Skills

Passive Portraits

HEIDI WICKHAM DISCUSSES THE EVOLUTION OF HER ART PRACTICE.

WE START SCHOOL with a great confidence in mark making, uninhibited by rules; we glue and cut and scrawl, just enjoying the process. Like most children, I picked up a crayon at the age of about two and started drawing. Growing up in a home with a lot of creativity really helped – my mother was passionate about literature and theatre and the walls were full of art and curios collected from our travels. When I was nine, I met Tony Hart at our village fete and asked him how I could become an artist. He kindly replied that I must follow the art exam route leading to university and just stick with it, if that was my life choice. After A-levels, I studied at West Surrey College of Art and then Bristol University, completing a BA in Fine Art in 1989.

One thing they don't tell you about in art school, is how incredibly hard it is to stay making art afterwards. With no studios, helpful technicians, materials or uninterrupted making time, it was impossible to continue with the welded sculptures I'd been so crazy about. So, I sketched whilst travelling around living in a bus with my partner, baby and dog. It was only when I had settled in a house with my new husband and second baby that I started making art again with any conviction. I started small. A local gallery took on a few of my drawings. I worked exclusively with charcoal on paper, but unable to afford to frame the work, most of it was sold as unframed sketchbook pieces. To survive, I participated in FÁS schemes and ran art classes for children and adults, all the while developing my drawing skills through practice and life drawing classes. Still reluctant to change career paths, I set up a studio in the garden and worked on making drawings while raising a young family. Most of my contemporaries will be familiar with the clock-watching, as 3pm approaches and you know that you have to put down the brushes and put your parent head on again. I emailed galleries, sent images on CD discs and generally knocked on doors until I had a couple of galler-

ies taking on my work and selling it. There was a definite moment about ten years ago, when I started identifying as an artist – this is my job and I love it. I started submitting to the Royal Academies and amazingly was successful with all of them, first or second time round, which really helped with my confidence as an artist.

My art is animal themed. In the Welsh cottage where I was born, at the foot of the great Skirrid Mountain, we were never without a family pet. I have documented a wide range of animals, both domestic and wild, including endangered species, such as the bee and the polar bear, with dogs and hares being recurring subjects. My animal portraits are largely passive. I like a certain level of melancholy; my palette, though full of colour, is muted and gloomy most of the time. I use charcoals and pastels in a traditional drawing process, but my work feels like painting, as I use liquid medium to mix the chalks on the canvas. I keep the pastel moving fluidly on the surface by adding a concoction of water and water-based varnish. My studio is full of jam jars containing a sort of charcoal soup that can form the most beautifully muted colours over endless visits to the canvas. I work in layers, sometimes allowing the colours to stay opaque, but more often diluting them, until I get the sort of texture I like. I gradually had to move away from paper, as my robust drawing technique usually ended up destroying the surface. Using canvas as a support transformed the way I put down marks. I am drawn to animal art in the galleries and museums I visit. Although it may be perceived as a rather unfashionable and sometimes mawkish subject, I think the animal image will endure beyond all other artforms.

Heidi Wickham is an artist based in Sligo. Her solo exhibition at the Hamilton Gallery, 'A Soot Peddler's Banquet', has been postponed until next year.

heidiwickham.com

Heidi Wickham, *Terrier*, 2019, charcoal, pastel and acrylic on canvas; photograph by Steve Wickham, courtesy of the artist

From Artist's Book to Online Artwork

NIALL DE BUITLÉAR OFFERS INSIGHTS INTO CODING A WEB-BASED ARTWORK DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

DURING 2019, I became interested in using coding in my art practice to explore abstract imagery that I was using in drawing, painting and print. I began using Processing, an open source graphical library and integrated development environment (IDE), which was developed at MIT to enable artists to develop software projects (processing.org). I experimented with some basic programs using modular graphic elements to generate animations.

Around about this time, I was also thinking back to an earlier artist's book I had made and of the possibility of revisiting it. The book was based around pairs of words forming binary oppositions, such as 'life' and 'death'. For each pair of antonyms, a thesaurus was used to generate a chain of successive synonyms to bridge the gap between them. These lists of words were presented in a circular format. It now occurred to me that by adding motion to the loops of words, the work could be presented as a projection on the floor. The viewer could stand in the centre, as words rotated around them like a whirlpool.

After testing this idea with a video animation, I realised it would make more sense to code a piece of software that could run indefinitely, without coming to an endpoint and restarting. My original attempt at this used Processing, but the animation was not smooth. It became clear that the level of computing power that Processing required to display multiple animations was excessive. I discussed the problem with a friend and software developer, Russell Davies, who suggested using CSS animation. CSS stands for Cascading Style Sheets and, along with HTML and Javascript, is one of the basic technologies used to create webpages. While HTML is used to define the elements on a webpage, CSS is used to control the appearance and positioning of these elements by applying a 'style'. CSS animations are an efficient means of creating online animations, by repeatedly updating the style applied to a webpage element. Javascript is used to make changes to CSS, enabling interactivity.

Once I concluded that the project could be developed using CSS, I decided an online version of the artwork was worth exploring. It would take me a step closer to realising a gallery installation, as the website could later be projected as an installation anywhere in the world. Following a successful application to the Arts Council of Ireland's COVID-19 Crisis Response Award, I began developing the project in early May.

There are many valuable free online web development resources, which I relied on heavily during the development of my website. W3schools contains information on Javascript, CSS and HTML5 (w3schools.com); as does Mozilla's MDN web docs (developer.mozilla.org). Stackoverflow (stackoverflow.com) is a forum where you can post questions to be answered by other developers and is particularly useful for resolving more specific and challenging problems. Google Chrome's developer tools is a useful way to identify errors and can be used to preview your website on phones and tablets. I wrote my code using the Atom text editor which is free, though others are available (atom.io).

Niall de Buitléar, *Onym*, 2020, interactive website; courtesy of the artist

There were numerous challenging moments during this project, when I thought I was almost finished, only to find a significant amount of work was still needed. This included the discovery of the need for an entirely different way of interacting with the work for mobile phone users. The low point in the development process came after I spent a couple of days successfully changing how the audio works on the website. Upon completion, I spent 20 minutes tweaking the positioning of some elements, which somehow resulted in the entire website ceasing to function. The most recent functioning version that I was able to recover was four days old. Thankfully, I still had the code from the broken version of the website for reference. I was able to go through this forensically and add each piece of code carefully into the four-day-old version. While this wasn't pleasant, the rebuilding processing resulted in a rigorous reassessment and clarification of code that had accumulated piecemeal over a number of weeks, with a much-improved result.

This taught me a valuable lesson in the importance of version control. A version control system records changes to a set of files over time, so that you can recall specific versions later. The most common of these is an open-source tool called Git (git-scm.com). Github.com offers a way to use the features of Git with a visual interface in browser. A useful feature of Git is 'branching'. When adding a new feature to the site, a parallel copy of the project, known as a 'branch', can be created. Work provides a safe way of testing out ideas, without overwriting files in the main branch until you are ready. For hosting I chose Netlify, a hosting platform that can be connected to a Github repository (netlify.com). When there is a commit made to the main branch, the changes are automatically deployed to the live website.

The website went live in early-June and I hope to use this online work as the basis for a floor-based gallery installation in the near future (onym.ie).

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