



Graeme Todd *Hermit House V* 2018, acrylic, ink, pencil, gesso, varnish on MDF, 105x122cm

*The following conversation is an edited, abridged version of an artist talk at LG Gallery, London between Graeme Todd and Scott McCracken.*

SM: I recently visited a Bernard Frize show and it got me thinking about what all painters have to do, on a very fundamental level, which is filling space. How does a painter fill space? Frize uses a systematic approach of horizontal and vertical brushstrokes of varying lengths and widths creating a grid-like structure and through that he fills the space of his paintings. Let's start talking about the two most recent paintings, *Hermit House V* and *Hermit House VI* and about how the pictorial space operates? From what I can see it's process-led, the decision-making is happening on the surface?

GT: That's right. I've been painting for quite a long time now. I finished college in Dundee in 1985 and I've been working as an artist for that whole period of time. The way I've been working over the past 2 or 3 years reveals a cyclical activity, and when I was making these two new paintings, the type of mark making, the directness of them, reminded me of how I was working in the 1980s and 90s. It's interesting thinking about Frize's work; it's about the brushes, and the things you put in your hand to make the marks on the surface and the surface itself makes the work and gives it its character. It's similar with my new paintings. I started using pencils, crayons, dry types of materials that I hadn't used for a while. Over the past twenty or so years the drawing in my work has been characterised more by fine ink drawing, reminiscent of Northern Renaissance landscape drawing, like in Altdorfer, Huber or Dürer or Japanese ink drawing. By putting a different material in your hand and coming from a slightly different angle, the look of the painting and the way it can be read changes quite a lot.

SM: Would you say you are drawing with paint, or do you see what you're doing as "painting"?

GT: There's a part of me that's more naturally drawn towards draughtmanship, particularly with line but there's this other aspect, of working in a broad, open-ended way with paint, of creating surfaces, textures or 'floating spaces'. My work for a while has utilized how those two things sit with each other.

SM: You use acrylic, ink, and varnishes, which gives this richness to the surface. I'm always surprised by the intensity and the depth that you're able to achieve in the paintings using acrylic. At what point did layering with varnish enter the work?

GT: The layering process is my way into painting. I was in the National Gallery today and looking at a late Titian painting and I thought this is really painting, you can see the paint's been pushed around on the surface, he's describing these forms with paint in what seems a very direct and malleable way. With me, one thing happens, then another thing, then another and, over a period of time, a dialogue is built up with the different elements in the work. I split them up. One has to remember to deliberately put one tool down and then to pick another up to do the job you need to do. So, I'm working with pencil or a pen, then I have to remember to put that down, and then pick up a broad brush and use varnish or a wash of acrylic. The reason I use acrylic is



Graeme Todd *Hermit House VI* 2018, acrylic, ink, pencil, gesso, varnish on MDF, 105x122cm

because it dries quickly and I'm able to seal a day's activity with varnish, and then work on top of that. The mark making is always very direct, it is as it is. There aren't sketches for these paintings, they are worked directly onto the surface. Everything is being mixed live, in the now.

SM: Is there an element of risk, or of chance? There's no rehearsal happening?

GT: Yes, there is a strong element of risk and of improvisation. It's about working in the "now". The work is live, there isn't a testing out. Recently I spent two months in Monteluco in Umbria, living half way up the mountain in a hermitage, so I was on my own, and I made a lot of small works. I kept notebooks, writing down ideas, and this is a thing I hadn't really done before. About a year and half later I looked at this notebook again and I decided to use one of the sketchbook drawings and transferred this in pencil onto a prepared surface. I mixed two or three drawings to get the skeleton of the painting and then it started to take its own logic. I had been looking at a book about Botticelli's drawings of the Divine Comedy so I'm picking out these details from his drawings – rising flames in fact - and dropping them in, sampling, on top of something I've generated before, but that has gone through a different material process. The materials I used are quite straightforward, things you can pick up quite easily, pens and pencils, because I work in a fairly small studio. These changes come in to the work and they change the way it looks and this suggests how I negotiate the immediacy of what I'm working on.



Graeme Todd *Needle Hill* 2001, acrylic, ink, varnish on MDF, 105x122cm

SM: Are you consciously trying to make the paint behave in a way that it looks like something else, a marker pen or a highlighter pen?

GT: I'm playing with it, seeing where it goes, but yes, I think it's interesting how visually interchangeable materials are. How using 'high' and 'low' art materials can play with expectations.

SM: What about looking back to one of the older paintings, *Needle Hill*. It seems like the priorities with how the paintings are constructed have changed? To me, in the earlier work, the linear, graphic element was of greater importance in how the painting operates compared to the more recent work, which is more about the variation of mark making and the paint application?

GT: Back then I was using found photographs from tourist books, postcards etc and the image came from, quite interestingly I thought, a 1930s Italian book written for German tourists. I selected the image, worked with a nib pen and put myself to working on that for a period of a day. When I was drawing I was concentrating on making the drawing, intensely and quite blinkered, and not especially thinking of the bigger picture. In the new works, the drawing is more compositional, it's more about the bigger picture and not referring to photography.

SM: You don't think of moves ahead, where you're planning what's coming next?

GT: There is a bit of that. What separates me from the artist I was in the 1980s is I've got more experience, I've made more work. I have acquired ways where I can make something that's going wrong, go right! It's improvisation. It's live, it's not formulaic because it's easy to fall into a certain way of doing things. Over the years, I've worked in layers of drawing, layers of colour, layers of paint and I've moved it around in different ways and I endeavour to keep it fresh, and not to allow it to become formulaic or predictable for me. I look for variations, I look to bring different things into the work. I'm doing formally quite serious things with pictorial space, the picture plane etc. but it's important that people can take pleasure in the work and I'm giving something that people can connect with and spend time with.

SM: It's the puzzle of figuring out how the painting is constructed?

GT: Yes. It's a puzzle that's without end. I don't have a problem with making things happen on the surface but, working in the way I do, the trickier part is understanding when it is, in fact, finished.

SM: Do you think of it in those terms, of at one point it being unfinished and you have to do something to make it finished, or is that too binary, too on or off? Is it more fluid - that the painting can exist in different states?

GT: Sometimes the painting becomes something else, it goes beyond me. I could fiddle endlessly but I think they get to a point when I genuinely don't know what else to do.



Graeme Todd *Hermit House IV* 2017, acrylic, ink, pencil, gesson varnish on plywood, 29x22cm



Graeme Todd *Mount Facenotseen* 2007-11, acrylic, ink, varnish on MDF, 105x122cm

SM: You've exhausted all possibilities?

GT: That's it, or I've probably got more interest in another painting. The image of the *Hermit House* came from the period in Italy I mentioned when I was being the hermit in the house, if you like. The house was a metaphor for the mind. If you get up close, you can see flowers and vegetation and I sampled those from a Dan Dare strip from the 1950s. I colonised the work with them, that's another way of putting it. I've been looking at those comics, I like publications from that period where you can see this simple way of printing, black, blue, yellow, red, and you see the same colours repeated because there is a limited palette. I like that economy, this is my red, this is my yellow, this is my blue.

SM: So, by working in a restriction, you actually have variety?

GT: The limitations are useful for me. There are all the other things I have up my sleeve I can reach for to bring into a painting to upset it. Diverting it from going down one route and taking it down another.

SM: The word 'disruption' springs to mind. You have found something in the painting but you're looking for ways to disrupt it?

GT: I start to get a certain sense that it's interesting or just better, to disrupt what's happening to make another sense, or a non-sense, that I can then respond to.

SM: What about the painting *Mount Facenotseen*?

GT: That painting has been in and out of the studio in different forms. It was shown as a different painting initially, then became a different painting when it came back to the studio again and was reworked. Sometimes when a work comes back I feel there is something else to be done, that it could now go some way further.

This painting has become so submerged, with a great many layers one thing on top of another. It conforms to my basic interests: a pictorial space which is basically coming from landscape – a landscape and a floating ground. The slashes are reminiscent of Fontana's slashes in paintings where he cuts through the surface but I'm interested in how the are colour works and how they disrupt the picture plane, in an almost festive way. I turned the painting on its side and dripped some white ink down and then dropped red ink on top so it chases itself down. It's an interesting way of getting a line, by using gravity and the fluidity of the ink. It's a line that looks like it's been made by masking tape but was made by letting the material do what it wants to do. That's an aspect of the work as well, finding out what the materials want to do, and what you can have them do.

SM: The varnish gives you marks that are sitting within the surface but also on the surface.



Graeme Todd *Opaque Constellations* 2016, acrylic, ink, pencil, gesso, varnish on MDF, 30x42cm

GT: The marks are contained in transparent layers of varnish like an ancient insect caught in amber. The painting *Opaque Constellations* is also about layering, not in transparent layers, but in opaque layers. So, adding something but obliterating something else at the same time, to get to another point. In the beginning there was a landscape on white in red, it's inked out with black and then the areas of opaque layering are on top. Instead of deepening the space, seeing through one thing to another, you have to look around it.

SM: Collaging with paint?

GT: Yes, like a collage but without sticking things on. Using white gesso, because white gesso is opaque and it covers what is underneath it. Instead of being an accumulation of these transparent layers it becomes something different. There is the passing of time in the making of the work and I want to make that show. There's a quote from a critic responding to the idea of Jackson Pollock's painting having no space, where he says "you could fly a spaceship through this."

SM: Was it Leo Steinberg?

GT: Yes, Leo Steinberg!



Graeme Todd *Mount Seethrougheye* 2017, acrylic, ink, gesso, varnish on plywood, 49x55cm

SM: He was talking about Giotto and painting as the window onto the world being a pre-industrial way of thinking but with a Pollock you can fly into it.

GT: Yes, there's no pictorial space for you to walk through but there's a miasmic, cosmic space you could fly through in a spaceship. I like that idea. It probably comes from watching sci-fi films as a kid. I like the invitation to move around them, to stop, to shift. Maybe a submarine or a spaceship would be useful. Where things change are important points in a painting, your eye goes to it.

SM: Points of difference.

GT: Yes, points of difference. I place these points of difference, parts of passivity, parts of activity. The viewer has to solve a puzzle that doesn't need to be solved. There's a pictorial space that's not giving it all up easily, you have to invest in a space. It requires a bit of effort on the part of the viewer.

SM: You can't be passive...

GT: Well...

SM: You could be, it's your choice to be passive.

GT: Yes, it's a choice but it's there if you want. People can take pleasure in moving through the painting, in being a bit baffled. Your ideas of the way things should look maybe change as well.

SM: It goes back to what you mentioned earlier, of time being in a painting. Unlike music, or film, or performance, which exist in durational, unfolding time, the painting is constantly live, constantly transmitting.

GT: It sits there and does its thing, one may not know what it's doing but it's doing it right now...in the National Gallery and seeing work from the past but seeing it in the now in its relevance to the now. Its activated by the viewer. These paintings are still doing their thing, it's not like the film that's ended where you have to go back to the beginning, it's all happening right now. It's not about being new; it's about being now.

SM: With the appropriation of the Fontana slash, you're not only imitating nature or imitating landscape, you're also imitating the history and the language of painting?

GT: It's the language of painting as picked out by me. One of my first influences as a young artist was Paul Klee. I liked that he used all sorts of materials, he separated things out. Everything was pulled apart but came back together again. I'm borrowing, and I'm using and I'm looking. You're looking for what you can find, but also importantly looking for what you're not finding.

SM: Talking of Paul Klee, he said 'art does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible'. The idea of looking and the visible is reflected in some of the titles, such as *Mount Facenotseen*, *Mount Seethrougheye*, *Opaque Constellations*. What purpose do the titles serve, do they support the painting? Could they be interchangeable or do the titles refer to the identity of specific paintings?

GT: I enjoy that the title will become associated with a painting over time, that it becomes its name. It's like if you have a child and you call her Naomi say, and that becomes her name. The Mount something-something form came from a book called the Classics of Mountains and Seas, an early Chinese book on mythical Chinese geography. There are fantastical accounts of mountains where the mundane and the fanciful or strange co-exist. I like place names. I grew up in Cumbernauld, a new town in Scotland where at some point in the planning process someone decides - let's name a street or an entire estate after types of tree, or of bird or of popular sportspeople. A place which didn't have a name which now has a name. The titles are given at the end. It's another thing thrown in to be thought about.

SM: What about the scale of the paintings? The scale is the most important first decision that you make, all the other marks have to relate to the outer four edges. The painting becomes a container, or a carrier, for what you put in so the scale determines every subsequent decision.

GT: The small scale works invite a certain kind of drawing. The larger ones wouldn't necessarily translate down. It's physically drawing from your wrist rather than drawing from your elbow. I want to make some large paintings for my next show, but I know I'll have to do different things.

SM: It goes back to the performance of painting, where you'll have a bigger stage to act on.

GT: I'll have to change my behaviour. In a big painting it's good to have things to draw you in. I want all my paintings to work from a distance, to send a message that's seen from a distance where you want to get close to it. It's about catching, drawing people in. The composition has to be robust from a distance. Working at college I see that students aren't looking in books as much, it's all online and a lot is preselected for you. I know that if a painting is doing what it should be doing then you have to come to it, you should want to do that.

SM: Speaking of the internet, in *In Which We Meet*, I see the series of dots as data being transmitted, signals which are all around us but which are invisible.

GT: There are a million messages flying around the room right now.

SM: Is that something you consider, when you're making these marks, that they refer to something else, "out there"?

GT: Absolutely. What is going out there in the world now? Making work like this in the world now you have to think of stuff like that but it can also be a compositional device, it's a veil that could be underwater perhaps... a series of veils that the viewer is invited to move through. It's a physical and intellectual way of moving through a space that's not been made by accident.



Graeme Todd *In Which We Meet* 2012, acrylic, ink, varnish on MDF, 90x70cm