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VAN March/April 2014: 'Visual Conversation' David Brancaleone Talks to Eamon Colman about his Painting

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Eamon colman, *After dawn, rain and wind came to lift everything*, 2013, oil on Somerset paper, 600 x 910 mm

DAVID BRANCALEONE RECENTLY ASKED EAMON COLMAN "WHAT'S YOUR PAINTING ABOUT?" THE ARTIST'S REVELATORY RESPONSES STRESS NOTIONS OF PAINTING AS AN ACT AND WAY OF BEING.

David Brancaleone: What's your painting about?

Eamon Colman: In his novel, *Making Way*, Theo Dorgan talks about 'how life gets made': "We

started something. The only way we find out what it is, is by finishing it, right? Like you're tipping away at a piano, say little riffs, not thinking of anything much and you hear something: a phrase, a run of notes, and a bit of you far away starts going: 'hmm'. You keep going, following. Yes, this; no, not that. Like following a thread and the closer you get to it the more you start to wake up and, if you're lucky, if it is something, if it comes to something, suddenly, you're wide awake. It feels like more than awake. You have it. You have it now, just a matter of finding, finding the final shape. That's it. The full shape of it."

When I started working on 'Scattered Showers', I had no idea of where it was going to go. I discovered a painting years ago by Constable entitled *Rainstorm over the Sea* (1828). It is a small, sketched painting in the Royal Academy of Arts, London. That was the thread that led me to start exploring weather, and, living in a very rural part of the world, I found that I was constantly coming back to it.

Very early on in my life, I became a walker and walking became a way, an expression. The French idea of the flâneur, the person who moves through the community and learns about it through the act of being there became very important to me. I am not a tourist.

DB: How do you feel when you are out walking?

EC: It's that whole Turner-esque thing: I have to feel the storm, feel it on my back. I undertook this amazing walk a couple of years ago: along the Appalatian Way. I went into farmsteads and asked if I could work there. So I was physically working in the environment, connecting with people on that level. For 'Scattered Showers', I literally went out in all weathers.

When I'm walking, I don't bring my notebook with me. I don't bring my camera. I literally go out and physically feel the landscape as much as is humanly possible. Again, going back to Theo's thoughts about the 'thread', I had started to look at the idea of storms as natural phenomena. I wanted to look – for want of a better word – for the 'god-ray': when the sky shifts and light shines through. I wanted to be in it and experience it. I didn't want to just view it from a window or from behind an easel.

DB: Why do you paint?

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The Representative Body for Visual Artists in Ireland, providing practical support in all art forms

Don't miss a notebook into the landscape, since I'm not a plain air painter as such – yet I'm painting the landscape and I'm coming from that tradition. It's almost like I go into my studio and sit there for a while in front of this blank canvas. I close my eyes and try to remember the landscape I have been walking through or the landscape I'm trying to evoke. It's those initial marks that I make on the canvas that tell me either: yes, you are starting to tell this story; or no. I know from the very beginning of making a painting whether it's going to succeed or fail as a balanced piece.



Eamon colman, *Make the morning from the heart of night (detail)*

DB: What do your paintings depict?

EC: I'm painting the landscape that I remember, rather than the landscape I see, and I'm also trying to paint the mood I've experienced. You go for a walk, for instance, and, even if your walk is in a town, the landscape you've experienced affects your mood. I try to respond to that mood through the physical act of painting. For me, the act of walking is about connecting with the landscape, not just through my eyes, but through my body, because painting for me is a very physical process. At times, I am literally throwing paint at the canvas. I couldn't do that unless I understood the physicality of walking in the landscape.

DB: What does colour mean to you?

EC: I'm only now beginning to understand what it is I'm painting and why I'm painting it. Colour is a vehicle for honesty, because my paintings are about tapping into an honest emotion; I use colour as a way of expressing that honesty. But in order to do that I have to understand colour and how I'm using it. For instance, I use raw pigment which I bind myself. I make the paint in the exact same way that the old masters did. Even small sections of the yellow would have different oil mediums within the paint mixture in order to get a variation of intensity. That is only a recent thing, because I have only started to understand how yellow, for example, can vary in tone, even in one brush stroke, and how you can manipulate that to enable you to say something – not only about the painting, but also about the colour you're using at the time. For me, colour is about immediacy. Since I started painting, people have said that I use beautiful colour. I respond to this by asking them to look beyond the colour and, to a certain extent, to see colour as an avenue, an entrance into the painting (not just an aesthetic).



Eamon colman, *Make the morning from the heart of night*, 2013, oil on Somerset paper 600 x 910mm

DB: Are you conscious of an audience when you are painting?

EC: When I'm painting, I'm painting for myself. Making something coherent is in the forefront of my mind. But every painting fails. There is no such thing as a fully formed, fully fledged painting. Yet within that failure there has to be a rhythm of language that is about nuances. I could spend a whole day just working on the grey, one little section of grey. And at the end of the day I come into the house, make a cup of tea and I can't sleep. I'm so excited about what

I'm doing that I have to go back out to the studio and re-evaluate. The hardest thing is to hold myself back from going at the canvas again.

I suppose my paintings are ambiguous in many ways, in order to let other people see things I've never seen. If I'm too prescriptive, if I paint something you recognise, I've failed. I think I try and paint in that gap between experience and memory. For instance, when you are driving along the motorway and something catches your eye and it's gone before you've seen it. Then, two days later, you suddenly remember the shape of it. That's what I'm trying to capture. I live with some of these paintings for years; they become part of my life. Every single morning I go into the studio and have to almost reinvent my enthusiasm for the painting I've been working on the night before.

DB: What routine do you follow in your studio practice?

EC: I do three things in my studio: I paint, listen to talk radio and read poetry. Poetry as an art form has been hugely beneficial to me. I 'write' my critique of a poem while I'm in the studio working on a painting. Part of how I live my life is through searching – for a vision, for a way into something. Perhaps I'm a poet who uses visual language to tell the story of

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the poem. It is the process that is of more interest to me than the final product: the search for the line, for the way through. I equate anxiety to tension: for any good painting to work it needs tension. It needs some form of failure within the painting to allow the work to have a life of its own.

DB: What does painting ultimately mean to you?

EC: Painting is food for me; it's what keeps me motivated. I get up in the morning because of painting. An awful lot of artists attach themselves to teaching institutions as a means of staving off economic insecurity. Unfortunately, I can't do that, because, for me, painting is like a twitch. If I don't have it, I get totally depressed and physically debilitated by the lack of studio time, so painting becomes that whole sense of being. George Steiner once wrote about the act of painting. He talked about the notion of walking through to the other side of the canvas where you can't put a mark wrong. Once you've experienced that, it's a leap of courage. It's about working through something.

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Visual Artists Ireland

The Representative Body for Visual Artists in Ireland

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Visual Artists Ireland
Ealaíontóirí Radharcacha Éire

Head Office
Central Hotel Chambers,
7/9 Dame Court,
Dublin 2

Tel: +353 (0)1 672 9488
Fax: +353 (0)1 672 9482
Email: info@visualartists.ie

Northern Ireland Office
109 - 113 Royal Avenue,
Belfast, BT1 1FF
Northern Ireland
Tel: +44 (0)28 9587 0361
Email: info@visualartists-ni.org

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