

125 Years on: Figurative Painting Today

In 1886 a group of young British painters, fed up with the stuffiness of the British art establishment of that day, decided to branch out on their own and form an exhibiting group. The New English Art Club was born.

125 years later, it is interesting to take a look at what being a figurative painter and member of the New English means today, so I spoke with NEAC members David Parfitt, Arthur Neal, and Julie Held.

I joined David Parfitt in a quiet corner of a Richmond pub, my journalist flatmate's tape recorder in hand, to mull over all things painting. I asked David why he thinks that "painting what you see" is a relevant activity in a world where figurative painting can sometimes seem rather left behind by the sensationalist art that gets all the press coverage.



Sun and Steel – David Parfitt

"To anyone who ever felt prompted to contemplate the world we live in – to look at it, to sit and stare at it – drawing it makes complete sense. I can't see that the period matters, whether you're in the 1840's (the invention of photography) or the early sixties (the era of Pop Art)."

He goes on to say, "At the outset, if you paint something, if you write something, or if you put a couple of chords together on the piano, you do it primarily because you are interested. It is a question of curiosity about the world."

Miles Davis, a great hero of David's, was asked why he kept changing his music all the time. He answered, "Car crashes don't sound the same today as they did in 1947". To David, this was an incredibly revealing remark. And he sees a parallel in painting. "Sunsets in Turner's lifetime

didn't look the same as they do today, for various reasons. There were no airplanes flying through the sky, and the pollution, such as it was, was of a different nature. The whole look of the world in 2011 is completely different from 1811".

Arthur Neal expressed similar feelings to me over a crackly line from his home in Kent. "It is what interests you in the end." We were talking about responding directly to nature. He went on, "But what is nature? Nature is as much what happens on the palette as out there. I see things that give me a buzz. I have no idea why they give me a buzz, one has to pursue that a bit."



Trojans – Arthur Neal

For Arthur, the painterly accidents on palette and canvas are as crucial to the message as the subject is; whether it is the view through the studio door, the chair, or a group of figures. "I always painted chairs" he tells me. We agree on the significance of the studio chair without even a mention of Van Gogh or Gauguin.

"They become shelves", I laugh.

"All sorts of things. Saw benches!"

"Step ladders!"

Arthur says, "I've a wicker chair that I probably bought because it reminded me of the Gwen John chair. So I've painted that God knows how many times, but I do like chairs."

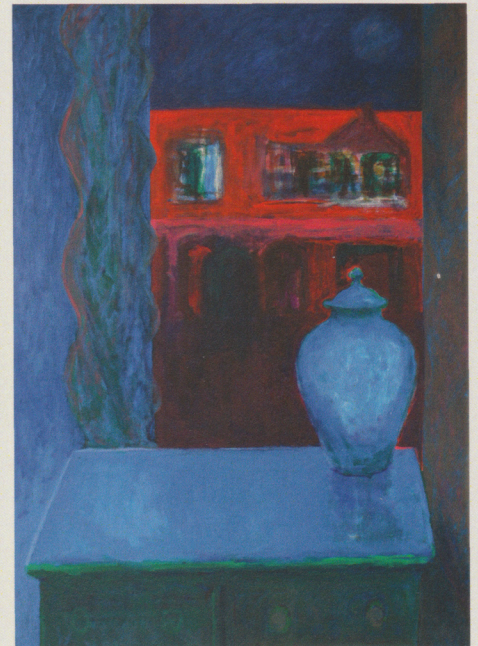
He goes on to explain how a painting may start out as a chair in a room but may rapidly become four figures on a beach (he lives by the sea). The metamorphosis is important – Arthur says that he turns his paintings round every five minutes as he works on them; they are constantly going round like a wheel.

"I pursue an image, and then as soon as an image becomes too clear or contrived I turn it

round and pursue another one". What is significant is that he keeps going until the end result rings true, pricks the consciousness, maybe reminds him of something.

"There is a painting that I called *Trojans*; which I really like. *Trojans* – I don't know why I called it that, but it probably just came into my head or perhaps my wife said it. But the painting depicts three people, which is like 'trois gens'. My daughter said it looks like a load of contraceptives. But I like the ambiguity of it; it's quite a flat painting, but it also has figurative elements. There are clearly three figures and almost a figure playing the violin on the right hand side. When that was finished it reminded me of my son playing the violin, it reminded me of being here at home, but it was also the solution to trying to get some extreme colours onto one surface."

David Parfitt said of Arthur Neal that he is almost an abstract expressionist – he is a figurative painter painting his own world.



Urn – Julie Held

Julie Held sees the sensitivity to the artist's visual world as a common thread among the New English as a group. She thinks that the traditional concerns of figurative painters – looking at the figure and the landscape, and the relationship of the figure to the canvas – hold together very well in the NEAC group shows.

Julie believes strongly in looking at the art of the past and tells me that she sees her work as coming from a tradition going back to the Renaissance, "if that doesn't sound too



NEAC artist **ALEX FOWLER** talks
with David Parfitt, Arthur Neal
and Julie Held

pretentious!" and that there is no cut-off date for works that interest her. "I am hugely influenced by work that is being made right up to this minute".

She shares my view that the principles that became famous in the 20th Century, the ideas of abstraction in painting and formalistic ideas, are actually evident through the whole history of art.

Julie talks about how Rothko and Matisse, in the way that they divide up and compose the canvas, are dealing with age-old concerns such as geometry, proportion and the importance of the flat surface, ideas as crucial to a painter like Titian, whose paintings "are full of flat against space, space against the picture plane".



Across the River – David Parfitt

This is why, in a painting such as Titian's 'Bacchus and Ariadne', you see a careful choreographing of the shapes across the canvas in order to create a sense of drama and rhythm appropriate to the dramatic event being depicted. And were one to ignore the figurative elements one would see a beautiful abstract arrangement, an intense blue, as powerful as any blue in Matisse, balanced by lively, swirling, punctuating warm in the trees and figures below. Turn it upside down and you have one of the world's great abstract paintings.

When Julie talks about Rothko taking on the flat of the canvas but within that creating these incredible depths of field, and Bonnard, who did something similar but within the domestic setting, it makes me think that the distinction we think exists between figurative and abstract is not really very helpful.

David reminded me how Bonnard, in order to try and eliminate the anecdotal detail, kept the still lives he painted in another room, poked his head around the door to have a look and then went back and painted what he remembered between the door and the canvas. How magnificent to attempt to paint the sensation of something seen for an instant. There is no one better at it than Bonnard. He recognised the importance of hanging on to that first impulse that caused him to choose to paint from that particular motif; an impulse that might initially have been manifested in a quick sketch in his diary alongside a note about the day's weather.

Bonnard was always drawing. It is what Julie Held sees as critical for every kind of artist whether student or professional, painter or designer. "All good visual work, whether it is painting, design, textile design or ceramics, comes out of drawing. Because the forms and rhythms and patterns within nature are the impetus for abstractions and synthesis into other forms of art."



Market I – Julie Held

Drawing as a means of engaging with the world, and as a means of analysis and synthesis seems to be crucially important for David, Arthur and Julie, in their artistic practices each in their own very individual ways.

And are we embracing our early member Walter Sickert's spirit of experimentation and enquiry, as we were encouraged to do by Wendy Baron, the great authority on Sickert, when she opened the NEAC Annual Exhibition

a few years ago? I would say so. For some time now the New English has increasingly been showing figurative painting in a broader sense, and the most recently elected members reflect this trend. It would have been inconceivable in the past to show the range of painting that we now exhibit under the umbrella of the New English Art Club. So there has been an extraordinary shift, and yet the NEAC has remained true to its original ideals.

Can drawing and painting the world around us still have validity and vitality today? The New English Art Club's answer would be a resounding "Yes!" Its members are, as John Updike put it, drinking a toast to the visible world.



Passing by – Arthur Neal

And of course, the society's camaraderie is greatly valued. So many of the members I have spoken with say how much they look forward to the Annual Exhibition. As Arthur points out, "Painting is an isolated business and it is good to be part of the New English. We laugh a lot on those occasions. We don't go out to the pub as much as we used to, but we managed it this year!"

Sounds like a challenge – fancy a pint?

Alex Fowler was elected to the NEAC in 2004. Following his diploma at Chelsea College of Art and Design, he graduated from Edinburgh University with an MA Hons in History of Art. He rounded out his formal education with a diploma in portrait painting from Heatherley's. www.alexanderfowler.co.uk.