

Mapping the Text

Benjamin Cousen in conversation with Sarah Whitfield

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SW: Can we begin by talking about the origins of these works? The titles come from well-known books such as George Orwell's 1984, Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*, Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, etc.

BC: I wanted these works to reflect the way we read. Reading is what formed me and so in that sense my work is autobiographical. I read a lot as a child and I still do. It may have something to do with a feeling of people not having roots anymore.

SW: In what sense?

BC: Well, not having roots in the land, and the fact that there is too much choice in the world. There is always that question: who am I? I am who I am through reading. It comes from inside. I always assumed there wouldn't be much of me in these works but there is.

SW: You must surely care enough about a particular book to choose it as a subject? So the choice says something about you. Are you able to say what determines that choice?

BC: I can't really predict what will suggest a painting. You can't force a text into being what you would like it to be so I can't plan it in advance - I just know when something might work. It might seem like a simple way of working but there are difficulties. There is an unconscious thing going on. If I am formed by texts - and to some extent we are all formed by language - a lot of it gets buried in the unconscious. We repress it.

SW: This sounds a bit like 'post-modern' thinking.

BC: Possibly. I first thought of working with texts after reading Jacques Derrida and becoming fascinated by the way texts can outlive their authors. We had a course at university where I did art history. It was very traditional connoisseur-type teaching but there was this one guy who did the post-modern stuff and he really woke me up. Derrida interested me.

SW: Are you sometimes surprised by your reactions to books?

BC: Sometimes. A friend lent me Isaac Asimov's 'Foundation' books. In fact, I wasn't that interested in reading them before I began, but I liked the descriptions of space and the idea of flying between planets so I knew immediately that I would make some 'Asimov' paintings. I also knew that these would specifically open up possibilities of the form reflecting the subject, so that these circular paintings would become like the field of a telescope. The colours can hint at those things that only certain scientific instruments can find, at the limits or beyond sensual perception.

SW: Do you make a distinction between different 'genres', biography, history, fiction?

BC: I began with books that have directly affected mankind in recent history - *Mein Kampf*, for example, or Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, but now I think novels are particularly interesting because in them you have lives refracted in many different ways. Reading is a mystery - like a lot of things. That is to say, reading a book is about forgetting and remembering at the same time.

There is a strange parallel between the way you have to remember the words in order to understand the meaning but then forget them in order to continue following the plot. Making these paintings is like turning a text into another language.

SW: Like a translation?

BC: In the sense that Walter Benjamin says that a translation can be a continual refinement of the original and is therefore something new. And, by the way, these 'theoretical' ideas may not be really accurate, I mean, I haven't studied Benjamin rigorously on this. But I regard it as a legitimate stance in art, if not in academia, to be inspired by something as it sparks up the mind. If that is a misreading, then that is still okay. It might even be more interesting.

SW: Do you see the painting as another layer on top of the original?

BC: I see it more as a distillation of the original. But the important thing is making something new, something that hasn't existed before.

SW: And that is made through your use of colour and the way you concentrate on the authors' references to colour?

BC: As a reader I find the references to colour very directive. There is a difference between 'A man walks into a garden' and 'A man wearing a red hat walks into a garden'.

SW: I take it that the colours mentioned in a book and the order in which they appear in the text provide a very literal structure for the painting?

BC: That's right, but it's more complicated than that. It's very carefully worked out before I start. First I have to decide what is a colour and what isn't. For example, names like Mr Brown in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, or Goldstein in Orwell's *1984*, do these count as colours? If it's a case of names deliberately chosen by the author to make a point then I incorporate them in the same way as I would the simple descriptive names of colours such as 'red', 'blue' etc. There are also words that obviously suggest colours such as 'canaries', 'snow', 'blood', but I have also created my own problems so that words like 'glitter' or 'glow', or phrases like 'blue drift' have also to be considered. It can become subjective quite quickly; 'Glitter' can be a lot of things.

SW: By bending the rules, so to speak, I can see you allow a wider range of suggestion than if you limited yourself to the basic words for colours. But every colour has its own range of tone. So when the text just says 'blue' how do you decide on a particular blue?

BC: I am usually guided by the text. For instance, for 'blue', I would probably use cobalt as a standard blue - 'soft blue' would be a lightened ultramarine. I am very much attached to what the author is saying. They are in control in their way and I am in control in other ways. But I do mix the colours - I can put quite a few colours into a syringe.

SW: Let's talk about your use of the syringe.

BC: I wanted to layer the paint but not in the way you use a brush to apply layers of colour. I needed to find a way of working that would retain the integrity of each layer. The syringe was a way of doing that and I couldn't think of another way. As it happened I had a friend whose father was a vet and he gave me some syringes to start with.

SW: Can you describe how you make a painting?

BC: It's like mapping a text. *Things Fall Apart*, for example, is a book that had a huge effect on me as a sixteen year old. The Nigerian author is writing about the way the white man systematically set about destroying the Ibo culture. The bright colours spreading across the surface follow the text - as does the white 'invasion'. I'm not imposing this on the text or on the painting. You can see how the white paint begins to invade the painting, building up so much that in the end it buries the old culture underneath. It is a pleasing consequence that the form the painting eventually realises is such a direct illustration of the politics of the novel. Similarly, with *Crime and Punishment* you can tell from the paint what is happening in the novel. You can see from the lines of red at what point Rodion Raskolnikov kills the old woman. The yellow is where Sonia appears, and the colour refers to the yellow card she has to carry as a prostitute. Likewise, there is a disturbance when you realise that the pretty gold in Levi's *If This is a Man* refers mostly to extracted teeth at Auschwitz. So if you know the text there is a way you can have a dialogue with the painting. I feel quite strongly about the integrity of the text, although of course nobody would notice if I didn't stick to it as closely as I do.

SW: Would you think of it as cheating if you didn't stick closely to the text?

BC: In a way, but how can you cheat about something you have made up? You have to invent your own rules.

SW: In a work like *1984* where the lines are particularly dense and thickly layered the 'mapping' seems even more painstaking.

BC: Yes, it's much more like a map of a book. If you look at the horizontal edge of the canvas you can see how it is marked up in pencil with the 342 pages of the edition I happen to have. Each of those pages has 31 lines and these are marked up along the vertical edge of the canvas. So I am working with a sort of grid. A particular colour may appear on line 18 of page 6 for example. You can have pages and pages with no references to colour followed by a flurry of colour words. So whereas in some other works each colour has its own moment, here one colour can cover another very quickly.

SW: Do you regret losing some passages through this layering process?

BC: Sometimes I would like to save certain happy conjunctions. But there are so many nice bits that can't survive the onslaught of the paint.

SW: It occurs to me that with so much intensive layering, a process which takes a long period of time, you can't know what the finished painting will look like.

BC: I haven't a clue. No.

SW: Are there a lot of accidents along the way?

BC: Yes, lots of accidents. You can't control the flow of the syringe that well. There are always going to be slippages. Using different quality paints has its problems. Take metallic paints for example. Sometimes they come out in a spiral, or you get what I call 'webby' bits. Quite often there will be an air pocket in the syringe which will make the paint pop and that makes a splatter. And then you never know how fresh paint will react on top of the layer underneath.

SW: Do you go along with the accidents?

BC: They are all in there.

SW: No correcting?

BC: No. I don't want it to look as though a machine could have made it. The accidents of process are part of the autobiography. There are lots of games going on in these works but they get buried. Nobody would know if I did it differently.

SW: Perhaps you like using the syringe because of its unpredictability?

BC: Perhaps. I like it that I can't repeat the paintings. I've tried and they are never the same. It's like reading. If there's a book you particularly like, each time you go back to it different things will stick out. You register different things at different times.

SW: It seems to me that the gradual building up of paint through the layers tends to blur the usual categories of art. Each line is 'drawn' with the syringe, so there is a definite graphic quality to the surfaces, and yet because of the density and weight of the paint some works are more like solid relief sculptures than paintings.

BC: Yes, I'm pleased you say that. I like the texture of these surfaces, the way the paint forms ridges and canyons. They look very different in different lights.

SW: In English Short Stories you have inserted a piece of printed text which is a departure from the other works.

BC: Yes, this is a new thing, adding an element of collage, I think it works though.

SW: Where the painting combines two elements - a central square of collage surrounded by a field of colour, you've used that before in the Primo Levi painting?

BC: Yes, and in that case the thinking goes back to when I was writing a PhD at Leeds. My thesis was about the 20th century as the century of film and how (as Jean-Luc Godard thought) that art form failed its own time because it didn't record the biggest tragedy of all - the universe of concentration camps. Additionally, there are only something like two minutes of film that exist as evidence of any of the Final Solution. So there is this huge gap. My aim here is to show Primo Levi's text as a bright square of colour surrounded by an abstract field of nothing. I didn't want it to be surrounded by white and the colour does not necessarily represent ashes, or anything like that. It's closer to a sort of negation of memory. I wanted the clarity of Primo Levi's account of his time in Auschwitz to shine out as a witness. The witness is more important than ever at a time when so much gets forgotten or denied.

SW: Do you feel you have worked through a certain phase?

BC: I've worked through paintings that have a beginning and an end. The next phase will be more about making objects to be in the world and less about making 'homages' to the text. I think I've created more space in which to be playful and there will be a new freedom to it, hopefully.