

Interview: Artist Allan Renshaw on his debut exhibition - The Journal

Notebook: Allan Renshaw ARt

Created: 12/11/2019 22:06

Updated: 13/11/2019 15:54

URL: <http://www.thejournal.co.uk/culture/arts/interview-artist-allan-renshaw-debut-4395...>

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Interview: Artist Allan Renshaw on his debut exhibition

08:00, 6 MAR 2013 | UPDATED 15:40, 25 JUN 2013

- By [David Whetstone](#)

Having moved to the North East recently, Allan Renshaw aims to establish himself as a serious artist.

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Artist Allan Renshaw with his debut exhibition at the Holy Biscuit art gallery in Shieldfield

HAVING met and interviewed a lot of professional artists over the years, I am pretty familiar with the usual career path – a foundation course followed by a fine art degree and maybe an MA.

Artists emerge every year from colleges and universities across the country with a glowing sense of academic achievement and endorsement.

Some of those with similar qualifications take a slightly different route, ending up as the curators who can give an artist a break by offering an exhibition.

This being the case, mightn't it be possible that you end up with an art world that conforms to a set of unwritten rules and standards known only to a select few?

And if so, how easy is it for someone who has taken a different route to be taken seriously?

Someone like Allan Renshaw, for instance.

Allan, who is relatively new to the region, has his first solo exhibition, called *Unconscious Landscapes*, at the Holy Biscuit, a satellite of the Biscuit Factory commercial art gallery in Shieldfield, Newcastle.

It doesn't look like the debut of someone who, after a career in a wholly different world, is now getting used to the idea of describing himself as a professional artist.

This is a body of abstract work that hangs together well. You sense a theme – or themes – which tell of serious endeavour and artistic knowledge and exploration.

These paintings are not merely representations of things. There are ideas here. To some extent all abstract paintings are puzzles, but there's clear method at play.

Allan, it turns out, has spent many years as a psychotherapist and social worker in North Wales. "Absolutely full on," he tells me in the gallery.

His work with families and in child protection took him regularly into some testing situations. It didn't leave him very much time for painting, so he would set aside a few hours on a Sunday.

"It's not a hobby," says Allan, bristling at my – quite deliberate and testing – use of the word.

"I did a foundation course in art but then I thought, I know nothing. I travelled around the world. I went to all sorts of dangerous places. I did it as part of growing up and because I wasn't into the glamour side of art. I wanted there to be some substance to my work."

The travelling involved extensive periods away, in places such as Australia and Peru, and he says this has all played its part in his development as an artist.

But it is a landscape nearer to home that inspired some of the paintings on show here – those with two broad bands of colour divided by a narrower band.

In North Wales, he says, he lived in a house with a view towards Anglesey across a tidal estuary.

Often he would be struck by the mirage effect of light falling on bands of sea and sand. It would become hard to see where sea ended and sky began.

But then there would be a moment when the sun fell below the horizon and there would be "broiling skies full of red". This is reflected in a painting called Firmament.

Allan talks compellingly about his life and his art, and you can see how it has arisen from his travelling, his love of landscape and his work.

As a psychotherapist, he explains, you are listening as much to what people don't say as to what they do, for in that may lie the clue to something of deep significance.

He talks about his fascination for the landscape and for man's marks on it. Standing stones intrigue him, as does the idea of the land beneath our feet containing layered clues to past civilisations. In understanding both the landscape and the human mind, he looks for subliminal messages and these inform his art.

Not long ago, after "seven years stuck on the front line in social work", Allan left North Wales and moved to the Scottish Borders.

His wife, Katrine, an environmentalist, was expecting a baby and they moved to be with her family.

Now Allan is hoping to establish himself as an artist. This exhibition is important, a first chance to put his work before the public.

"It has taken a while but finally I felt I had a body of work worthy of putting in a public space.

"We looked around and found the art world very snooty. We went to London and met some people who asked where I was educated. It is very difficult to get started.

"But I always saw myself as eventually becoming a practising artist. Sometimes I do come out of the studio and ask myself what I'm doing but there is an imperative within me to carry on producing art which reflects my outlook on life."

The Holy Biscuit, which was formerly a Methodist church but is now run in partnership with the Biscuit Factory as a Christian arts centre for the local community, contains two well-proportioned rooms where art can be displayed.

Allan's carefully arranged paintings look good here.

He explains his working method, saying he never uses brushes but applies paint and moves it around the canvas with a cloth and a palette knife.

It's all about building up layers, adding paint and then removing it before adding another layer.

The paintings, like the landscape and the human mind, have intriguing depths that are hinted at by surface irregularities.

Allan talks about attuning himself to the landscape – and to those skies and sunsets – and letting it play upon his subconscious.

The paintings on display – with titles like Heaven & Underworld, Shining Sky and Crimson Sprite – juxtapose the regular shapes of the man-made environment with the untamed splashes and swooshes of nature.

I say, without wishing to offend, that I am reminded a little of the concept album sleeves of the 1970s. Allan doesn't take offence. Neither does such comparison belittle work that is worth a close look.

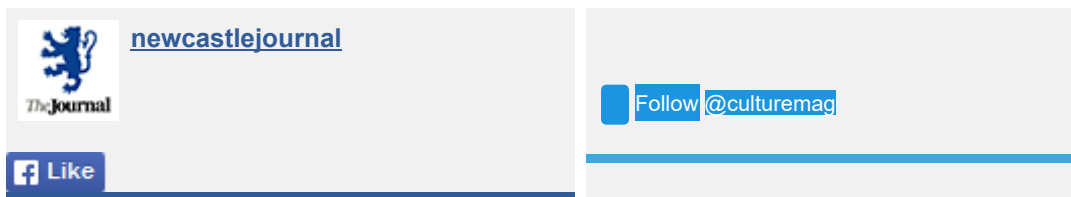
In taking his art as seriously as his travel and his social work, Allan's aim is to make the art world take him seriously, even though he doesn't have the academic qualifications that might possibly fast-track him to the most prestigious galleries.

He is hopeful rather than bitter and plans to work hard. He says he couldn't not paint.

Unconscious Landscapes shows what he can do and if he can get the public on his side – and possibly even buying his work – than the rest may take care of itself.

The exhibition was due to end on Friday but has been extended and is open between 11am and 4pm. Admission is free.

Find out more about The Holy Biscuit on www.theholybiscuit.org and more about Allan on www.allanrenshaw.com



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