

James Aldridge

NJ Where did you study?

JA I did a foundation course in Nottingham which is where I grew up, then I went to Manchester Metropolitan University, where I did a B.A. in Fine Art. Then I completed a M.A. in Painting at the Royal College, from 1993-95.

Can you recall any particular changes in what you were doing; steps to where you are now?

Well like a lot of students, when I was doing my B.A. I was floundering around trying to find a language. I started by making very abstract, gestural paintings, things that used the medium of paint for its own sake. When I got to the Royal College I guess I started focusing a little bit more on process, which became really important in my work later on. For my final show there I made paintings of natural phenomena;

very simple things like raindrops on water, very graphic paintings of trees, extremely pared down like Japanese art. Also they were like comic book art, Raymond Pettibon for example. I was becoming intrigued by how you could describe something by the simplest means possible. It was a start but things got more complicated later on, and things really happened after I left college.

So your work was quite graphic then. How was it received?

I'm not really sure. The process was important for me and some of my tutors used process in their own work, and could maybe see where I was coming from. The way I worked was very laborious, and you could see the way the image was arrived at. They were successful in the way of informing me of something.

Did you exhibit straight away?

I think it was a very different time, there weren't so many galleries taking people directly from college, in the way there are now. I was showing work, putting on shows with friends. In terms of my practice I was very single minded, I worked in part time jobs and made sure I got into the studio as much as I could. I stayed in London after college and got a studio in Limehouse, shared with a couple of painters who were at college with me. Rents were a bit cheaper as well.

With the YBAs, the art world went through a big change, it went through a kind of revolution. Did you have any contact with the YBAs?

I'm a generation after that. Some people, a year above me at college, got involved with the Saatchi, 'Bad Painting' shows he put on. I was on the edge, but slightly in awe of it. It was quite far away from what I was doing. My work was very precise and very much about

making beautiful paintings. Later on I did a scholarship at the British School in Rome, where I met artists who I am good friends with to this day; people who felt what they were doing was relevant. I made some really good contacts then. You may forget that it's your contemporaries who go on and do things. I met people, who I subsequently worked with, who were artists, or were working in bookshops, in galleries. We had a shared interest and we were contemporaries. Things happened in quite an organic way, through personal relationships. Then I was working with imagery that was quite clichéd and also more mundane but I hadn't yet found a way of marrying that with my wider interests. At college I made a painting of trees, related to ideas of learning to draw. I remember as a child, my father used to sit down with me, he had a very schematic way of drawing trees. He's a nature enthusiast and, as a



James Aldridge **Fallen** 2008, Acrylic on linen, 200 x 175 cm
Courtesy of the Artist and Poppy Sebire Gallery

youngster, there were a lot of bird books lying around; I would copy birds from those and I inherited his love of birds and natural history. Later I found a way of allowing these things into my work. Other elements came in a gradual way and built up, where those things became more and more dominant in my work. Things do seem to creep into the work, things I am interested outside of Art. The process is still there,

but now it's a tool for some other reason. I guess the paintings reference each other and that's partly to do with the process, the strategies I use mean each part of the painting is a reaction to what went before and mentally I carry on from the previous work. This means that the language is continually expanding in quite an intuitive way and as I said things from outside creep in. But allowing these other areas of interest into my work was like bringing myself into the work which I found quite a difficult thing to do. It was like they weren't worthy of the art context and it took me a while to even identify those things that have meaning to me personally. But when it happened it brought some kind of spark to open the doors to everything else.

And the narratives that appear in the work?

For me there isn't any specific narrative to each work. I think the narratives form intuitively, organically,

and reference what's happened in the previous work. I used the process to expand what I do, but not in a contrived way. From one work to the next something is learnt, but it's a very slow process.

This gradual way of working is important in realising the paintings?

I'm not one of those artists who does something radically different, because the way I work is so indebted to the process; so integrated with how I'm thinking and how I'm engaging with the works.

When I said narrative, I didn't mean just telling a story, your paintings appear more like a dark poem. They're more mysterious and elusive than the word narrative indicates. 'Fallen' is a relatively recent work. It has a feeling of mortality, indeed skulls appear in the composition. Shall we talk about 'Fallen'?

I have a specific set of rules that I begin with, when I start a painting. Saying that, I'm constantly breaking



James Aldridge 'Black Sun' 2010
Acrylic on linen 2.5 x 2metres
Courtesy of the Artist and Poppy Sebire Gallery

them, to avoid making a contrived image. The works are never pre-planned and I don't know what's going to happen. I work in a kind of reverse way in constructing the painting, where the final part of the painting is usually the furthest element in the background. A ground wash goes on first, then the foreground characters are established; things appear as a reaction to what has already been



James Aldridge 'Descension' 2009
Acrylic on canvas, 2009, 200 x 200 cm
Courtesy of the Artist and Poppy Sebire Gallery

laid down. In 'Fallen' the mountains were the last element to go in. The space is not established in the painting until the very end. The other elements don't feel they have a context until this point. As it goes on I become more engaged with the relationship of the elements. It's a specific way of working, but now and again I break those rules and that's when things start to happen but that decision comes through this process,

it becomes part of the thought process and my engagement becomes heightened to the point where I am inside the painting. I think if narrative applies it is an internal narrative, a conversation with myself.

Can you describe some of these elements?

One of the elements is smoke. I first introduced that to my paintings in 2007 as a way of further animating the space, which was starting to feel very static. Smoke suggested some kind of movement. It's a strange thing to try and paint as it is intangible. I like the fact it has a physical presence but is in some way intangible. 'Fallen' was also one of the first paintings where I was thinking about gravity in a specific way. There's also a lot of play with positives and negatives, with images of the goat, the cat, the wolf and the crow. They represent something other than themselves. The skulls are pretty ubiquitous now. They don't have the meaning historically they

used to have; the potency they once had. I become totally immersed in the paintings, almost like a participant in the painting while I'm making it, and the skulls, which came from a particular music I listen to, represent many things. In 'Fallen', I wanted to introduce a human presence, but I was quite adamant I didn't want human figures in it. The music angle is quite important to my practice too. As a teenager I used to copy Heavy Metal album covers and I found I became immersed in them when I did it. In recent years I've really got into Extreme Metal and I am really interested in the imagery certain genres use, it is like it is part of the language of the music and creates specific atmospheres and it is coded and complex. It is important to have music playing while I work to create an atmosphere in the studio.

In 'Fallen' there's a falling creature, like a dog or a wolf, whose silhouette is echoed in a piece of landscape below. Its

shape morphs into that and there is a sense of shifting bodies exchanging their form into the landscape, like a passage of mortality.

It's a good point. I live in Sweden now, in a very rural area, in a forest. My relationship with Nature has always been important to me. It's something I can't explain to myself. Even living here it's something I feel slightly outside of, something that's slightly mysterious. There's something very melancholic about the Swedish landscape. You do get a sense of the folklore and all the associations Nature has with that kind of framework. There is a spiritual, religious belief which I don't actually have. It's the idea of making sense of something that is too hard to comprehend. I am really interested in the idea of belief and how that is manifested in images. I'm trying to believe my images as I make them. So the elements in the painting can have a real physical charge or reaction,

which is what I'm seeking. Rather than a narrative it's more like a psychological space; with a feeling or atmosphere which comes from them.

There are lovely colours in 'Descension' 2009. There's not so much black, or silhouette, it's quite a subtle work. There is a field of small flowers on mauve, or red, it's really got a good feeling to it.

I think it's one of the first works where I started to make the birds more realistic. I still look at ornithological guides and also bird art. I've become very interested in John James Audubon¹, his 'Birds from America', the life size folios. They're hand coloured lithographs, but also very graphic. He was one of the first people to pose birds in a realistic way. He painted from dead specimens hung on wires. As I mentioned before, I spent some time in Rome, and looked at Renaissance frescos; including some quite horrific images that Christianity can produce. I still use the silhouettes, but I'm trying to

make a subject a bit more three dimensional, to bring something else to the work. I'm adding another language to the work that is slightly incongruous. In lots of ways it is about solving the problem of taking all these languages that don't usually work together and making them function in a believable way. There are leaves in the painting that reference a Schongauer print.² I was intrigued by how he made a drawing to represent something three dimensional it was for a silversmith, so I took that a step further and added some colour. There is also a bay in the painting, leading off to the distance. It's a visual trick in a way, to create space. That part came directly from a Munch painting³. The colours are quite unnatural but I'm trying to suggest specific atmospheres through how the colours work together, something beautiful and repellent at the same time.

The lilac area in the centre?

That's a lake, leading to a line of trees.
What is different in this painting, maybe it's a move to a new phase; there's a softer blending of the elements.

Well I have thought of myself as *not* a painter, because I was not allowing myself to use the paint in any way, other than establishing flat forms. I limited myself to the least description needed. That's an important thing with the smoke, which adds an atmosphere and blends things. There's an action between certain birds for instance: there might be smoke spewing from one bird's mouth, being swallowed by another. There's an interaction between the elements that comes from the smoke.
A new work in 2010, 'Black Sun'

This is for a show in September in Amsterdam, it's 2 by 2.5 meters, a big painting. Partly because of my children, their enjoying colouring in Mandala books; I've been thinking about that a lot. I've done a number of recent cut outs, that are almost

entirely symmetrical, which is why I started looking at the Mandala's. There's a symmetrical circle of flowers, a circle of birds' heads. Mandala's are spiritual symbols; you see them in everything from Christian paintings to art from Eastern religions. In Black Metal the band logos incorporate symmetry with slight asymmetrical elements. The two things are connected in a visual way, they hide something that reveals itself on closer inspection and that can be like looking for something like a bird in the landscape. You have to invest some time to find out what is there. I like that association, the way that a crow has an association with something darker. An image of a crow is not really a crow it is associated with so many other things. There are areas of symmetry in the painting; there's a tree in the middle, an owl at the bottom and a reflection of two cats falling, two crows facing each other.

The treatment of the smoke around the flowers is terrific.

That's coming back to thinking about positives and negatives. It's a formal device, because it strengthens the silhouettes of the cats. There's a charge to the surface in that way. If I paint smoke around an object it might lead your eye to that, and then away to something else. The paintings are large scale, and have been from the Tate piece onwards.⁴ Because I'm using very graphic languages it is important they can feel physical and the scale helps that. They can be freed from their source in this way. The circularity acts as a way of navigating the work. It serves a formal and a very physical purpose. It's a way of finding a path into the different layers of space.

Interview recorded 24th June 2010

Notes & References:

1. **John James Audubon** (April 26, 1785 – January 27, 1851) the artist was born in Haiti, then raised in France, before emigrating to America. Audubon led a varied and pioneering life, engaged as a naturalist and ornithologist, and hunter. He is noted for his great series of watercolours and prints, which catalogued species of birds in America.

2. **Martin Schongauer** (c. 1448 – 2 February 1491) regarded as the leading late medieval German graphic artist after Albrecht Dürer in Martin Schnogauer was a prolific engraver, whose editions circulated widely in Europe. He was also known in Italy as Bel Martino and Martino Anversa.(ref.Wikipedia)

3. **Edvard Munch** 12 December 1863 – 23 January 1944) one of the primary artists of the movement known as Expressionism, active in the northern European countries, from Germany to Norway. Munch explored states of anxiety, passion and intimate encounters, producing iconic paintings such as *The Scream*, *The Frieze of Life* and *The Sick Child*.

4. 'Cold Mouth Prayer' Painting commissioned for Tate Modern Restaurant in 2007



James Aldridge **Haven** 2008,
Cutout, 144 x 108 cm framed
Courtesy of the Artist and Poppy Sebire Gallery