

GRAHAM DEAN Images from the depths of water



Today we discover and venture into the research of Graham Dean, a contemporary figurative artist. His artwork has recently been exhibited at the Watherhouse and Dodd in New York, and several other important venues. To quote the latin scholar Lucrezio: ‘The nature of the soul does not live without a body’’. What is the body for you?

I used to refer to the body as a 'holding pen for emotions'. I guess that still applies. I'm really not interested in straight forward depiction . Nor portraiture, I've only done a few in forty five years . The body is a way of transmitting an emotion , a feeling of presence. This is not easy to describe as the process is not prescribed , and also open to a lot of change all be it knowledgeable chance. Because I work in sections each individual sheet comprises of one body part and painted separately. It's only at the end that I assemble the pieces together to form the final figure . So sometimes I use different model parts on the same painting if I think they improve what I'm after. It is an unusual way of working, I know, but very organic - I didn't work this method out in advance, it just developed out of necessity as I couldn't buy very large sheets of paper back in the late eighties.



Tell me more about your research: what was your starting point? Where did you study? What did your training consist of?

I first went to Art college in my home town of Birkenhead , Merseyside which is opposite Liverpool. At that time you could enroll earlier than now so I took full advantage and did a two year foundation course at the Laird School of Art. The course was a superb crash course in trying out all disciplines from painting to sculpture to photography to ceramics and textiles in order to work out which one to specialise in for the next degree course. Unwisely I was sort of pushed into applying for a graphics course by my tutors as there were a few other students there who were better at painting than I was. I also did not want to be a painter at that stage . The art scene in England in 1967/1968 was not as it is now with only a handful of artists managing to live off their work . I was constantly told this and I also lived in an industrial urban town in the north of England , far away from the bright lights of what was then called 'Swinging London' . So I moved to Bristol to take up a three year course in Graphic Design and very soon realised I had made a mistake, it really wasn't for me. I found it backward, traditional and dull – not Bristol , just the course and I told them I wanted to leave. I think they were surprised and possibly offended so they asked me what I wanted really to do – I replied that I wanted to make exciting visual images, and at this stage I didn't know what I meant by that but that was my intention . So we reached an agreement that if I just did the very basics of the course then I could in effect set up a 'studio within a studio' to do my own work . This would not happen in todays art colleges , I suppose the sixties revolutionary fervour had a part to play even in Bristol.

So, it could be said that this is the moment my art career started with me experimenting on my own with paintings, often using cheap materials. I didn't expect the works to last and most didn't but I did manage to have a solo show of these works in a gallery in Bristol in 1973 – my very first show, and that also gave me some money to live off. I did complete the course by the way and for some odd reason I was awarded a first class honours degree, the only one in my year, by the visiting assessors who probably had little understanding of my unique arrangement with the college. I then moved to London with just £5 in my pocket.

I remember a theater course in which I participated having done theater for many years. One of our teachers told me that I had to build the character from my limitations. So your research also stems from the ability to succeed despite everything to create powerful images with poor means. Kind of like this limitation is a strength. Right?

Limitation as strength is an interesting thought. I have talked with Peter Gabriel, a close friend about something like this. He said the worst thing anyone can say to him when, say, they commission a song for a film soundtrack is to say you are free to do anything you want. I think for all artists constraint is what activates the creative juices. I haven't thought my limitations might be an aid to produce as you say powerful images but there may be something in this. I sometimes describe ideas as like slides dropping into my head. They either come as ready made images or ones that derive from errors, chances, unexpected turns or events. I often wake up with these images, it's as if throughout the night my brain has been working overtime, filtering, organising and assembling. Not every idea is a good one though!

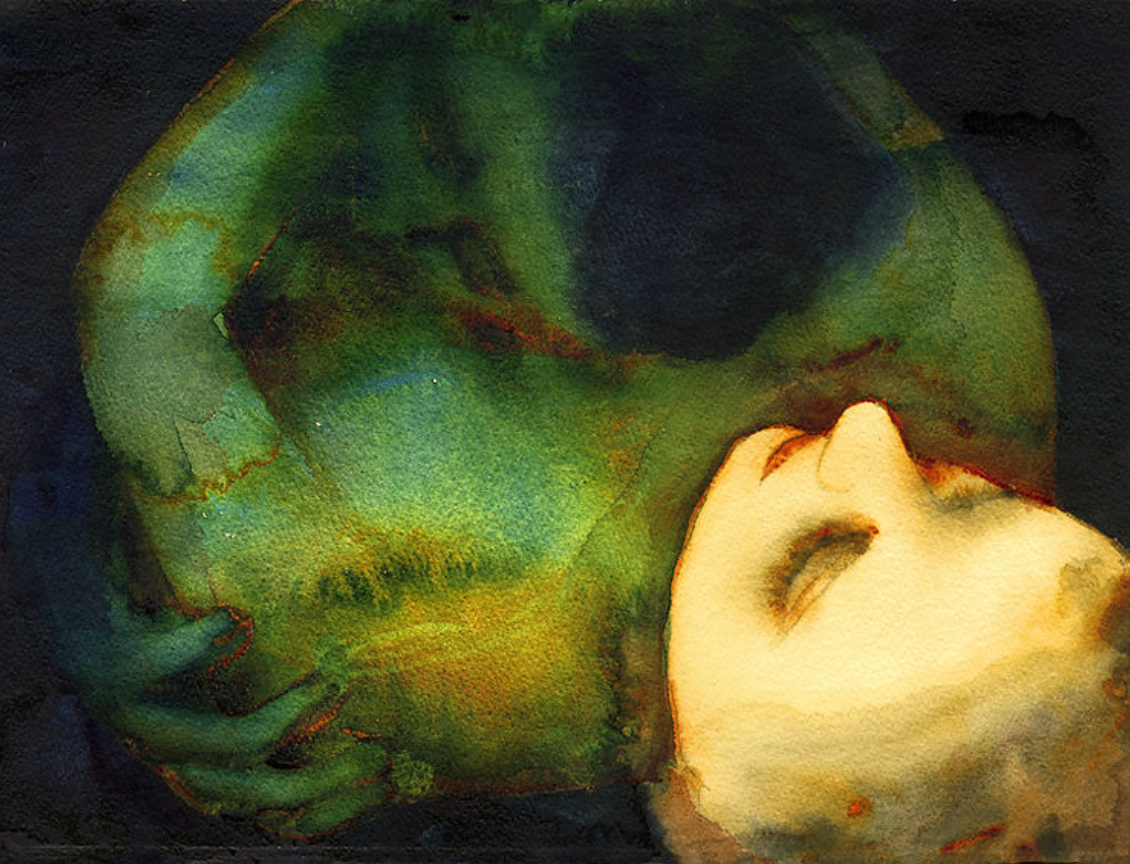
The faces and bodies you paint bear a significant poetic power. What do you look for when you paint?

Poetry has played an important part in my working practice as have films. Robert Creeley has been an influence – he did in fact write a catalogue introduction plus a poem about my work. I keep lists of his sentences as possible painting titles.

I tend to work in a very intuitive manner, if something feels right then I will explore it. I'm fortunate to have a good 'antennae' which I follow. My early work was much more prescribed, I would work on an idea, create small drawings of it and then get models in to recreate the scene in my head much in the same way as a film director would shoot a scene. This was in my realist period when I painted life size paintings on canvas depicting contemporary scenes with figures.

When I changed to watercolour on paper on a large scale around 1985 then my methods evolved into how I work today. When I took up watercolour and rashly or confidently declared that I intended to re-invent watercolour painting, I wanted to make very large works – again life size. At that time you couldn't buy large sheets of watercolour paper so I invented a technique whereby I draw up an image on the floor using several overlapping sheets of the paper and then I paint each one separately. Only at the end when they are dry do I see the final image when I rip and tear and 'jig-saw' the painting together. I still work directly with a model, making drawings, taking photographs, discussing with them what I want to get out of the ideas. It's a long process – I always say for such a quick medium I make incredibly slow paintings. I also 'go with the flow' – if a painting suddenly takes up a different vibe to the one I had intended then I often follow where it's leading me. This is the process, the watercolour medium taking central stage and due to the copious amounts of water I use these paintings can go in any direction. Paul Klee used to say about drawing

that he wanted 'to take a line for a walk' , I often say about watercolour that I want to 'take a painting for a swim' .



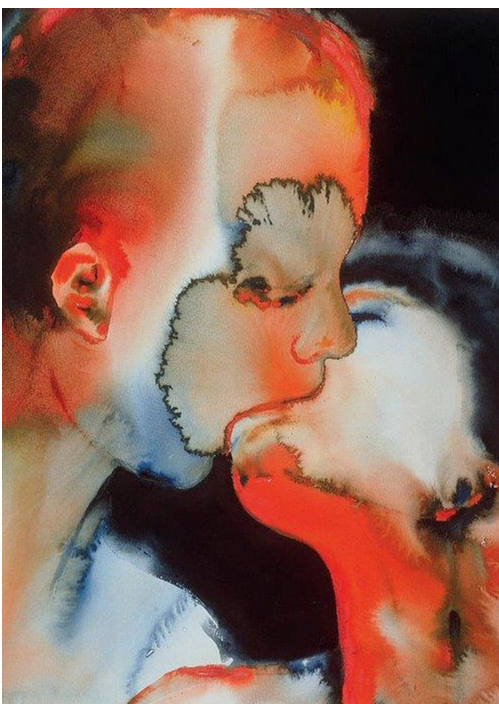
I think of Mask 75x38cm. Does theatre play a role on your work?

Mask , is a painting I'm not sure I've ever exhibited. I can see why you ask the question but its nothing to do with theatre. About fifteen years ago I started working with a new model who was quite tall and very striking, intelligent and independent . It turned out she was a bondage and S&M enthusiast, quite well known in that area, so naturally I wanted to know more. It was a fascinating period and she returned many times with stories about her work with photographers and film makers. I was interested in exploring the psychological elements in her chosen way of life and I fed these directly into a series of paintings . These can be found on my web site , cropping up in several sections.

Two unified bodies and an intense kiss. This painting has been posted and reposted several times on different web pages. Why did it get so much success?

Yes, probably my most well-known work . I believe Tumblr alone has over 150,000 re-pins but as you say there are countless others who have reproduced it and I have sold many reproduction prints of 'Close-Up Kiss' 1988. It's now 34 years old but I still get requests asking if its for sale, people seem to think it's a recent work .

It is in fact a painting of myself and my wife as we were back in 1988. Part of a series I made on the kiss , obviously following on in the long tradition of artists who have made this idea their own – Rodin , Klimt, Munch,etc. I would be honoured if my work was mentioned in the same breath . From the reactions I get it certainly seems to touch or speak to people from all backgrounds , learnings and countries , I guess it could be called a universal image – the idea of two people joining together in a passionate embrace. Is this not why we are all here ? I know of some artists who try and disown their most popular image but if this is to be mine then I'm quite happy about it.

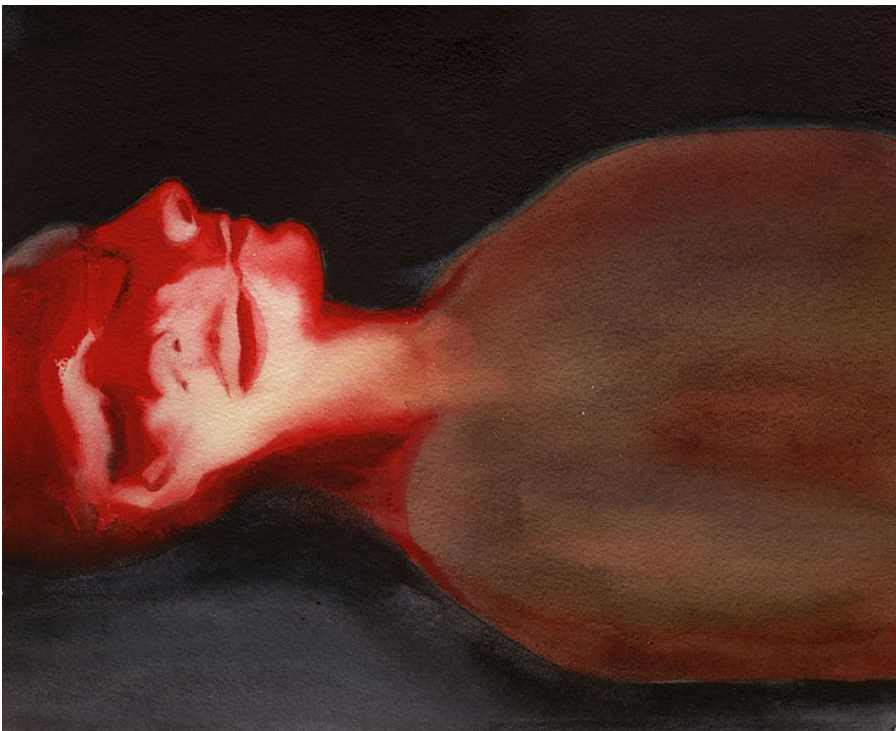


In Munch's painting, the two lovers embrace each other tightly until they lose their identities. Some critics have said that Klimt instead wanted to glorify eros in his painting. What does your work on the kiss represent?

It's odd that I'm presently reading a number of books on myths and working on paintings relating to the Adonis and Daphne story.

The Kiss and Close-up Kiss -now both about 35 the years old owe their origins in a Munch woodcut were they really were fused together. People think that Klimt must have been an influence but it was Munch. Essentially it's a portrait (a word I don't usually use) of myself and my wife as we were back in the late eighties. I aimed for a passionate, visceral image and I produced several very different versions. I was fortunate that the excessive water created the mask type effect on Close-up Kiss. This wasn't intended but I often think that painting or perhaps the best painting comes from somewhere else, somewhere not prescribed. It's not that I'm not in the control of what is happening but I'm laying down the foundations for the chance element to create something I haven't thought of. It's learning to go with the flow of the work and not fight against it. The water is the fuse between the two figures, an exchange of personal feelings. Again it's this notion of trying to put what's on the inside onto the outside. I believe this is an essential element to all my work.

Here we see a lying body.



There is love but also what some small tribes call ‘little death’, that is sleep and dream. Some bodies float into the water. This element is often present in your technique and the way you use colour is absolutely unconventional. What does colour reveal in your work? Is there a symbolism in it or is it completely free?

Ok , there are several questions in one here. Yes, Sleep and Dreams do appear in my work quite frequently but probably more importantly water. Apart from the obvious that I now work with water, I was born in a port, I could hear boats and large ships on foggy nights on the Mersey sounding their fog horns whilst I lay in bed as a child . It was very evocative. I now live and work by the sea here in Brighton –I can see it down our road, and my other house in Umbria, Italy is surrounded by a river in a horse-shoe manner. But perhaps the biggest and most traumatic effect was when , again as a child, I fell down an open well in my grandparents garden . It was only the quick thinking of my mother who saw my blonde hair floating on the surface and yanked me up, that saved me from drowning. I had uncomfortable nightmares about being trapped in an enclosed space with rising water for many years when I was about 8 or 9 years old. I used to wake up terrified. I'm sure this experience has fed back into my paintings with water as a theme – it's something I keep returning to.

As for colour , yes it plays an important part and something I have studied for many years.

Let's talk about the size of your paintings. Do you often work in small format and why?

I do also work small alongside the really large life size works . These started as try outs or 'studies' which I still make. It was then that galleries asked to show them and now they are small paintings in their own right. If I feel like I've said everything I need to say in a small one then I won't go on to make a larger version – there is little point , but this happens not so often and a large work , often because the working process as described previously will enable to to explore several layers in a painting which gives the work more depth in its interpretation.

When you're drawing do you often listen to music? I'd love you to share one of your favourite lyrics. I imagine you in silence holding a brush immersed into the darkness of your studio. What song would be there playing in the background?

Oh , countless songs, much music. I went to college at a time when all my friends were in bands so I grew up with contemporary music from the Beatles onwards. I have always had strong associations with musicians and today I have people like Peter Gabriel as close friends, someone I've known for forty years.

As for lyrics, I keep large work books for ideas, drawings, lists of words , poems etc . These are my first port of call for the paintings. In my latest one I've written a couple of lyrics from Leonard Cohen about old age which I think are wonderful . ;

“ My page was too white
My ink was too thin
The day wouldn't write
What the night pencilled in”

And

“ Her thighs , they slipped away from me like schools of fish.

Though I've forgotten half my life, I still remember this “



It was a pleasure talking to you. One last impression. Megaphone has the ambition to talk about different forms of art and explore the connections among them. Is there a movie that has influenced your poetic image of the world, the way you paint and the subjects you choose?

The ones I tend to quote are films by Tarkosvky, who had a huge impact on how he saw the world, a great eye. Also Kubrick , Coppola – these have all played a big role in my thinking. Creativity is my language and this has the same vocabulary in other art forms wether it be film, art, music , poetry etc etc . We all recognise the quest to create a work that can have a profound effect on someone else . It's what I get out of bed for.

Thank you for your time and enjoy your exploration! Talk you soon!

By Niccolò Tabanelli