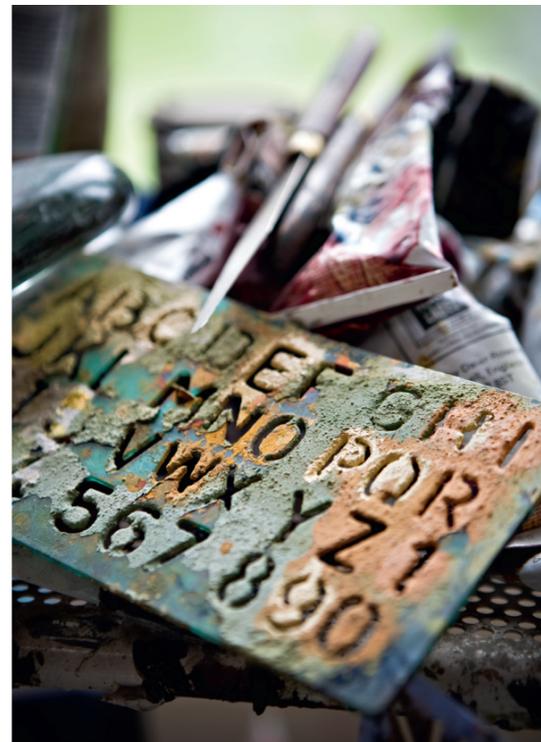


In the studio with PAUL MARTIN

WORDS: STEVE PILL PHOTOS: ROSS AITKEN



After graduating from the Royal Academy Schools in 1973, Paul embarked on an award-winning career in large-scale figurative painting. Eight years in the making, his latest collection *When Men and Mountains Meet* features more than 100 new abstract pieces. Paul works from his garden studio in East Lothian, Scotland.



What is the concept behind your forthcoming exhibition?

When Men And Mountains Meet was originally a working title, taken from a William Blake poem about the relationship between man and nature. In 2006, I started a set of drawings of rivers exploring the ever-changing flow and flux of water and, more particularly, our own response to it. Within two months, I was applying the same focus to nests, trees, fruit and, eventually, mountains themselves.

How will *When Men and Mountains Meet* differ from your previous work?

The marked difference has been the disappearance of the figure, which formed a significant part of my earlier work. There has been a reason: I wanted any human image to identify with, and to be an extension of, the landscape. I wanted what constitutes the inscape and logos of natural forms to be present in the formation and the

meaning of the figures. I wanted them to be made of the same visual language. I am working on it. They will return.

Your work is interested in human perceptions of the natural world. Do you do much in terms of fieldwork?

Fieldwork for this project consisted of drawing on site, particularly by some of the smaller rivers and streams of East Lothian, and, because of the large scale of the paintings, applying all this later to the studio work.

How does a new work typically begin?

New work has a habit of making, or at least suggesting, itself. I work with materials that have life, movement, translucency, opacity, fluidity, which suggest something of the meaning of the subject. Lately, I have been using wood varnish to carry sand and pigment. Earlier work has been stripped back to gesso and drawing materials such as pencil or charcoal.

You use unusual materials, such as magnesium oxide, beeswax and bitumen. Are you concerned about the long-term stability of your works?

No. I don't use untested materials and the pigments are always stable. Archival strength is more of a concern. Also there is the question of meaning, and the manipulation of materials and their ultimate longevity or fragility is part of that meaning.

Do you have a high or low success rate, given the experimental nature of your processes?

Experimentation is not an end in itself. I use it as a way of making myself think, react, make associations and sense, respond to and contemplate the subject. In fact, the subject is sometimes suggested by the process.

Do you have plenty of unfinished work stacked up in the studio?

I do have failures but they don't always

remain so. The way I use materials is to make sure there is enough thinking at every stage of the work to have marks or surfaces, tones or colours that enrich the final thing. It all counts.

Has your studio practice ever been informed by other artists?

Not really, it has evolved as a result of thinking about my subjects and what they need to express them. However, I remember seeing the work of Balthus in the 1970s and wanting his surfaces. I then discovered wax. That ultimately turned into forms of encaustic urged on by the Greco-Egyptian Fayum portraits.

Given that you are not chasing a traditional likeness, do you have certain criteria that a work must satisfy before it leaves your studio?

I don't think of myself as non-representational in that the work has always been conditioned by a desire to describe things that are already

known by the viewer. Colours, light, darkness, rhythm, substance and scale are all things we readily respond to. Sometimes they can move us to see and feel. Painting can do what a photograph cannot do. I have never 'finished' until I have conveyed something of the energy or evidence of the subject and felt some of its life and mystery. Some paintings do it more than others but I often ask them for their opinion. Sometimes I am too dull to notice their affiliation to their subject and meaning, so we have to work together at it.

What constitutes a good day in the studio for you?

A good day is one where, having concentrated for a long time, I feel I have begun to understand something. Then I don't want to stop.

When Men and Mountains Meet runs from 4-19 April at Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh. www.whenmenandmountainsmeet.co.uk