

EARLY BEGINNINGS.

I was born in London in 1955 and moved to Kent when I was 5.

I decided to dedicate my life to painting when I was 8. It was my thing, but it was not considered seriously by my family as a possible career. I had my first studio in an abandoned cottage when I was about 12, and at that time my mother used to raffle my landscapes to raise money for the local church in Kent. There was an old painter in the village called John Brown who drew horses and figures very well and I used to show him my efforts, and he introduced me to Degas and Turner who are still very important to me.

At school I was lucky with a great art teacher called John Alford, although I don't think he thought I was particularly good, he was encouraging and organized outdoor painting trips to Wales, which were windblown and fun.

I was supposed to have a gap year before studying Art History or Architecture, but I persuaded my parents to let me do a foundation course at City and Guilds, London. It was old fashioned life drawing and painting, and the first thing I learnt was how little I knew. The teachers were very critical and I commuted from Faversham on Sunday mornings to do extra life classes. Then I moved permanently back to London and continue on to do a BA at art school.

I looked around the art schools in London and to me they seemed chaotic. The only one where I felt I might learn something was Kingston polytechnic which was modern and well equipped. They also had very good supplementary courses like the History of Film which was wonderful and good history of art lectures. But the best bit was the visiting artists, particularly Prunella Clough, Terry Jones, Derek Boshier, Michael Johnson and Derek Hirst among others. That was very *one to one* and useful.

My first real break was getting a place at Chelsea college of Art, Post Graduate under Ian Stephenson. Everybody applied from loads of colleges and there were only about 15 places. I was extremely fortunate to get a place. There again it was the visiting artists that I now feel honoured to have met. Victor Wiling, Laurence Gowing, Patrick Heron, Anthony Whishaw, Euan Uglow, Sean Scully, Ken Kiff etc. etc. On the same course in Sculpture was Anish Kapoor and they also had really interesting visitors. It was only a one year course with no summer break and we worked really hard with a final show in September. I continued to draw models which had to be especially supplied because at that time most other students were abstract or conceptual. I won another post graduate place at Syracuse University New York and had to leave my paintings still hanging at Chelsea in order to arrive in America in time to enroll. I got a friend to store my work in a garage for a couple of years.

Somehow in America I felt liberated. It was really a new world and for a year I lost my desire to paint figures but I worked from landscape or still life pretexts to make colour pieces free from pictorial spatial considerations. I soon came back to the figure with some kind of autobiographical connection but I had freed up my way of painting to be a bit more gestural. At Syracuse I also met many interesting artists including Anthony Caro, Kenneth Noland, Helen Frankenthaler and the critic Clement Greenberg.

When I got back to London in 1980 I really didn't know what I was going to live on. My younger brother had a tree surgery business which was just getting going and I worked with him up the trees and selling logs to pubs etc. It was really awful and dangerous and looking back I don't know how we survived. I visited the post graduate exhibition at Chelsea which had come around again. I ran into a friend who had been in my year, and she told me that a gallery owner had liked my work but couldn't find me because I had gone to America. And that she would introduce me as she (Nicola Jacobs) was again, that evening, looking at student's works for her gallery. This was my second major break and we arranged a meeting. She took a few works for a figurative group show, and that's how I got started with a gallery. I showed with her for ten years and made contacts with galleries in Germany, Switzerland and USA thanks to her. Nicola Jacobs Gallery became one of the top galleries in London during the 80's.

I still had a long way to go as a painter though. It's a continual, lifelong process. The works I first showed don't really represent my interests today, and there is such a struggle with the material and sorting out ideas, that only a few of these early pieces are coherent to me today. This is a fairly typical reaction to one's own early work. And maybe one day I will have some other kind of overview.

Really my important influences have come as much from literature, poetry, film as from painting itself. At art school I picked up on the idea of being a maverick individual with my own unique visual language developed for my own requirements rather than being part of a movement. This is a typical posture of the so-called School of London, centring around the idea of representational painting from which I have never since deviated. Among the literature that I would say had been most important are: T.S Eliot *Waste Land*, Thomas Mann *The Magic Mountain*, Marcel Proust *In search of Lost Time*, Anthony Burgess *Earthly Powers*, various histories of the 20th century. Also the poetry of Emily Dickinson, John Claire, Federico Lorca, Metamorphosis of Ovid, to name a few.