

Ali Cockrean



HOW I WORK

What is your typical day like when you are painting?

Painting days for me are very personal affairs. I tend to shut myself away in the studio and switch off to everything other than the job in hand. I find music is a powerful force in concentrating my mind. I know there are artists who find it distracting, but it helps me to relax into the work and generate the moods that help me produce effective work. I listen on an MP3 player because it makes the whole experience very personal and that is important in focusing my mind.

By the time I start to mix paint in preparation for a new work I am normally completely absorbed and the rest of the world has faded away.

Once I start a painting I can work for 2-3 hours before I take a break. Then often it is just to grab some food before returning to another 2-3 hour stint. I don't work exclusively on one painting at a time and it is not unusual for me to have three works at various stages of completion. I don't find it difficult to switch between works. People sometimes ask whether it isn't confusing or disorientating swopping between pictures. But each has its own distinct character and therefore my approach to each piece is different. Also because I have created them from scratch I understand what I need to do to keep the process moving forward and ultimately achieve their finished state.

I do tend to lose track of time when I am working and on a good day I will work well into the evening. I hate distractions of any sort, it breaks the flow and it can make me feel disorientated and grumpy when I step back into everyday activity too quickly.

I'm not entirely sure where I go in my head when I'm working – but it is a meditative state of some sort I think.

I usually feel pretty tired when I've finished a day's work. It uses a tremendous amount of emotional energy and concentration, but essentially it is a good feeling. I'm never fully satisfied with what I produce, I am always striving for something better.

What materials do you use and why do you like working with them?

I use a variety of materials but predominantly acrylic paint. I find acrylic suits my style of painting best. I work quickly, building up layer on layer and so the fast drying time of acrylic paint is ideal. I also apply the paint very thickly and often sculpt with it. If I tried to do this with oil paint it would take up to a year for each picture to dry out properly, whereas with acrylic paint it is just a matter of days. There are artists who don't like acrylic paints because there is a significant colour shift between wet and dry, but when you have worked with acrylic for a while you get used to this.

I work exclusively on canvas. It is such a delight to use and the added flexibility that the surface offers is also important to my style of applying the paint. I believe it is incredibly important to use high quality materials when people are paying a lot of money for your work. They need to know that they are buying an investment and that the work won't deteriorate over time. I feel very strongly that artists have a duty to do this, for me it is a moral obligation.

What prompts your ideas? Can you give an illustration for this?

All sorts of things can stimulate ideas. It is usually an emotional response to something going on around me. Sometimes it can be very simple, such as a song, a few lines in a film that make an impression, or a particularly beautiful sky. Other times it can be truly life-changing experiences like the loss of a loved one.

Many of my prompts are generated by my relationships with other people. Intimate moments shared with friends or

family. Maybe just a look shared between two people or an understanding, unsaid, but fully appreciated by both parties. I'm someone who is very much in sync with my emotions and comfortable with most of them, even the negative ones. I'm an analyser and my mind is always full to overflowing with potential subject matter for paintings.

I don't think I will ever run out of ideas. While I am painting one set of pictures I often find myself formulating my plans for the next.

What originally prompted you to become a more abstract/expressionist painter?

I have loved drawing since I was old enough to hold a pencil. I drew and painted my way to adulthood. But I lost the great feeling I had when I was a child spending hours drawing images that came straight out of my imagination and onto the paper. As an adult I was painting and drawing traditional subjects such as still life and landscapes. They just didn't give me the buzz I had as a child and it took me until my 40s to realise why. I needed to go back to painting from imagination. As soon as I started to create abstracts I rediscovered that great feeling of liberation. I knew that at last I had found my niche.

What difference does it make being a full-time artist?

Essentially being a full-time artist means that I have to make a living for myself and balance my creative needs and my business needs. It is possible to be a good artist and a good businessperson. However you have to accept that about 70% of your time will be spent either in front of a computer, exhibiting and generating business and about 30% spent in front of an easel.

I get very angry when people suggest that if you are lucky enough to make money out of your art you can't possibly be valid as an artist. What I want to know is when did the two become mutually exclusive? The vast majority of great masters painted to make a living during their lifetime. The reality is that we all need to make a living – nothing has changed. And, by the way, I don't buy the idea that being starved and impoverished improves your art.

However, making a living doesn't mean that you have to sacrifice the things that are important to you. I, like every artist I know, have to make my own judgements about how well business opportunities sit with my own artist code of ethics. I have refused commissions when that line is crossed. You do need to protect your integrity, but that's all part of being a professional artist.

Who are your heroes and villains in the art world?

My particular hero is Mark Rothko. I get a great deal of my inspiration from his work and also from his attitude to art. He is best known for the huge colour field paintings he produced from the late 1940s until his death in 1970.

In simple terms, he believed that the work should speak for itself and that too much explanation was unhelpful. If the viewer is sensitive to the work they will be able to understand it. I have a lot of time for his approach. Art appreciation is about what the work says to you, not what you have to say about the work. Art should speak for itself.

I don't have villains in the art world, I don't presume to understand enough about the workings of other people's minds or the situations that prompt them to behave the way they do.

What ambitions do you have?

I am an ambitious person. I would like to be a recognised player in the contemporary art world. But I'm also a realist, so I don't underestimate how difficult it is to make an impact at that level. As far as I am concerned ambitions are what you aspire to, whether you reach them or not is less important than the journey.

When I started talking to people about contemporary art, two things became very clear to me. The first was the sheer number of people from all walks of life and all ages, who have a passion for the visual arts. The second, how few of them felt that their opinions on art had any validity or value. Even those who pursued art as a hobby themselves still considered that they had little to offer in the way of an opinion on art appreciation. Despite the fact that, in the 21st century, art is probably more accessible to people than ever before, it is still viewed by too many as an elitist and highly intellectual subject that in its purist form is only the province of academics. I have an ambition to break down this barrier. I firmly believe that art should be accessible to everyone.

Things you are most proud of in your career as an artist?

I'm proud of the fact that I am able to make a living as a professional artist. Not many people manage that, believe me.

I'm proud of the work I do with aspiring artists of all ages. I enjoy helping others achieve their artistic potential and I have students at both ends of the age spectrum. I have ten year olds who are excited at discovering what art has to offer them and seventy year olds who still see that learning new skills is important and worthwhile. The reality is that I learn just as much from them as they learn from me.

I also spend time talking to art groups and societies about how to appreciate contemporary art. I am continually overwhelmed by how many people have told me they have been inspired and excited by what they have heard and that they will look at art in a new light. To enrich someone else's life in this way is, I feel, something to be proud of.

Ali Cockrean was interviewed by Rod Macrae

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