

AN INTERVIEW WITH GREGOR HARVIE

by Nicola Barranger of The Interview Online

GH. It's an old story really, it's the story about the rise of humans and their impact on the planet. We seem to have this need to destroy the things that are around us, even when we rely on those things to survive. GENE MEME holds up a mirror to that pattern of behaviour and says, this is what we are, these are the things we do, and if we don't want to follow the path of hundreds of civilisations before, we need to act. So that's the underlying story behind the show.

NB. And how did you translate that into paint, colours and image? Can you talk us through, for example, this lovely picture we're standing in front of which is full of replicated reds, deep deep blues, and spotted with white.

GH. There will be fifty paintings altogether, and in the way that our genes replicate, the paintings are themselves replications and mutations. The subject of population evolves through the fifty paintings, and they will dominate the gallery, in the same way that mankind is dominating the planet. So some of them are very simple paintings of cell structures and very simple organisms multiplying and dividing. The one in front of us here is a much more complex picture of an abstract crowd of people. They are not purely representative, I think if they were, they wouldn't sustain long-term viewing, they would be too obvious. But as abstract paintings I think they engage us for longer and you can just about read into them this kind of combination of a crowd of people and also a spreading biological organism.

NB. Show me what you meant by the series.

GH. This one has this sense of a primordial soup and within it there are cells that are dividing and multiplying, and you can just see, hinted in the background, a single circle which could be a cell coalescing or a life-form coalescing. But the cells are spreading all the way to the edge of the canvas; they are filling the painting, they are totally dominating it, in the same way that the paintings will dominate the gallery.

And the series goes all the way through to this one where it is much more literal. This is the far end of the spectrum where we can see definite body forms, we can see shoulders and heads.

NB. It's far more clear there, you can definitely see lots of people, far more representative of the human form than any of the others.

GH. But it's nonetheless spreading to the edge of the canvas and completely filling it. And then, in between, there are a whole variety that range from just one single cell on the canvas through to things that are combinations, cellular structures you could imagine seeing in a petri dish, and yet if you engage with them, you can also see just the hints of human forms in them.

NB. So is there an order that one needs to view these in?

GH. No. They are going to be displayed randomly, in the same way that genes replicate and mutate. Life has this sort of randomness to it, the paintings will as well.

NB. And if anybody wants to acquire one of these paintings, taking them out of the sequence, it will have a life of its own won't it?

GH. Yes. It's not a sequence, that's part of the point, it's a random mutation, it's a spreading, so each painting represents the entire installation.

NB. You're very generously donating a substantial percentage of any sale to Street Child Africa. Why Street Child Africa?

GH. They are very enthusiastic and a great organisation and they got what we were trying to do immediately. It was important to us that when people went through the installation, they came out the other side feeling there was something they could do, that there was positive action that they could take. So, for every painting sold, Street Child Africa will offer an apprenticeship to a vulnerable child in Ghana for a year to try and lift them out of poverty.

And some of the children that they are dealing with are the first victims really, of the rising population of the world. So there is a good resonance with the subject, and if we can use the paintings to do something positive, that will be great as well.

NB. And it was important to you that you were going to do something positive for the planet with these paintings?

GH. Definitely. I think the time of 'get rich quick' art is gone. We've had the credit crunch, and we are more sustainably aware now. I think it's time that art gave something back, it's time that art did what it has always historically done, which is to engage with social issues and to be part of society, not this separate thing that's slightly baffling. I think we're going to see more and more of this type of partnership between art and charity.

NB. Have you seen other artists doing that kind of thing?

GH. There's a tradition of artists donating a proportion of a painting to charity. Artists using their subject matter to work with the subject matter of a charity I think is something a bit new. But it's something we'll see more of. The charity as well has found it an exciting process because they've got a fresh perspective on their own work and they've found it interesting to be able to engage with art in a day-to-day way, contemporary art that is part of the society that they are in, that it is saying things about society that they recognise. So I think the charity themselves have found this a very useful process to go through.

You can hear the interview in full and see a slideshow of Gregor's work at:
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