971 all of my work has been about what I could extract from the Seven Estuary; it's only a few minutes walk away from my home in Penarth and after forty or so years I'm still here.

MS Nothing wrong with that. I can see that it's been extraordinarily fruitful. It's obviously somewhere that drives you and you feel is a part of yourself and one thing you have not done, you've not cut yourself off. Miles ahead of anybody else you've dealt with issues of pollution and man-made detritus and everything which is now a sort of mainstream issue. Climate change, the lot, you were into that years and years ago.

TS The issues about recycling and pollution surfaced when I started going onto the beach. Cardiff was one of the most important ports in Britain so everything was industrially charged. I also started to feel in contact with the movement of the tides and the human activity going on; the discarded waste, some people's inability to be in harmony with nature or to enjoy nature and not ruin it for other people. Rather than a piece of beautiful landscape it was more like a legacy of my London childhood: homelessness and bomb-sites, bits of people's lives being lifted and spread across that landscape. The tides on that estuary are enormous and they gather in what's left on the beach and plant it somewhere else. The moment I saw that happening I realised that I could play a part. I could pick things up and I could place them somewhere else, which I did, and the tides would come in and knock them down and then I'd have to rediscover them. That was the start of it. My work has gone through many changes since then but on the beach I found a system that I could build upon.

MS That would explain why you've been at it such a long time; it's such a dynamic, on-going situation. From what you are saying it changes all the time and you've basically got a never ending source to work with which is fantastic and enviable. I can see the huge attraction of wanting to stay and you've produced a very large body of work on this very subject. Why go elsewhere?

TS As my political awareness developed, the sheer horror of the violent aspect of world pollution became evident. The Torrey Canyon polluted beaches and damaged bird-life and marine-life. Wales wasn't spared the fall-out from Chernobyl either. They were all eye openers to add to the local messages left on the beach, like a settee or an old car or whatever, they had some kind of interplay. If a car was pushed onto the beach that was not just a playful act, that was a very violent act which was almost as violent as the tidal systems or the weather systems or the shear light of the place – those systems all came together and I found it very very exciting. I had to find a way of working with such a volatile place.

MS Would you say there's a moral aspect to your work?

TS I'm not attracted to overtly political arguments. I'm attracted to argument that lays the ground but that allows for ways in for the spectator where they can find the different levels in the work. The materiality of the work is one issue, the subject of the work is another and they can be confrontational but somehow I have to make a way in for people.

MS Sure, you're not screaming at people, but it does seem to me that you couldn't do this work unless you cared; unless you had that feeling you couldn't do it. The other thing that has always intrigued me about your working method is the way that you use encaustic wax. You've always experimented with materials but the encaustic has been a consistent feature of your work since the 70s as I remember

TS In a group of paintings I was doing on the theme of Axminster carpets, I needed something to slow the paint down and I found that adding wax to oil paint gave me just what I wanted. Later I had to bind things together on the very big paintings, so I found a bee's wax substitute which is a crystalline wax that comes from the oil industry. The wax became almost a metaphor for the mulch of stuff that I observed on the beach; the coming together of mud, sand, stones, seaweed, detritus, all of that. By the beginning of the 80s I was making enormous works in encaustic wax on tarpaulin that were actually worked on the that had detritus incorporated into the surface. 'Once upon a time there was Oil - III', bought by the Tate, is 3m x 5m and 'Touch the Earth Again', which was shown at the Hayward, is 4 m x 8m.

MS So what's going to happen in the next 10 years? I understand there are plans for a barrage on the estuary that will destroy your environment won't it?

TS If it goes ahead everything will change. I object to it on one level, the damage it will cause to the local community and the habitat for wild-life, but the planet definitely needs more energy

created from natural sources. I've started to respond to the idea of this barrage in the new work for this exhibition.

MS Is this the start of a whole new chapter about your beach then?

TS Yes. The place that I've been interested in for forty years is Lavernock Point. It's not a very grandiose place; but it is a very special place. You could find something far more magnificent on other beaches but it's a place that is understood in shipping, the focal point where the rock juts out was used for navigation. Marconi first transmitted from Lavernock point and a few months later Alfred Sisley painted views towards Lavernock so there's a host of natural and man-made things that link and interact in my mind about this place which may all be lost.

MS It's interesting how these small paintings that you've been working on recently are much more lyrical than the larger things that I'm familiar with. They are full of air and light. And they are windy. They're more like conventional depictions of the landscape from a conventional view point but I doubt that they are.

TS You are right. They're not from a particular position within the convention of landscape painting. They are inventions of the sensations of the place. They are part of what I've absorbed from all the visits I've made, all those experiences of the place coming together from memory to a point where I re-engage. They are flavours, sensations if you like.

The demands that I put on them are not the same demands that I put on very large works. They are not meant to confront in the same way. When I'm making them I have a hot-air gun in one hand and tools, scrapers, brushes in the other hand. Then there's a point when a sense of light radiates from the painting, and some sense of belonging, and that belonging is the lineage from and through Turner and beyond. I don't think British painters have ever lost their link with Turner and Constable. Especially if you've decided to work from natural things like landscape.

MS How good it is to see that you still have a connection with tradition. I don't see that in much contemporary art. I sense that that's also the case even with the big pictures that deal with pollution and so on. They also have a lot of landscape in them.

TS My use of plastics and heating processes are very much to do with the traditions inherent in landscape painting. They're very much to do with place and atmosphere. If you look at them very closely they are similar to the small pictures, they have the same sort of conditions of matter bubbling up and forming into crustations and ultimately in your reading of them as landscapes. They may not be as perspectival as the little pictures but they are not as abstract they appear on first viewing.

MS I can see that, it's not a mystery. When you look you can see that it's not a depiction of a landscape but there is a flavour and a memory of English seascape painting. This is important as a lot of younger artists don't seem to have any foot whatsoever in history which is their loss. They are only into what is out there today. They see what other people are doing and I actually wonder

what on earth they are doing, and why they do it. You're steeped in art history, you couldn't do it otherwise.

TS      Coming to Cardiff changed me as all places would. I became attached to an estuary and decided that I wanted to return to painting and to bring the landscape tradition back into my work. It was almost like starting again. I thought perhaps I'd regret it but that's the way it was. I returned to nature again. I started to change the material I was working with, and then I went onto the beach and that brought about changes in the processes I was using. There have been radical changes throughout but I think there has always been continuity. One thing seems to have led quite naturally to another even if it wasn't always that obvious at the time.

MS      So which would be the most radical change?

TS      Going onto the beach in 1971. My whole work since has stemmed from that; I to my teenage interests.

Recorded in Terry Setch's Bute Street studio, Cardiff on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2010  
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