

Oxfordshire



September 2015

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Inside the
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The art of
Andrew Manson

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Building a punt from scratch



The Eagle and Child in St Giles, Oxford

Visions of Oxford

Andrew Manson is a young British artist. That does not mean he has just nailed three oranges to the wall, stepped back and declared it art. Or invited adulation for refusing to make his bed one morning and instead called the Saatchi gallery on his mobile, writes **Richard O Smith**

Rather he paints proper pictures of proper things and portraits of people you can recognise. But this does not mean his work is resistant to modernity. He often depicts Oxford subjects, yet crucially through his own unique vision. The result is an intriguing amalgamation of the challengingly modern and reassuringly timeless.

He is a modern artist. But is he making modern art?

"Yes," he replies – in one of his more succinct answers. You see Andrew speaks like he paints, somewhat frantically paced yet with a manifest crafted intelligence. The words, like hectic brushstrokes, suddenly come together to create recognisable insights. Though inevitably some paint gets splashed in the process. He has to speak and paint this quickly as his work is in demand. With recent Oxford exhibitions at the Town Hall and Art Café just ended, he has another upcoming exhibition at The Jam Factory in Hollybush Row, Oxford running until September 22 titled *Streets & Spires*.

The quality of the pictures is breathtaking. Not as Andrew has much time for taking breaths. "If there's one thing that I can ask for a lot more of it would be time," he ponders. But his time appears to have arrived in the art world.

Appointed artist in residence by the Eagle and Child pub, his portraits of JRR Tolkien and C S Lewis have seen his influence ripple out from Oxford across the Atlantic where a high-profile American organisation associated with C S Lewis recently purchased one of his portraits.

But there is another, perhaps more reliable, sign that he has arrived in art circles.

A plan was recently hatched to steal his picture *Oxford Night Sky* – a view painted from New College tower. However the heist thankfully did not go to plan. Art thieves broke into the Chequers pub after hours, ignored the bottles of booze and everything else on the premises, and instead prized the canvass off the wall.

Fortunately the thieves were thwarted by Lola, the pub's dog, whose bark signalled his intention to use his exposed gnashers on the picture purloiner.

Although the canvas was damaged it survives to hang another day for the public to enjoy. "You know you have arrived as an artist when art thieves specifically target your pictures?" I proffer. "Yes, I suppose that is true," he laughs.

Andrew, 25, lives on a narrowboat. Indeed one of his earlier commissions was to create a painting on the side of a narrowboat that can still be spotted at various points bobbling along the Oxford canal.

"There was a month's worth of rain in two days when I did that," he recalls with a stoic smile. He has always resided in Oxford, a city that he confirms his art is intuitively drawn towards: "Oxford happens to be a canvas that I live in."

While attending Matthew Arnold School in Oxford a teacher recommended he studied an art foundation course at Witney and Abingdon College. "And I am very glad she did," he concludes. "I opted out of university, as it wasn't what I needed, although I appreciate it is for some people."

Strategising this would suit him better than three years at university proved to be an astute decision. Mixing the structured with the autodidactic enabled him to develop his own style.

"I had the great privilege to go to Abingdon and Witney college. They gave you freedom and tolerance to learn in your own way and follow your own creative path."

After growing up in Town he also experienced Gown by working at Oriol College – helping to shape a rounded vision of the city that is traceable in his pictures. As did Oxford's public libraries.

"I looked into books at Oxford's libraries to learn from the masters – both new and old. I love taking volumes and volumes of books home, they are a great reference."

Who are his favourite artists and what does he like about them?

"My favourite artist is Claude Monet.

He is just the guy who lived through it all. What he painted was amazing. Impressionism came from criticism of his work and it is now one of the most breakthrough of art genres around."

As Andrew alludes, the term "impressionism" was a mocking pejorative label coined by unimpressed French art critic Louis Leroy. Astonishingly Leroy collectively branded an exhibition featuring Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Sisley, Cezanne, Degas and other assorted geniuses, as merely giving the impression of being able to paint. Understandably Andrew adopts a healthy scepticism towards some critics: "They can have their own views to enforce onto others."

His admiration for the impressionists widens to include the influential British artist J M W Turner. "I don't think Turner necessarily predates impressionism, but definitely he was a catalyst to start it. My favourite is Turner's *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament*." Viewed today Turner's oils and watercolours reveal a traceable fault line that shifted painting from dutiful depiction towards impressionism.

Andrew's paintings of Oxford reveal an affection for Monet and J M W Turner, yet his work retains a contemporary distinctiveness. Inspired in turn by Edouard Manet, Monet developed a *sui generis* style by departing from restrictive forms of linear realism – viewed at the time as a damaging departure from orthodoxy.

Like Monet's work, light floods into Andrew's nightscapes, emphasising the abstract qualities of captured atmosphere in his Oxford scenes and subjects. He upholds the impressionists' ability to capture

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Andrew Manson in his studio



Andrew Manson self portrait

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a vitality rather than perfection. Painting the light brings a variegated vividness to his creations.

He has travelled for his influences too. “I drove a group of mates mad by going to Amsterdam and insisting no one drunk or smoked anything so we could fully appreciate Rembrandt’s work.” He recalls they were neither enthused nor impressed by that directive. Although Andrew reports being captivated in mesmeric wonder for 25 minutes by one Rembrandt painting. “Giverney [Monet’s garden studio]

in particular, which I am still yet to visit, was a dream and an ideal that I aspire too. Not to mention his body of work; it is glorious – I am a big Monet fan. Although this may seem outdated he is my favourite.”

Like his compositions, Andrew’s taste balances the classical with the modern. “There are modern artists that I love like Tim and Sue Webster and their shadow work. Philippe Halsman from *Life* magazine. And Conor Harrington who is marvellous. Conor really is hardcore and fantastic cutting edge.”

Conor Harrington is an Irish-born

but London-based street artist whose art has made the transition from outdoors to indoors: his international recognition meaning his former graffiti scapes have literally come in from the cold, culminating in a recent show at the Dulwich Picture Gallery. This willingness to embrace the new is marbled throughout Andrew’s work.

Given he displays such an enthusiasm towards the subject, it is unsurprising to learn Andrew volunteers to teach art. But to what extent does he believe someone can be taught or

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Night Sky

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learn to be an accomplished painter?

“If you have a passion and a love for it – and have thick skin as criticisms can be harsh and unkind. You have to give your life to it and want to show something for your art. You have got to be grounded and realistic, or at least have someone by your side who is grounded and can keep you going when it is not easy.”

He also has some perceptive advice for anyone trying to establish themselves in the arts: “It is not all about painting, it is about paperwork, emails, organisation and constantly making new contacts. It is very easy to talk about doing things, but completely different to actually achieve them. You have to be realistic, but it doesn’t hurt to dream big.”

And students cannot dream bigger than being on a career path parallel to Van Gogh. “I tell my students, ‘If you sell one picture you are on a par with Van Gogh’. Van Gogh succeeded in selling only one painting in his lifetime: *Red Vineyards near Arles*. He sold the picture to a fellow impressionist painter for 400 francs. It is worth an estimated £100m today, if you were wondering.

And whereas Van Gogh was famed for the self-portrait, Andrew – seemingly not one to hide from a challenge – is committed to painting a self-portrait for his new exhibition. Self-portraiture is a process that he describes, perhaps surprisingly for a recognisably talented portrait painter, as “very difficult for most artists”.

Undeniably Van Gogh helped seed the image of the despairing artist revelling in quaint poverty – beneath black clouds of torment bringing the required rain that must fall on an artist for their talent to flower.

It reminds us that the public expect their artists to belong in either of two categories: poor and struggling or rich and famous. That concludes all the available categories.

Andrew paints at various studios around the city and is also prepared to suffer for his art. “I can paint anywhere in winter – just put on two extra sweaters.”

So how did he discover his distinctive

style? Did it evolve or was it naturally organic? “Trial and error,” he concludes. “When I started out doing murals with spray paint at an Oxford skate park – which I owe a lot too – I was allowed the freedom to paint what I liked. I remember painting *Frankenstein*. It was fun although it did not always work, but graffiti had a short lifespan so you could change it. And when you got it right, it was a great feeling.

“I tried to replicate what I did on walls to canvas, particularly of the city that I was born in, live in and that I love. I got tired of seeing it in the dull light that it is mainly presented in. It helped that I worked in the colleges from a young age – it is great to see it all from an inside perspective and it changed my opinion of the city. Composition is everything, and I saw this through artists like Norman Rockwell. And Monet started changing my style to a more impressionistic, colourful look of the city.”

There is a Monet-like vividness to many of his creations – dauntless dabs of courageous colour. But who and what else influences him?

“Everyone and everything. You can find ideas from the smallest things. I keep an ideas bank. I always keep postcards, photos, sketches to create picture mood boards – both mentally and digitally. Then I can express these ideas into a larger brainstorm or into thumbnails. At the moment John Singer Sargeants portraits are inspiring me; he paints pictures of people of his time, while they are alive and captures the importance of them. I have started a portrait collection of people in Oxford that I feel are important, if not well known.”

Such portraits include the master stonemason and sculptor Michael Black who chiselled several of the Emperors’ Heads that necklace the Sheldonian and guard the entrance to the Museum of the History of Science in Broad Street.

Andrew has captured other “local individuals who have made and make Oxford a marvellous place to live in” in portrait form. His recent subjects include: J R R Tolkien, Junie James of the East Oxford Community Centre



J R R Tolkien

and founder of Black History Month, *Wind in the Willows* author and Bodleian benefactor Kenneth Grahame, expert paint manufacturer Annie Sloan (now fittingly preserved in her own paint), Oxford imam and peace ambassador Dr Sheikh Ramzy, plus man and shark about town Bill Heine.

His website is a one-stop shop for his pictures, drawings, blog and exhibition schedule. In addition The Gallery on Oxford’s High Street regularly displays his paintings.

Andrew leaves in a flurry of busyness – he nobly prefers busyness to business – and departs to his next commission. He has been approached to paint the portrait of Claudia Jones, founder of the Notting Hill Carnival.

He is certainly very proficient. “You have to be. If you stop even for a moment, or take the pace off, someone else will come along and take what you’ve set up.”

How does he explain his driven work ethic? “You always want to do something better, you have to keep pushing yourself, never repeat. You want to get the best results.”

To see these best results, visit the *Streets & Spires* exhibition, although Andrew candidly admits: “The exhibition should really be called ‘Streets, Spires and Portraits’ – but it doesn’t roll off the tongue.”

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• The exhibition *Streets & Spires* runs at The Jam Factory, Hollybush Row, Oxford, until September 22, 2015. For more information and an opportunity to view Andrew’s work visit the website: www.thebigorangem.com.