

A conversation with the artist  
Nigel Rolfe

NR You have such a strong intellectual place that we always go to, we always start to talk about politics, social politics, where does that stop and the work take over?

EC I think that fundamentally I am a storyteller, that's my initial spark. It's where the political comes into it - I'm very aware that people need to be able to tell their own stories and through the telling of their stories, their livelihoods, their way of interacting with the landscape that all feeds back into the work. This painting here 'Made Before Morning, Sheltered time', is based loosely on crosses and the idea of going to a cross to tie your woe. You'll find that, all around County Kilkenny there are crosses that have schoolbooks from kids doing their exams or people with ailments. Each tie their little symbols onto the crosses and it's that link to the past and pagan times I'm fascinated with.

NR Talk through the formats - there's horizontal, square, - why square? Why the more traditional landscape and why this very extended long series, which could be termed the letterbox series?

EC All my paintings are about a struggle for placement that is the placing the elements on the canvas. I spend weeks making drawings before each painting. The use of the square format comes from an attempt to create balance and harmony. The challenge is to lead the eye through the picture plain.

NR Hasselblad developed the square format in photography in the 20's exactly at the same time as the United Nations and the idea of humanitas, it's the only truly abstract format.

EC As I am painting I will turn the canvas. For me the canvas has to work every which way and as I become comfortable with a square format I do not want to become complacent with it. I also use a very large mirror, which helps me analyze the mark making and the colour. The marks must also work in the reverse, it's a form of lens I suppose. So I constantly analyze myself by changing formats.

NR So if 'Made before Morning, Sheltered Time' is stimulated by a 'place' and was an early one in the (painting of Salt River ) process, others are landscapes?

EC As I started to paint the exhibition, the idea of both the metaphysical landscape and the actual landscape started to bind. I was also reading a lot of African and magic realism writings.

NR So what is the relationship you talk about between African and Irish mythology?

EC After you open yourself up to another culture or cultural differences you realise that core cultures aren't that different. Some form of humanity binds us all and that form of humanity doesn't come from the people it comes from the people's relationship with their landscape.

NR Other paintings seem to be in motion, as if you are passing through this psychical map, its not only a place, it's a memory, a dream, a kind of poetry about place, you seem not to be fixed now, it doesn't describe what's in front of you.

EC I'm very influenced by writers like Ben Okri who talks about the reality of your ancestors, their deeds and history are always with you.

NR You talked about being in the city and going to the landscape - then the nature of the painting at one hand is being very honest and direct and feeling like a modern primitive. Now these are more sophisticated, nearly absolute abstract paintings with signs of realism, so there is quite a range.

EC I never want to stray one hundred percent to abstract because I find that abstract art doesn't capture that sense of humanity that I want it to.

NR Boy, is it very close in these though!

EC It's like if you're playing tennis, trying to keep the ball on the baseline. Time and time again I'm trying to keep it on the

baseline- that area between reality and something else.

NR How do you approach it then? You go from the child in you, the naive in you, to some which are incredibly sophisticated and very opaque in terms of that realism. They don't look like anything- they look like an experience! The factor, which is common to all of them in relationship to that text of Africa or India that is the colour and light. As if the colour and the light has stayed with you in response to what is here in Ireland and that seems universal. They all have quite vivacious colours, quite a gorgeous sense of light about them.

EC When I walk a landscape like the riverbanks of these salt rivers, I look at how the light affects shape and form. I make some sketches in a little notebook but mainly I try to feel the landscape. This is an emotional response. The colour I see is in the hedgerows, a small blue flower a piece of moss. These colours along with the strong northern light we have in Ireland gives the grounding to that emotional response.

I also look for colour contrasts, rust reds beside livings greens. What excites me are the small happenings in a bigger landscape and how weather can affect the intensity of the moment. A cold northern light for instance has a totally different effect on colour than that present on a hot summers day. My response is simple but in order to portray that simplicity, quite sophisticated colour combinations are used.

NR Last week I was talking to graduate students in painting and this is probably the most abstract work I have seen and might be more abstract than you realize! Abstract painting always seems to me the most intellectually demanding to try to talk about because it's very hard to put words to things, which are ineffable. The letterbox series nearly have a cartooning in them, are you aware of that?

EC Yes, I'm also aware of their surrealist sense, that things float out of sync.

NR They are all quite small these paintings, why?

EC This exhibition has been the most intense that I've painted to date, although I always feel the same way upon finishing a series. In that my traditional way of painting has been to work on a couple at a time. This time I was concentrating on one piece and making all of the drawings for it. There was the constant referral back to 'Eamon what is it you are trying to say in this piece'. So I'd make colour combinations, drawing placement experiments and I'd cut every sheet of paper to the exact dimension as the canvas. For some of them I refer back to my original drawings and I draw from them. It is always about trying to keep that intensity of what I am trying to say alive.

NR When we were talking about the variants of the approach to the work, you seem open to allow it to be quite wide.

EC Because each piece is about a particular response in time and space it has to be true to itself, therefore I was trying desperately not to allow outside influences of other paintings to creep in. I was trying to make each painting a unique experience to that moment in time and space.

NR If what I see is maybe six different strands inside that framing texture, the magic realism and the idea of your foreign travels this memory of light and colour in an Irish context – are there six shows in this one show?

EC No, because they are all about a journey through that sense of placement on the canvas, the idea of dealing with light in the near abstract, even in pure abstraction light is emitted. Therefore putting that ball very near the baseline challenges how you keep that sense of light. If you look at the paintings you will see this sense of journey into an exploration of how light affects colour, how colour affects the placement on the canvas, how the shape affects the light and the colour the placement, so each one is about that learning process.

NR Would you ever see in the letterbox series the translation up to a completely epic scale because they are three dimensional, and some of the others I feel too the sense of size in terms of not

measuring them with the eye anymore, and they are quite interesting those in that they are simple, but the range in the simplicity is a complicated text, 'Reeds and grasses, sing reflections' that's the one I find the most cartoon-like, a bit like an animation or a story telling, the story telling hand and the range they go through, but the format is so set that it binds them all together.

NR Tell me about that square one there.

EC I've called it 'A Field Without A Name Holds A Legend'.

NR Is it a stoop of corn, a rick?

EC Yes, it came about through a series of conversations with the local farmers in Kilkenny, stories ranging from how you can save the corncrake to 'remember when we used to cut it with a scythe' and this sense of them feeling divorced from the rhythm of the land through new technology..

'A Limb of Water Between Bog and Soul' came about from having walked the riverbanks in County Kilkenny and the South East. The title for the whole show is "Salt River" which relates to the tidal flow of the river Barrow and the idea of these limbs of water coming inland. In County Kilkenny the River Barrow travels quite a distance inland from New Ross all the way up into Inistioge.

NR So intellectually there's a text and the framing devices, then there's the work itself, when do you identify when you are doing it that you are 'on stream' ?

EC I probably don't know I'm on stream until the last 20 minutes in the making of a painting - I've got an idea at the back of my head that is informing the mark making. It is through the process of making the actual marks and because I love thin paint, I would put a mark on and if it isn't working it just gets wiped off.

NR So in the performance of these you talked about them being quite long, in it being the last twenty minutes does the performance come to a kind of crescendo like a pitch for you?

EC Yes, George Steiner talked about the process of contemporary painting- that there is a moment when the artist goes to the other side of the canvas. That the sense of where you are going is the border between conscious thought and the sub conscious. That suddenly everything is happening and you know instinctively that it is right and I suppose, my task is to give myself the time and space in which to reach that moment.

NR The curation and edit in this is already wider than I would work to as a photo based artist, much more like a performance for me where it could be a moving text, but when that performance comes in certain works, what do you do about all the other works in the series towards that, does that moment get higher?

EC Yes, it gets higher, but I also know instinctively - there is a moment that you reach in the painting process where you either know that this can be taken that stage further or it's never going to go there.

NR How has that changed since the last exhibition- Africa 22° - 35° S?

EC The change has been honesty. The fact that I now find myself living and working in a rural landscape means that rather than leave the city to gather ideas I am living amongst the inspiration all the time. Maybe as I am getting older one becomes more confident in the approach. The outside influences start to diminish. After a while all of those artists that I have really enjoyed and found stimulating become onlookers at the back of the studio.

NR What about the range between you as a poet, inventor, a dreamer, where they are more psychological and more mental? Then the more physical ones are more about something or somewhere tangible, the cross and the hayrick, whereas the others are in a dream state - would they be thought of as surrealist?

EC That's why you get that huge range in my exhibitions, it isn't just about individual paintings, it's about working through something..... If you take the notion of dreams - all dreams

have their roots in a reality. Most of my influences come from listening to people's stories and interpreting their dreams.

NR Like being a dream catcher!

EC Yes, like being a dream catcher. It's a very abused idea in the contemporary world. You know that within our built environment the one thing we try to squeeze out is the whole notion of dreaming and that your dreaming has to be ambitious. Whereas in reality your dreams are all about trying to connect. How does the reality of my dream world connect ?- that's why you get this big range from something that is tangible and experienced. You may question "is that a mountain" or "I'm not too sure what it is I'm looking at".

NR Are they done on the flat, or on the wall?

EC They're made on the wall, the initial drawings are made on the ground.

NR Does that ever erode, does the drawing become the painting and the painting the drawing sometimes and would you ever show the drawings?

EC Very rarely. I've shown one or two drawings over the years, the drawings are my private musings, like my diary! They go from being "drawings" which are quite tight, getting looser and looser as I'm becoming more in tune with what it is I'm trying to say. That is what the paintings are for me - they're about an exploration.

I'm constantly questioning what it is I'm trying to do and what it is I'm looking at. I probably feel nearer to performance artists in that way, in that, I always feel whilst watching a performance artist, perform, that there is a tension present. A tension of trying to get what is in your gut out and that's, for me, the same as painting. It's always about trying to get what is inside out in an honest way.

NR Probably a fly on the wall to us would find this opaque, at the best of times obscure - I was just thinking of what you are carrying in your head at any time, as an artist is ineffable anyway.

EC Is it that language doesn't actually convey what it is that you are trying to say?

NR Or the opposite of what you feel.

EC It's almost like a form of yoga for me. I go into the studio every morning, I turn on my heat, I go back out to the kitchen, I make a coffee and then I come back in. I paint lots of sheets of newspaper white and I lay down each sheet on the ground then I get a paintbrush, using a mixed blue paint I flex my wrist. I look at mark making and it becomes a meditative state that can go on for two hours or so until I feel that I've got myself in tune to make the marks that actually tell the story I'm trying to tell.

NR I really like these, they feel gritty, they feel like there's a resistance to something else, and I'm more at the edge of abstraction than you are with them probably. But I do think there's a huge range here and intellectually that discussion is really a complex one. A working artist's life that you can see and what you should be really proud of I think is the availability to really let the cat out of the bag. In terms of it being pretty broken, pretty vulnerable and then it going right through a whole gambit to a much more sophisticated graphic device of a foreground, middle ground, background, how the colour is put together, what is working in lots of ways.

What about sentimentality - how do you put manners on this so it's dignified? It's a tough question; I just did it in my last show by pruning ruthlessly.

EC I prune, but I also feel sentimentality can be about the response to colour. I think men have a real problem with colour, in general colour has been viewed traditionally in a very sentimental way. What I'm trying to do articulate through colour is a personal emotion and how we respond to something emotionally is instinctive and personal.

NR Do you think it's fair to introduce the colour in a culturally transforming way, from your travels to Middle America, Thailand,

India and Africa.

EC All of the colours here are found in the Irish landscape

NR But it's richer and warmer probably.

EC I'm doing that deliberately. I'm looking at the opposites to the greens and the reds, the oranges and so on, it's about how I actually see the world. I see the world through colour, that's how I've always read the world.

NR I always see it as grey!

EC It's also about inward looking at art, what I want to see is passion and passion is a word I find is so out of fashion. I want to feel a tightening in my gut, go wow! Jesus! it's fucking great! and that's what happens when I'm painting. That's where I use colour and that's what I mean about that last twenty minutes in forming a painting, suddenly I feel my blood pressure starts to go up a little.

NR What about talking a bit about the relationship of drawing and fields, this mark, this sign, the wave that you talk about as a wrist movement and the drawing is like drawing for sculpture. It's a physical drawing, it's not a linear drawing, they're not like line drawings filled in but they're quite field-like. How about them becoming figurative?

EC It starts off purely as a mark on canvas being built up, even though these are my stories they can also be yours. That's when abstract art is really good in that it gives you an in – like looking at clouds! I spent my childhood lying on my back in the garden looking at the clouds and finding shapes that would suddenly disappear and mould into something else.

The drawing aspect for me is about two things; it's about coming to terms with the shape that I have elected on, whether it be a white butterfly shape or hay stack for instance. Then it is all about placement on the canvas, what it does in relation to the other elements I'm using. In traditional drawing it is about getting to know your subject matter through the mark making. For me I'm using the same process in quite an abstract way to find out what is

happening on the canvas.

NR When do you know what you are identifying?

EC Probably again it's through the act of drawing that I know what I'm identifying - I find that a really difficult question to answer- to articulate what is instinctive!.

NR Well we know in that one (A field without a name holds a legend) it's a hayrick, that one (Made before morning, sheltered time) it's a cross, these are colour field paintings, they are shifts in colour!

EC Take the drawing element away from them and they become pure colour field paintings, but at my soul I'm still a landscape painter. Each are based in the landscape of the mind that are peopled by the things that go on inside my head rather than what is happening outside. Drawing for me is all about rooting the colour. I constantly question how you give colour meaning.

NR You're quite expressive, the hand is quite strong and then goes to being more dreamlike or more absent. In some paintings the hand is very present, you are showing us the strength of the mark but also the breakdown of the mark and then in others a range of washes, more sensitive more ephemeral. Do you think of yourself as an expressive under that credos of de Kooning or Jackson Pollock?

EC I'm very intrigued by American abstract artists, by that period in art history and how the true human condition is expressed through both uncertainty and certainty.

NR Part of me would struggle for those two polarities being set free so that the expressionist be more expressionist and you can see that dialectic between the dream, the more sophisticated overlays.

EC Scale also affects that!

NR They are quite small?

EC On the bigger work- on the really big pieces 14 ft x 16ft I allow the brush strokes, the physical action to dominate much more. Whereas for these new paintings to make them work I have to actually put a control on what it is I'm trying to do.

NR Do you see force of hand carrying truth as an expressionist and what is the conversation then when you become this filter, like they are veils, what happens to the sense of truth in the hand?

EC Two things happen, one is my actual passionate response to the paintings - all of my paintings especially in this series have a certain tension and also a response to the world around me. I have a passionate belief in the living process. While these paintings are paintings that are inside my head, they are certainly never about the dark side of the inside my head. They are always about my excitement which is quite childlike at times. I remember exactly my feeling upon discovering the cross with all these things tied to it and suddenly realizing this has been going on for millennia. How I filter that excitement is through the drawing and the mark making process. I aim to allow that excitement on the one hand and the tension on the other come together.

NR Do you ever take photographs?

EC Yes and I take a lot of photographs of the light

NR So when you were in Africa recently...

EC Yes, but also in the studio, for instance I use paper as a palette, when a colour doesn't work the paper gets bound up into a ball and thrown into a corner. The other day while in the studio I suddenly saw the light falling on the paper with all its blobs of colour.....

NR These are oil?

EC Yes and I mix the paint on paper because I like the,

NR Resistance of the paper.

EC        Yeah, but I'm constantly trying to get a colour that is just that little richer, that has more depth of colour than the first mix, constantly trying to push it to get the colour that I have inside my head. If it isn't working the colour that's on the palette will influence what I'm trying to get so I just roll it up and start over again.