

TURPS

Featuring
Jeff McMillan interviews Rose Wylie

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JEFF MCMILLAN INTERVIEWS ROSE WYLIE FOR TURPS BANANA

Rose Wylie's paintings have always struck me as odd, challenging and funny - utterly different from what anyone else in Britain is doing.

A few years back I turned my studio into an exhibition space (called Pearl), where one of the featured artists was Rose Wylie who I visited at her studio in Kent in 2002. Nine years on I returned to speak with her.

JM: What are your very earliest memories of painting?

RW: When I was four I had a green Winsor & Newton paint box and I had to clean it in bath water, as it got very messy. I was very fond of it and I used it to paint pictures in books by filling them in. I'm the last of seven children, and half were born in India and half were born in England. My mother liked Greek mythology and we had books from which I used to paint pictures of Greek mythology. I suppose I always made things too. I used to cut out and sew clothes for dolls, and I used to make powder out of bricks by smashing them with stones to grind them up, and I made rope ladders. I suppose that's how it was as a child, all part of just doing stuff. Then I went to art school later on.

JM: When I first visited your studio almost ten years ago, I remember seeing recurring images of doodlebug bombs, maybe just in the margins of certain paintings, but you still depict them from time to time. I always wondered if those were part of your childhood.

RW: I was probably five when the Second World War broke out, and the doodlebugs used to go over our garden near Bromley. You could see them and

hear them, very low, and they had a tiny propeller at the front, but were driven by some sort of rocket device that meant they went at a certain distance, and then dived and exploded. If you saw them and they were still going you were all right, someone else would be killed further on, but you wouldn't.

JM: Why do they crop up in your paintings?

RW: I like their shape, they are easy to do like clouds or trees, and the memory is also a part of me. I always paint them with blue skies, as that is how I remember them, and always left to right, because that's the side of the garden I saw them from. That's how I knew they were going from France to London. They were just a part of the Second World War - air raids, shrapnel, barrage balloons, rationing - all of that.

JM: Why did you decide to go to art school?

RW: Well I went to ordinary school and did A-level Art, which was very crappy - it's just not much cop. My art mistress suggested I go to art school and I went to evening, but then I wasn't quite sure what to do. I even thought I might go into law, either law or tap-dancing. I thought that might be good. Or painting, or maybe acting, all of those things. Anyhow, I chose painting. I think it's because you don't have to perform. In 1956 I went to Goldsmiths, where I did a one-year postgraduate course, and it's where I met Roy (Oxlade). We got married at the end of that year and I had children quite soon after that. I had about twenty years out while the three children were growing up, but I began again when they were old enough. I went to the Royal College for an MA from 1979-81, and then I moved here and got on with it, obsessively.

JM: You obviously live for it.

RW: It feels exciting. Also, you can get rid of all the rest of the shit in your life. You don't have to worry about your house falling down, or your family - you



Top: Arab and Dancing Girl
2006
Oil on canvas
(251 x 435cm)

Bottom: Inglorious Bastards
2010
Oil on canvas
(181 x 338 cm)

Both courtesy of the artist and Union Gallery, London

forget everything. It's great. Well you know what it's like. I like the decisions that never stop coming when you paint - everything is a decision. How much of everything, how much contrast, how tight, how loose, how stupid, how elegant, how desperately, well, awkward. I hate elegance... I like ducks.

JM: You've cultivated an inelegance of your own.

RW: It's what Emma Dexter called a 'total aesthetic', which I think is quite good. I think I do have that.

JM: What do you think she meant by that?

RW: I suppose it's because I have patches on my clothes, which I have sewn on, and I stick my hair out... I like to deconstruct things. I might put a whole lettuce on the table - then you have the problem that there's mud in its stalks, and so you have to deal with that.

JM: I can see a 'total aesthetic' all around you - paintings stacked in the dining room and in just about every other space.

RW: Yes - I like stuff going from floor to ceiling. I like stacking, I like time coming from backwards up, stacking rather than alphabetical filing.

JM: Your way of working has always intrigued me: large unstretched canvases in stacks on the floor, with almost no room to move around them, and a few canvases stapled to the wall which you are working on. You make a lot of larger works that are not just a single image - canvases get butted together into diptychs and triptychs - do you work on them at the same time or are you just guessing that they will marry up?

RW: Sometimes they are complete chance because I find that I like the look of them next to each other on the floor. You turn over a picture and they have no relationship at all, in fact they have a non-relationship, but they're nice together. There's that type, and then there's the other sort, which I plan together, and they go right across.

Sometimes two go together, but they're repeats of the same picture, one a little bit nearer, and one a little bit further away, so that it's photographic.

It becomes filmic, or the process it describes does.

JM: What I've always loved about your works, especially those on paper, is the way you use cutting.

RW: Well, the cutting I can explain very easily. When you work with ink, and you've done something that you can't stand - it's too slick or elegant - you can't change it unless you make it blacker and blacker. But if half the image is going all right, you just cover over the bad bits.

It builds up with glue and layers of paper. It's the thing about liking patches and changes and that sort of thing. The paper can often end up quite thick, but I don't want to make it thick for thick's sake.

It's a kind of anti-mannerism in me, I only like them to be thick if they've needed to be thick, and have become thick through the working. So, often some of the drawing is thick and some thin. With paint, you can just paint over, but I might stick another bit of canvas over it. Working with unstretched canvas means you can add bits to it when your space runs out.

JM: There is a curious thing about your paintings; you seem to always work in the same format, a six by six foot square.

RW: It's what fits on my wall, and I can reach it.

JM: You could go smaller.

RW: I could, but I feel I have a way of working I'm happy with. Mostly I start with a drawing, and that usually comes from the mind, but not always. I can look at a bird and I might get a piece of paper and draw it. I've drawn myself and thought what do you look like when you're laughing? So I draw from actual as well as from memory, and often combine them. Somebody once said in a text that I didn't do observational drawing, and I got really annoyed because my drawings are nearly always

based on observation. I work with the specific, and I hate generality. There's a balance between what the object is, what is specific and particular to it, and the person doing it. If it all becomes subjective it becomes boring and it lacks connection. The primitive artist or child 'tries' to draw what they're looking at. There's got to be something else, but what quite, I'm not sure. Do you know the writing of Roland Barthes, the way he uses the word 'punctum'? Is it the essence, something that is not context or meaning or ism or issue? I imagine it's what Gertrude Stein means by 'entity'.

JM: I remember Iwona Blazwick asked me if my dipped paintings - where I push a found canvas partially into paint up to the point where it loses or changes identity - were about locating the 'punctum'; I suppose the one part of the picture that constitutes the essence. It's not how I thought of them in my mind, but I thought it was valid.

RW: It 'is' the painting I think, when it works, and if Barthes is not talking about that, that's what I think it ought to be about. It's very hard to define, and very hard to get at, and of course if you try to find it you never will. I like the idea that Riegel said, that skill for an artist is about getting what you want, not how well you copy what is there. I always thought that was quite useful because actually you don't quite know what you want, but you know what you don't want.

JM: I often think that painting, what Richter might call the 'daily practice of painting', is about figuring out what you want by sticking with it long enough so that it begins to become clear, though that revelation can be a very long process.

RW: You don't want to do it for so long that you get proficient and artistic and assured, and that's why so many of us want to go backwards. But you need to be in it long enough to know what it was that you wanted to find out. Perhaps my brushes are a help to me because they're

not in particularly good order, like my saucepans.

JM: Would you be suspicious of an artist whose brushes were in particularly good order?

RW: I don't think you could be, it's simply a different way of working. For me having beautiful paper and not wanting to mark or cut it is inhibiting, and that's why I like cheap paper and hard, cheap pencils. You can't really have cheap canvas and paint though, that doesn't work. And I do use fine sable brushes for eyelashes and that sort of thing. Now, I want to ask you something, because your work is very different from mine, why is it that you respond to my work?

JM: It's a good question. I think you take chances and are braver than I am. I admire that in other painters, it's what I've always loved about someone like Baselitz or say Basquiat, artists who aren't afraid to take risks putting things together in often unfathomable or ugly ways. I also love naive and self-taught art, and I think you are on the borderline - you seem to fit somewhere in between those two camps. Your work has a kind of awkwardness.

RW: Well, I am awkward really.

JM: I'm curious about how that comes across, for instance, in the recent paintings you are making based on films you use a lot of text which looks very unschooled.

RW: I wrote a letter to a friend recently and she said it made her shudder, as it looked like the kind of handwriting she didn't want to get.

JM: It's also very cryptic.

RW: Well, it's broken and it often runs off the edge, and disrupts the meaning. My spelling is phonetic, if you know what I mean?

JM: Yeah, I had noticed that. It doesn't look like you use spell-check.

RW: In that *Inglorious Bastards* painting the word HUNTER has got two N's. That's not phonetic, it's because I



Truss
2000
Oil on canvas
(183 x 178 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Union Gallery, London



Holy Doors (Film Notes)
2011
Oil on canvas
(182.5 x 165.5 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Union Gallery, London



Footballer Heads
2006
Oil on canvas
(214x168 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and
Union Gallery, London

Painted it backwards – from the middle of the picture backwards, to fit it in. So you've the T, then you think what comes next? N, then you get involved and the N gets repeated.

JM: It's curious for me to think about what your work was like at art school. Was it generally the same work?

RW: At art school you get caught up in something else, you work through stuff. I've always liked children's painting, and untaught artists; they're doing

something real for them. It isn't something imposed or taught, it's genuine. I like the real. I like real in houses, real food, I like people who are real. I suppose I've really gone back to my childhood in my work. I don't have to worry about what something looks like, whether it's good or not. I just do it. A lot of art is 'knowing', cerebral and self-conscious. I'd like to get rid of all that. I suppose in a way I've given up reading, and I hate theory. But the whole thing comes

together, I hope, in what I do. I take what I know about people, say Wayne Rooney, I know his physical type, I know Peter Crouch's physical type and I use that.

JM: I'm interested to know why you paint figures like footballers, or for instance the tennis players, the Williams sisters. Do you choose subject matter through osmosis, through the papers and television, things that are current?

RW: I think the Williams sisters are terrific icons, as is Tiger Woods. He has a great way of standing you know. I like that Tiger Woods won that championship when black people were not allowed to be anything other than caddies. I hate power and exploitation, and I don't like money much.

JM: I am thinking of your football paintings, done not long after the World Cup.

RW: Yes, that seemed to be all that was going on in England. They're public icons, everybody knows them so the images connect. I see them on the telly and notice certain things about them; Rooney has slightly plump legs, and he's a bit short for a footballer.

JM: Well he's kind of round, almost sausage-shaped.

RW: I once saw him run the whole length of the pitch with his legs going very fast, and it was fantastic. That makes an image for me that I can see very firmly and clearly, and I try to put that in the paintings. With Peter Crouch, his shorts just hang off his legs. I've painted Lehman, the German goalkeeper, and Ronaldinho who twitches a lot. He twitches his ponytail and he does a lot of back kicks. I did twitchy paintings of him. I've done a lot of sport paintings.

JM: I've noticed a couple of large triptych paintings of Arabs, are these related to the Arab Spring?

RW: No, nothing to do with it. There were a lot of Arabs, terrorist bombings, etc., around in the newspapers at the time. I love their turbans, that way

of dressing, of wrapping yourself up.

JM: The idea of a dressing or wrapping also appears in your painting *Truss*. Where does that image come from?

RW: Well, there's a chemist's in Faversham with several Will's cigarette cards from the 1920s and 1930s on the wall, and one of the series has first-aid advice. They are terrific little drawings I've worked from a lot. I took a photograph of it too, to check against, in case the paintings get too wild and loose.

JM: Is the card as stark as your painting? I notice there's no text on it.

RW: There's no text on the original, although I do like the ones with writing. I like writing, it's liberating. It's not part of the pictorial narrative, but something else. You can vary the script you use, the thickness, and the colour. That's why I like Arabic writing, because I don't know what it means, I don't care what it means. There are characteristics that Arabic script has that makes forming letters such a very different thing to writing in Western characters.

JM: Who are your artistic heroes?

RW: Going back, I like ancient Egyptian and Roman wall painting. And I like Giovanni di Paolo, Rodrigo de Villandrando, El Greco, Henri Rousseau, early Cézanne. More recently I like the early work of Tal R, and I liked Martin Maloney's 'sex club' paintings. I have a soft spot for Alex Katz, as well as for Karen Kilimnik. I like Kerry James Marshall, and some work by Schnabel, particularly those painted on Japanese backdrops. I like Ocampo, Jonathan Meese, and I very much like late Guston. That's probably it really.



Prop - Jeff McMillan
2009
Oil on found painting
(46 x 36 cm)

Courtesy of the artist.

