

Interview covering Day's work made from 2000 to 2020 conducted during the winter of 2022/3 with Yad Maharg

y.maharg. We are now at the start of a new millennium 2,000, did this turning point affect your work? You had been interested and made work involving the calendar for example

g.day. For me the 2,000's began with a solo exhibition at the Forge gallery in Wiltshire where I showed a compilation of my pieces involving circles entitled AROUND. The circle with its centre is



such a mysterious fascinating shape, it's the extreme formal simplicity, its completeness is captivating, it doesn't lead anywhere or need anything, it must be the universal primal archetypal image although I'm

not particularly interested in its religious or symbolic value. Circle are inevitably used to visually represent the passage of time. Since making those pieces I have come across research suggesting that from birth we are hardwired to prefer round shapes, like eyes and nipples.

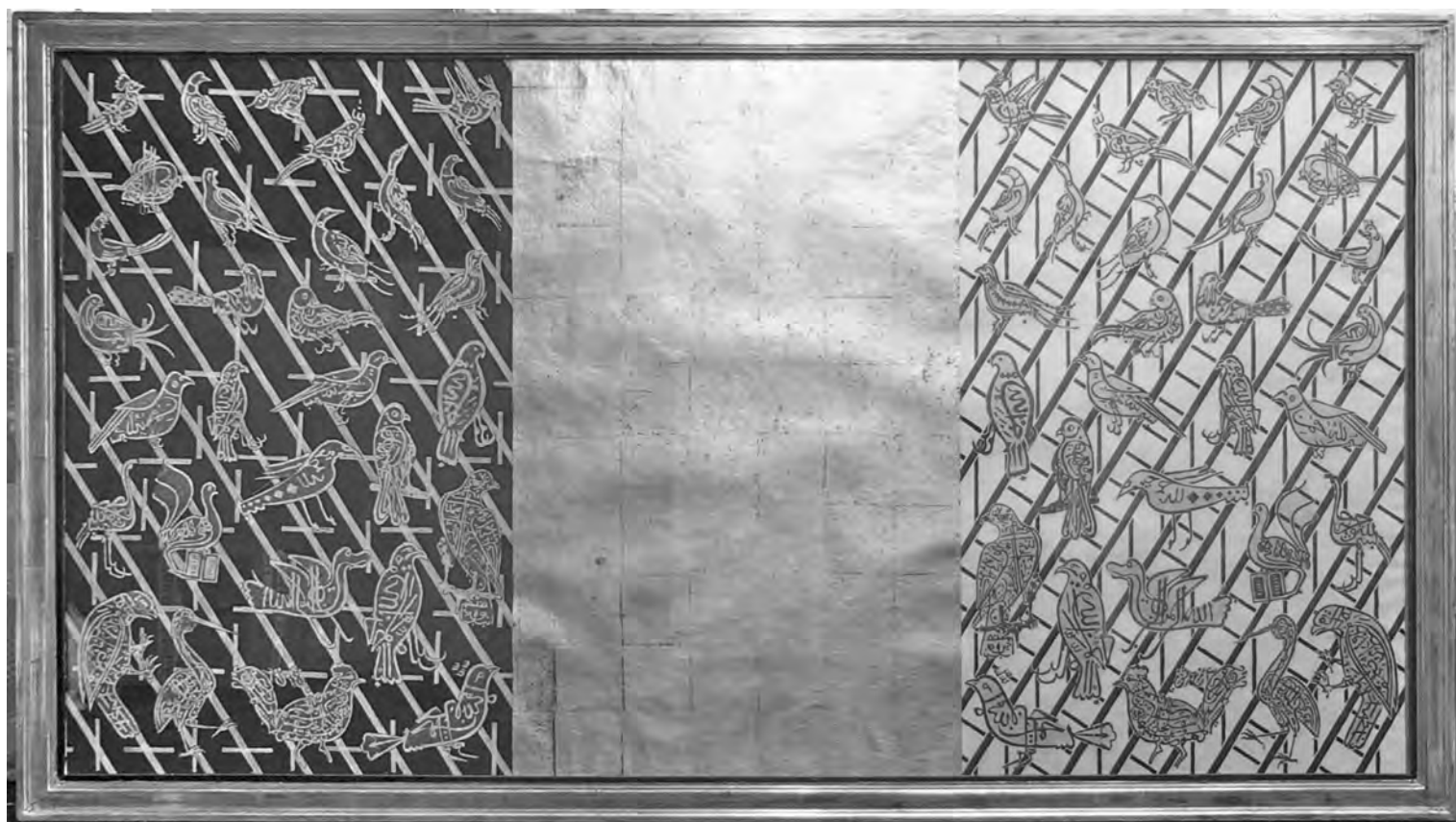
In Spring 2001 there was a large solo exhibition of your work in Los Angeles, what did you show?

Professor Sidney Berger, American rare book specialist organised a large solo exhibition of my work entitled MARBLED MASTERY.



It was a survey with over a hundred pieces of my extensive research and experimentation into the alchemical art and craft of integral paper marbling of the previous decade. It was good having a retro overview of all the marbling, I had moved on from there so it brought and end to a period that had preoccupied me. I couldn't get there but apparently 750,000 people viewed the show.

2001 continued with exhibitions of your work arising out of your encounter with the 11th century Persian tale *The Conference of the Birds*. The first shown of them had been in Mitch Critz's gallery in Mason's Yard in London in 1992. This was followed with big shows in Beirut at the Janine Rubeiz gallery then in Tehran Iran at the Museum of Contemporary art during 2001 and culminating in showing them as part of a big celebration of Iranian art 'Intimations of Immortality' in London, art that had in addition to painting, music, poetry and lectures.



“The *Manteq at-Tair* , known as The Conference or Parliament of Birds, is a *mathnavi*, i.e. a poem in rhyming couplets composed towards the end of the twelfth century by Farid ud – Din Attar, the celebrated Persian poet from Nishapur in north – east Iran. It is an animal fable that involves the birds of the world in their search for their king, the Simorgh. The birds, who represent a range of human archetypes such as the timid finch and the coy duck, elect the hoopoe – because of its knowledge of the world gained whilst acting as courier between King Solomon and Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba – to lead them to the object of their desire. Each bird expresses its reservations and apprehensions about the journey ahead; each in turn is placated by the hoopoe. The journey takes them over seven valleys that chart the progress of the aspirant. Only thirty birds survive the arduous voyage and these thirty (*si* in Farsi) birds (*morgh*) finally come face to face with the Simorgh. This pun is the crux of the tale: they are confronted by themselves. The imagery in my monoprints is derived from popular talismans found in the Middle East and India. Zoomorphic calligraphy is not exclusively Persian, Arabic or Turkish; there are numerous Greek, Hebrew and Chinese examples. The motivation to twist text into images has as much to do with human curiosity and ingenuity as the Islamic prohibition on image-making. The pious pictures are often associated with the Bektashi order whose origins are obscure and history fragmentary. It's founder is said to be Hacı Bektas-i Veli (1248-1337). Animals, plants and human figures made of letters existed in branches of Islamic art such as metalwork of the eleventh and twelfth

centuries. Many images consist of mirror-image halves, a symbolic reference to the exoteric and esoteric aspects of being.



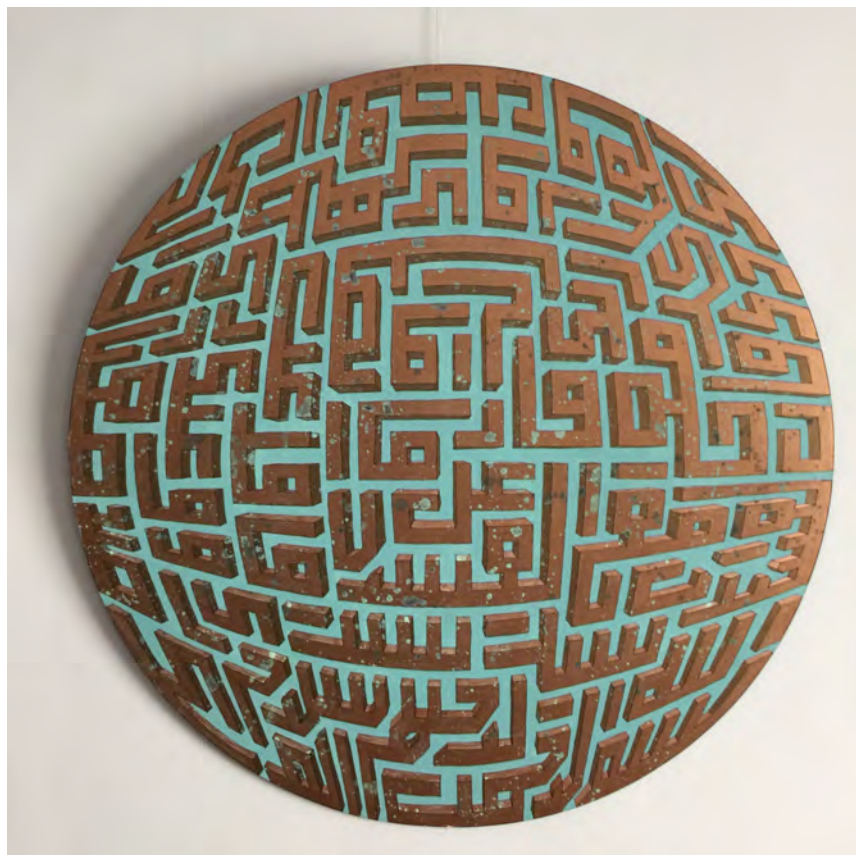
I chose thirty examples from a wide variety of sources and re-cut them onto wood printing blocks and printing them by hand using relief printmaking which is inevitably concerned with mirror-images and symmetry. Another link that determined the use of mono-printing was anaphora; this is a literary device popular with Attar, where words or phrases are repeated and strung together like pearls:

“Love’s built on readiness to share love’s shame Such self-regarding love usurps love’s name.”

The repeated printing of the bird-image blocks, which are themselves made up of text, a visual equivalent. In addition to the block printing which is multiplied by reversing the image through printing on to very thin Nepalese tissue paper, the mostly Indian paper grounds are painted, stained, inscribed, sprinkled with multi-coloured mica, gilded and burnished, depending on the part of the poem chosen to illustrate. I had no hesitation in labelling this series of unique prints as ‘illustrations of’, which is anathema to most fine artists. My idea of interpretation is to accept the grandeur and seminal quality of work as given a force and to rework it, adding a gloss or nuance that reflects the time and context of its rebirth. These working methods are standard practice in theatre, music and architecture.” I’ve still got the 30 blocks and occasionally reread the poem and think about making a new image.

Where do you think your interest and inspiration to work with Arabic calligraphy came from, you don’t speak or read Arabic or Persian?

No, I can't read Arabic, but - it is no coincidence that good written Arabic, whether cursive or monumental, is the result of extreme dedication by calligraphers to make it as explicit, concise and beautiful as they can, for them calligraphy, as the word means, is a homage. For me generally, all text, is a powerful image, when you look at words, whether you understand what they are saying or not, you automatically engage your brain, the words are emanating meaning, imploring you to understand them. I tried to see if simple geometric shapes could do the same as letters, and concluded that although they:- circle, square, triangle, star, moon, spiral etc can't spell out precise meanings like an alphabet, they can generate a receptability, recent research in France by a neuroscientist Dr Deharne is experimenting to try and discover whether geometrical shapes and our ability to recognise them are part of what makes our species special. For me text, especially if I can't understand it, is made up of shapes, of geometric forms. Also, being dyslexic means that I have a reluctance to trust my understanding of the meanings of words, I've always looked at the shapes of words. I've had an exclusively visual education and spent my life looking at shapes, considering and appreciating proportions. So, no, I can't read Arabic, not much better at English actually. But to try to answer your question about why am I attracted to Arabic writing I point to attending a lecture by Annemarie Schimmel, a German orientalist scholar from Harvard wrote extensively on Islam, especially Sufism, she died in 2003. She got across how words contained, within their rhythm and construction, and in addition to meaning, a power, an image, a representation of what they meant, this struck a powerful note with me and legitimised my approach to seeing words as shapes. My answer to your last question was that "I've got the blocks", to me the words are things, objects, that can be manipulated to make meanings. I made some large paintings rearranging Islamic sutras using existing kufic texts but manipulated to make the words into shapes that the viewer's eyes and heads had to negotiate.



2000 was turning into a busy, productive year for you, the marbling research was over so what had you been making?

I had been invited by the British Council to exhibit again in Tehran. Thinking about Persian art and looking at examples from the 3,000 year history I sensed the visual connections and multi cultural influences that had contributed to the national aesthetic, Chinese from the East, Greek from the West, Central Asian, from the north, Indian from the South. I was also impressed by the Iranian love of poetry that ran through all strata of society, that encouraged me to use words. I decided to make 3 text based works, each saying the same thing in Greek, Persian and Chinese. Three different scripts that each had distinct individual forms. I choose a universal message: *If you wish to be loved, love*, that is attributed to the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca, who died after being forced to drink poison by the Emperor Nero. I had come across it in a Victorian book, 'Beautiful Thought by Latin Authors'. The Greek translation I had carved into a slab of green marble, the Persian I made as a multicoloured mosaic and the Chinese was carved into two long planks of wood and gilded.



The show was planned for the end of September 2001 and as I was packing it all up in crates to ship 9/11, the planes crashing into the World Trade Centres in New York happened, and in the immediate chaos that followed the show was cancelled. No follow up plan developed and so the three pieces, bereft of context, were mothballed and hung around the studio. After a while it dawned on me that I could enlarge the original plan and fill in the gaps between Greece and China. So whenever I met people who spoke languages as well as English I asked them to translate the phrase and then I set about looking at art and folk pieces from those countries to decide how to portray the phrase. This

would be a lot easier now 20 years later with Google translate readily available. Looking back over pieces that I have made over these five decades, fiddling around with type and stencils and screens was the norm back then but is distinctly artisanal now, its an important technical dividing line, what should it be called?

The Digital Divide?, Pre dig and Post dig. There is no distinct date to place it, earlier in the US, later in Europe, roughly 1990. So which countries did you do?

Making these pieces, looking at lots of different cultures art and craft led me to address my interest in the pathology of collecting. I had always justified the pleasure derived from the addictive nature of acquisition by reference to the useful knowledge acquired by the research involved and the appreciation of the various skills employed by the artists and craftworkers. My fascination of the work of other cultures, mostly Asian coupled with my interest in Pataphysics, a French pseudo science invented by Frenchman Alfred Jarry at the end of the 19th century and popularly described as the 'Science of Imaginary Solutions' it led me to think of what I was doing as creating a collection, where instead of waiting for items to turn up in auction houses I created them, trying to make them look authentic.

Is there a danger that they can be seen as forgeries?

Cultural rape was another accusation along with making forgeries. Of course I was aware of all that, I signed all of my pieces and they were all documented and catalogued and dated. The viewer is invited to willingly agree to mentally jiggle the appearance of the work with the knowledge that it is not what it looks like.

Like in theatre, where the 'suspension of disbelief' allows one to disregard fact and enter a constructed world.

That's it. With forgery there is an intent to deceive, the maker doesn't want the viewer to question the authenticity of the object whereas I tell them that I made it and it is obviously presented in the context of an overall work of art.

The exhibition as theatre.

Yes, an environment of presentation. With this work there is an intention to perceive not deceive, I want the viewer to question the authenticity of the piece.

I know that you are a collector of Asian art and craft, and must spent time and energy considering things that you want to acquire, has that critical discipline affected your art making?

I suppose so, it's the pataphysics reasoning again, making things that could, should have existed, once I expanded, or rather infilled the number of cultures, I then wanted to do everywhere, don't forget that the original genesis of the piece was to amplify the message - *if you wish to be loved, love* - and by making a collection of dozens of cultures saying the same thing, I hoped that it would demonstrate that if so many different people said it then it must be true.

But given that none of them, except poor old Seneca said it, then it must be untrue!

Suspend your disbelief, if you want to be.....

Ok, but to finish this, where will it end?

The last one I did in 2022 was Ukraine, I made it like their two coloured flag, only I crossed out the last word, love and replaced it with 'Fuck off back to Russia' which I had seen in a photo of a road sign in Ukraine.



Not much love there then. Let's move on. In 2003 you met Alda Caparelli from Naples who had opened a space in Kensington and you did a show with her.

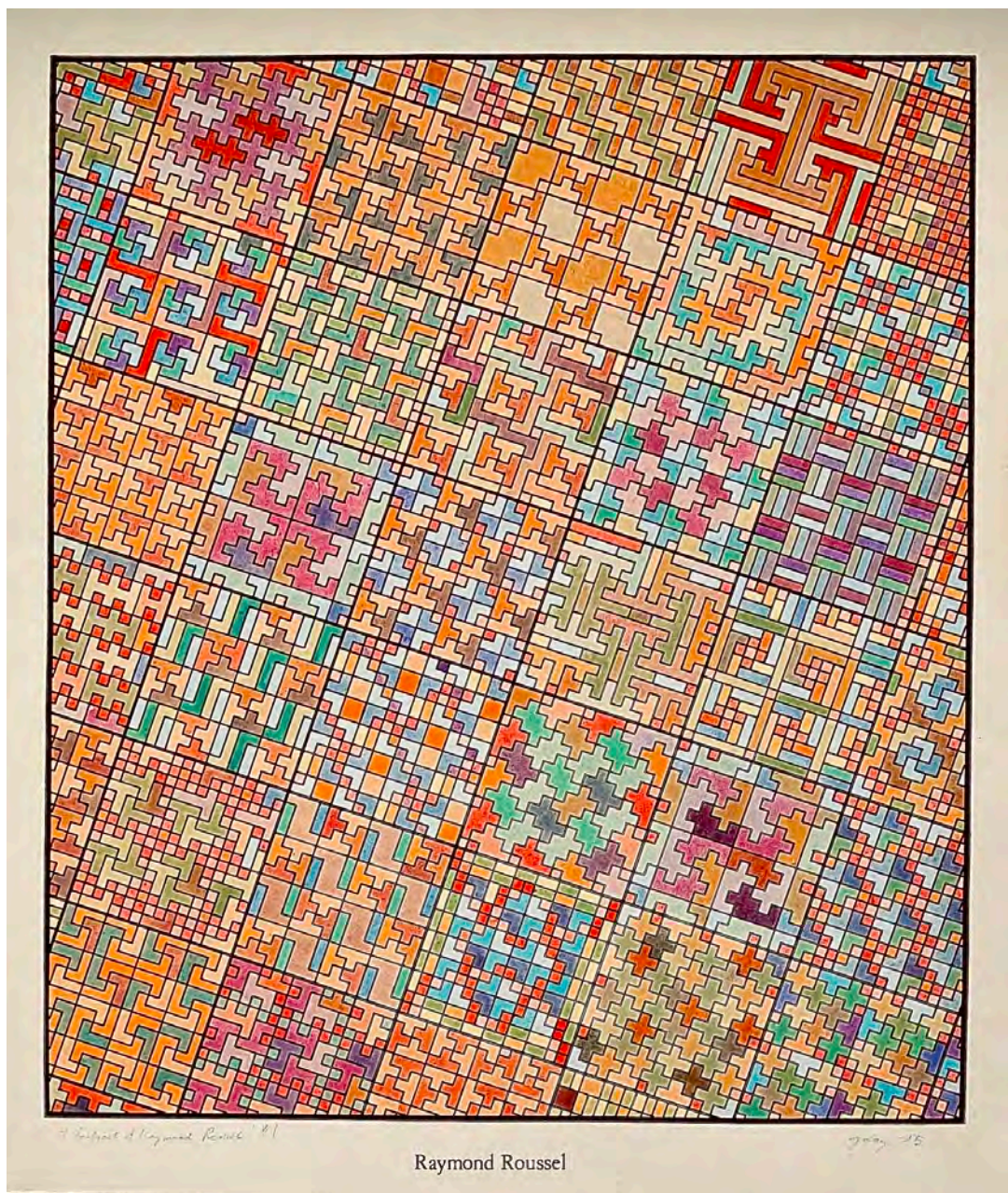
Yes, it was a disparate group of pictures I had made recently, I titled the show Naive Science a Wildean play on Naïve Art.

Wildean?

Yes, you know, Oscar Wilde, who reversed the order of the words in expressions, saying something ironic and usually more meaningful, such as "Work is the curse of the drinking classes," and "Opium is the religion of the masses".

Makes me think of the French writer Raymond Roussel with his use of homophones that generated the bizarre events in his stories.

I made a portrait of him in the 1970's.



So, *Naïve Science*.

Naïve art refers to work made by an untrained hand that might unconsciously create interesting stuff. I had no training in science yet was interested in what might more accurately be called Native Knowledge, things that are known instinctively. Nature, the material world and its processes has suggested to us a language of forms that precede writing, basic simple shapes, circles, triangles, squares each with their own intrinsic meaning and power, can these be combined to express something meaningful about the world around us?

Yes, *that's pretty naïve*.

Yes, that's the point, to stumble across a truth without knowing what you are doing, as I made these new versions of old shapes, I tried to fathom what other cultures from other times sought to express. I made these pictures so that as I made them I could contemplate what they might mean. To quote Oscar again—"To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" to reveal things that were always there,



With google to hand we could have a whole interview chucking quotes at one another, to your Wilde I offer the American composer John Cage “The function of art is not to communicate one’s personal ideas or feelings, but rather to imitate nature in her manner of operations”.

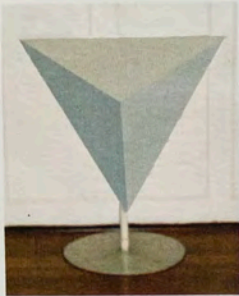
Yes, I always thank abstract expressionist painters for reminding me to look at anything and enjoy seeing it.

So, I’m beginning to see the prime factors in your work, geometric shapes, words, printing, not painting, all 2D...

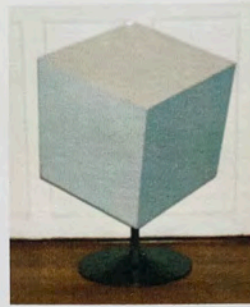
Ah, but next comes Philosophical Furniture, a show with Alda Caparelli in 2004. This consisted of flat painted boards depicting the five Platonic forms mounted on metal stands like display models for use in a lecture on mathematics, but also capable as being used as tables.

What’s philosophical about furniture, it’s just practical ?

I took the title from Edgar Allen Poe who wrote an essay The Philosophy of Furniture in I think 1840. The so called Platonic tables that I made at first glance appear to be convincingly three dimensional yet on closer inspection they are obviously completely flat, an amusing illusion. That sparrows came to



Tetrahedron



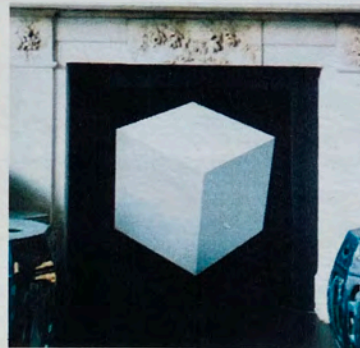
Hexahedron



Octahedron



Dodecahedron



Icosahedron

This unique set of The Philosophical Furniture objects is hand cut from fibreboard, painted in lacquer and varnished in matt, eggshell and gloss. The adjustable metal stands can be painted to allow them to blend in with their environment.

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pick at the grapes painted by Zeuxis led Goethe to dismiss all talk about deceiving the eye as 'sparrow aesthetics'. They can also function as objects of contemplation – known in Indian art as yantras whose purpose is to focus the mind and promote meditation on a jewel-like perfection, completely resolved and irreducible. An Ideal Form as Plato (circa 427-347 B.C.E.) describes the five shapes in his Timaeus dialogue in which he outlines a cosmology through the metaphor of planar and solid geometry. The importance of the five shapes have resounded throughout history ever since. Andreas Speiser has advocated the view that the construction of the five regular solids was the chief goal of the deductive system of the Greeks and canonised in Euclid's (fl. circa 300 B.C.E.) famous mathematical work the Elements. Hindu tradition associates the icosahedron with Brahma, the supreme creator himself, and as such this image is the map or plan of the universe. An ideal object for contemplation. The five shapes can be thought of as functional objects. On display in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford are a granite group of the five solids carefully carved and decorated; found in late Neolithic contexts in Scotland. Their use is unknown, but presumably they had a symbolic significance they may have been used as symbols of authority by family or clan leaders or were perhaps used in divination. Leonardo da Vinci illustrated the five forms for Fra Luca Pacioli's 1509 work De Divina Proportione where they appear as though made from elegant strips of wood. Famously, Johannes Kepler; (1571 – 1631) mistakenly thought that he had penetrated the secrets of the Creator and discovered the underlying organisation of the galaxy within the spatial relationships between the five shapes. In 1946 Buckminster Fuller

projected the surface of a sphere onto the inside of an icosahedron, this became his Dymaxion Map which when opened flat became the first two dimensional map to give an accurate representation of the world's land masses. Today the five shapes no longer command the respect of scientists, Herman Weyl said we still share Kepler's belief in a mathematical harmony of the Universe. It has withstood the test of ever widening experience. But we no longer seek this harmony in static forms like the regular solids, but in dynamic forms. I tried to wittingly reference this abandoned functionality of the five shapes by allowing the shapes to also be used as tables, i.e. something to conveniently support something else.

They do look 3d from a distance.

That's because I made 3D cardboard models of the five shapes and photographed them then projected the image onto the flat boards and painted the facets as though there was a light source that created shadows, finally varnishing the 'top' plane so it is reflective.

Francis Bacon made tables and a screen in the 1930's, abandoning that for painting, you seem to be going in the other direction.

True, I've always considered myself a didactic artist. I taught part time at art schools for over 30 years. Didactic art was considered inferior to expressive art until Duchamp came along and started getting the audience interactive in making the art.

So, your plundering of literary texts, scientific theories, illustrating, cultural appropriation, using ancient craft techniques all define you as very unoriginal, maybe artist is the wrong term to describe what you are and what you have made?

What do you suggest would be more accurate? I was once described as part Archivist and part Alchemist, they both begin with an A, I think that is pretty accurate. But of course I am an artist, it says so on my passport.

That's what this interview is trying to discover. You have always collected art and once you gave up teaching in 2006 you became a part time dealer, opening a little gallery off Bond St in London. I can't help thinking that this has affected your thinking and your attitude to making things, do you see the connection?

No, not really, I had to make money so it was an obvious move to try and operate in that world. As a collector I view and value painting initially by how it has been made, how was that red mixed? That's a good way to present a series, what a beautiful proportion, etc; a parallel part of my brain seeks to understand what is being said, another part locates it in its context, dates it, but most importantly one has to decide and often very quickly, just what is it, who was it made for, does the price reflect its true nature? That's why specialists specialise, you can't know everything about metal and stone and paper, to be any good you have to focus, this is the difference between being an academic and being a collector or dealer. The academic assumes that their subject object is genuine and concentrate on it's social history and related versions, your dealer on the other hand has to have a mixed bag of skills.

YANTRA

DIDACTIC DRAWINGS & DIAGRAMS
PAPER CLOTH COPPER ROCK CRYSTAL SHELL



1



2



3



4

- 1 Jain Tantric Yantra. Ink on paper and cloth. 18/19 th cent
- 2 Hindu Snakes and Ladders teaching aid. Inks on paper. 19 th cent
- 3 Hastakara Yantra. Inks on paper. 18/19 th cent
- 4 Tree of Life. inks on paper. 18/19 th cent

GRAHAM DAY FINE ARTS

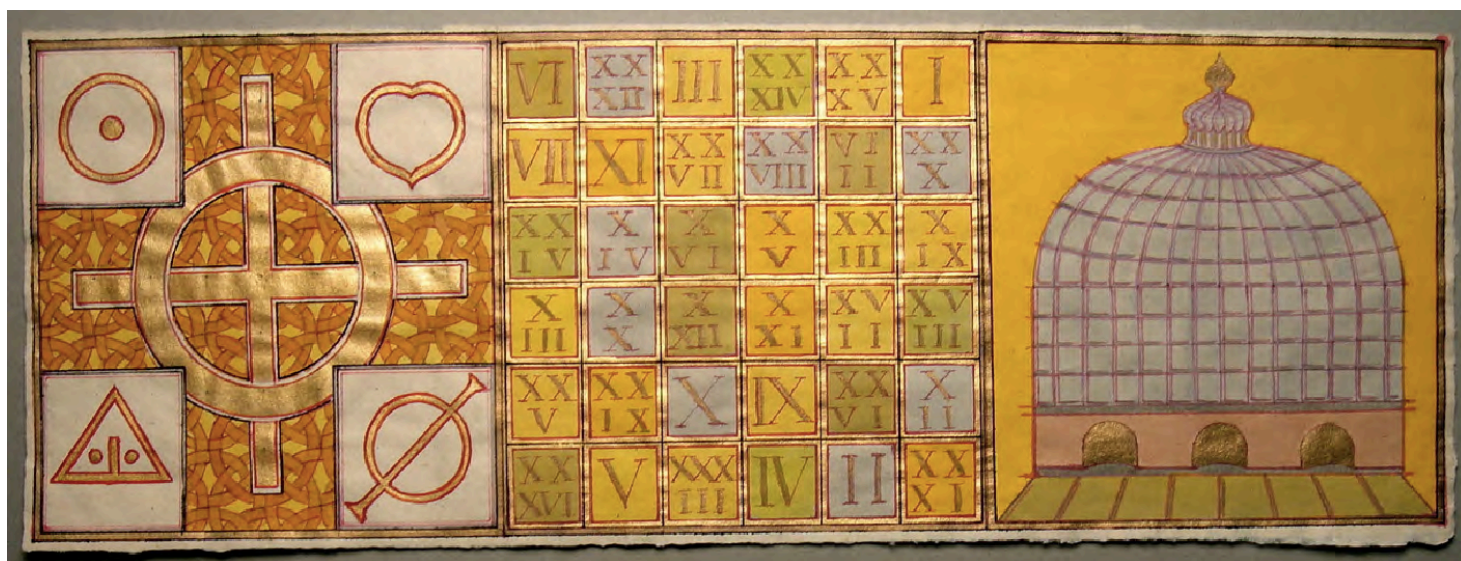
1-7 DAVIES MEWS MAYFAIR LONDON W1K 5AB

EMAIL: info@grahamday.co.uk TELEPHONE: 07775566398

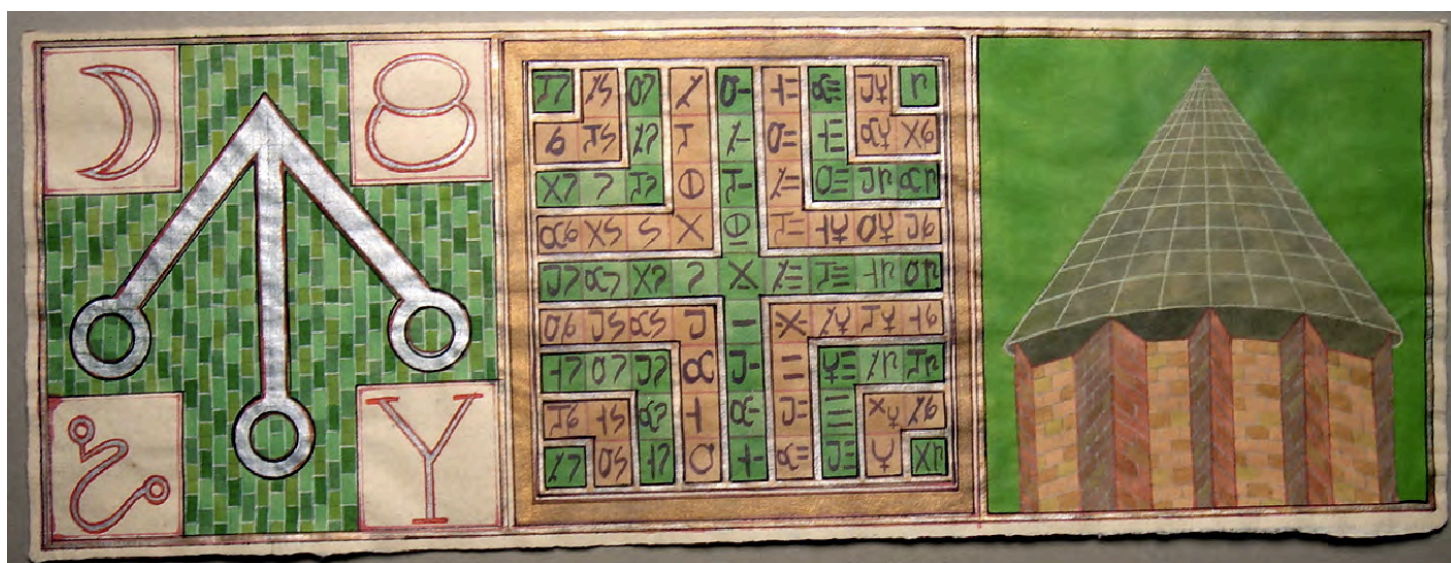
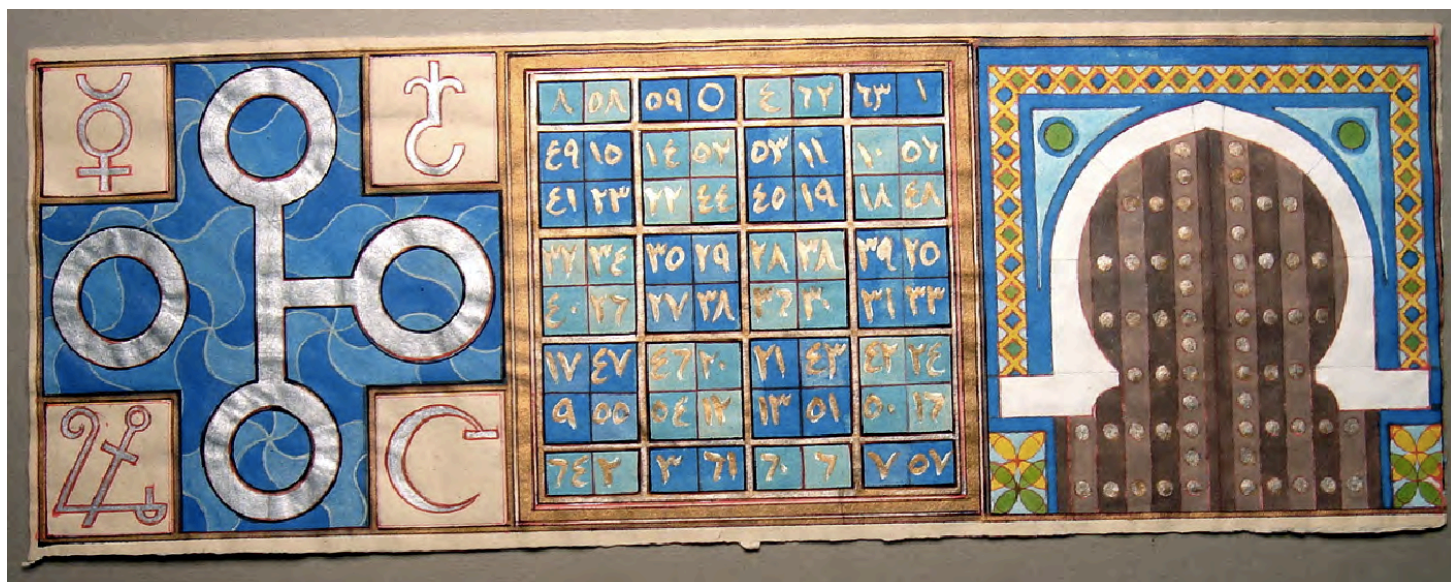
Psychology is needed in acquiring the article, are the materials authentic looking, detailed knowledge of other examples, scientific skills in detecting restoration, it's provenance, location of where you came across it, it's monetary value, what to do with it, how to present it? All of these considerations have fed into and affected things that I have made. Indian miniatures were kept in bundles and viewed by passing them around, not framed, Japanese scrolls were displayed for particular occasions in a dedicated

showing space, then rerolled and stored, Himalayan scroll paintings were illuminated by smoky oil lamps which blackened them, Persian miniature paintings were a book art accompanied by text. It is not easy to make something that looks as though it is from a different culture than one's own, misuse of language is easily detected by native speakers. Although there is the element of naïve charm found in uneducated use of language, the native viewer sees that the writer is not from the culture in which they are writing.

Your illustrations of the 12 th century romantic epic the Haft Peykar by Nizami strike me as a good solution of how to combine different elements.



They are painted onto 7 sheets of paper which look like pages detached from a volume. Nizami's tale of spiritual initiation combines the 7 colours of the universe with the 7 metals, the world's seven climes, the 7 planetary spheres, the 7 days of the week. They are



Black, India, Saturn, Lead.

Gold or yellow, Byzantium, Sun, Gold.

Green, Turkestan, Moon, Silver.

Red, Russia, Mars, Iron.

Blue, Moorish, Mercury, Quicksilver.

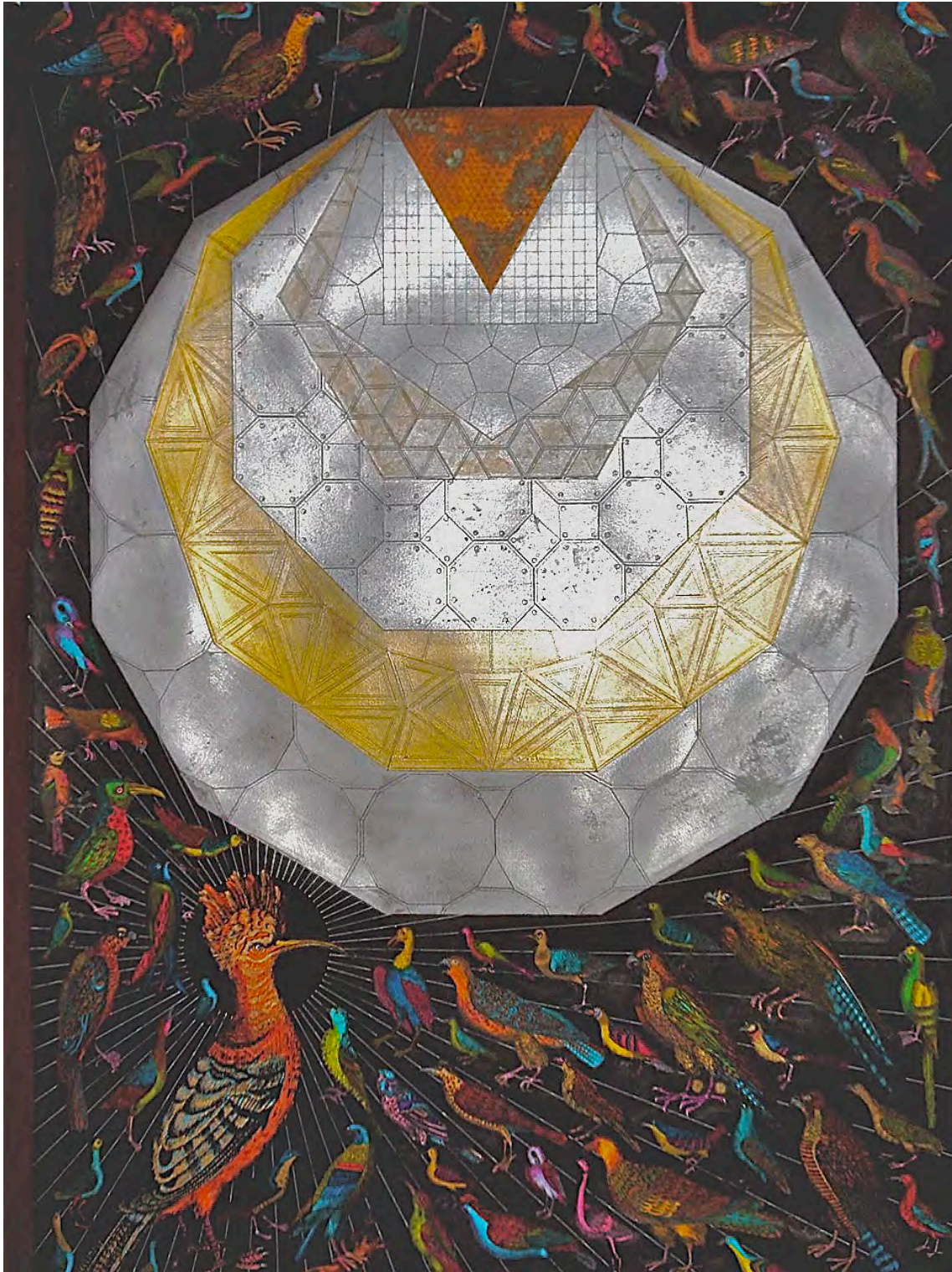
Sandalwood, China. Jupiter, Tin.

White, Persia, Venus, Copper.

I crammed all of this into my illustrations, adding characteristic patterns and alternative symbols for the planets, national styles of architecture, the numbers of each country and the magic square of that planet, these not mentioned by Nizami. The origin of his seven tinged perception of the universe goes back very far and the Haft Peykar became the most frequently illustrated of all Persian books.

I also notice that you have referenced Nizami with his contemporary Persian poet Attar in the same painting

Yes, both writers portray the initiates' search for enlightenment. Here the world's birds are instructed by the hoopoe about their troublesome journey ahead which I have represented by the 7 different metals, each being contained within a geometric shape with the triangle representing the first or in this case the last form. I also made a double sided painting using the seven colours, one side urban the reverse mountains.



You continued working with the Platonic Solids and in 2004 exhibited Plato's Shadow.

If you are a painter you are inevitably concerned with illusion, you work on a flat surface and depict *images* of things. Plato's Allegory of the Cave addresses this. In his allegory Plato describes a group of people who have lived chained to the wall of a cave facing a blank wall. The people watch shadows projected onto the wall from objects passing in front of the fire behind them. The shadows represent



reality for the prisoners because that is all that they see and know, but we know that they are not the real objects, merely shadows. The point of Plato's allegory is to encourage us to break free from illusion and seek the true. I tried to play with these ideas by making the real shape merely a 2

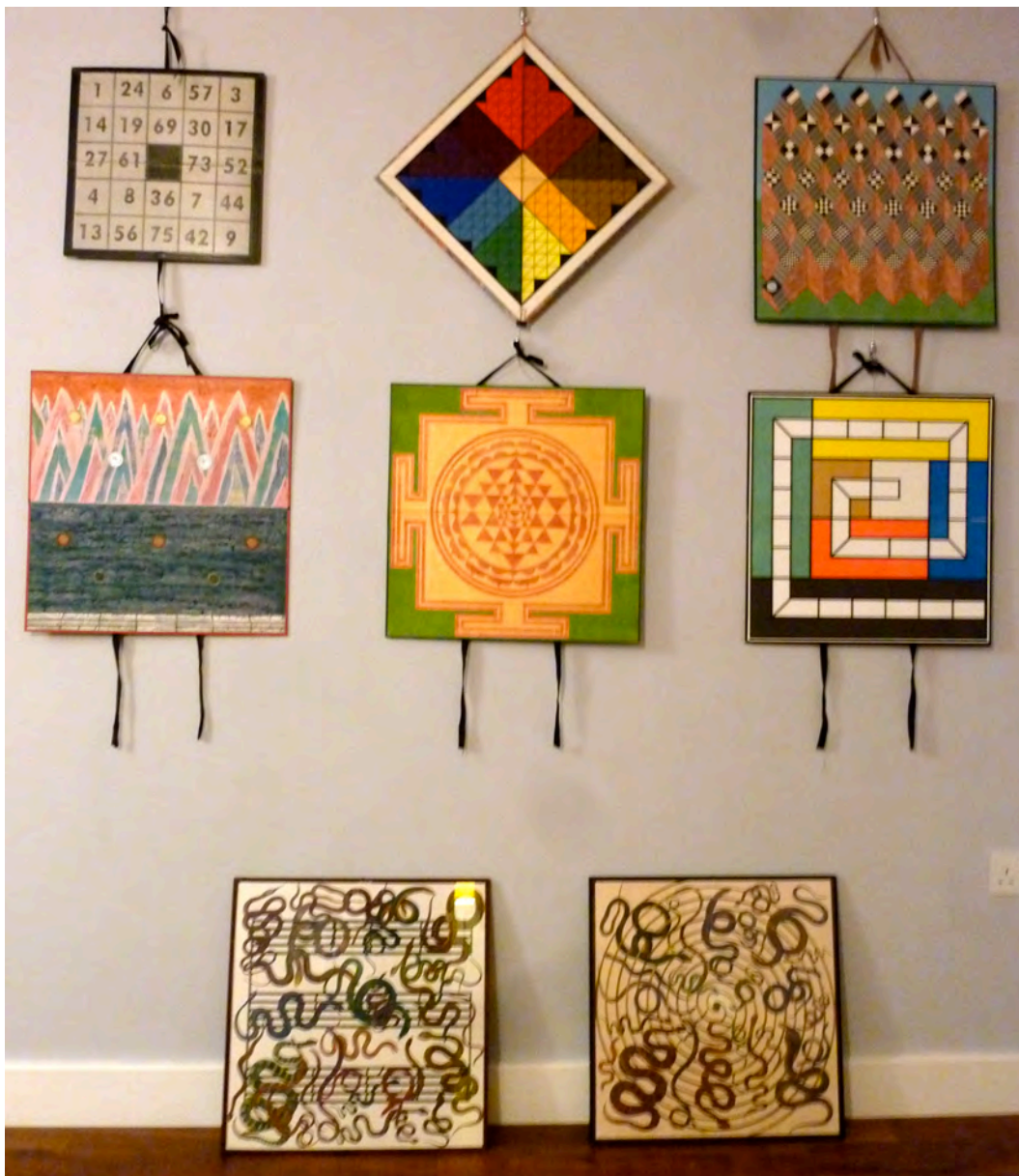
dimensional projection of an imaginary shape that cast its shadow as though it were 3 dimensional, my point being that I had no confidence in Plato's Ideal Forms theory, where all things are merely imitations of an ideal form of them. I was motivated by reading Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, his 1954 little book that describes his experiments with taking LSD, this was the quote that stuck in my mind throughout my art making years "Art I suppose is only for beginners , or else for those resolute dead-enders, who have made up their minds to be content with the ersatz of Suchness, with symbols rather than with what they signify, with the elegantly composed recipe in lieu of an actual dinner." The point being that everything is what it is, meanings fade, time changes intention, ie, the shadows are shadows. The images that I used were copies of the famous intaglio prints by Jost Amman of the work of the German goldsmith Jamnitzer from his *Perspectiva Corporum Regularium* of 1568. I mounted my flat cut out shapes on to metal armatures that were fixed away from the wall so that they could be manipulated to create different images of shadows. So you are looking at shadows of illusions, are the shadows truer, more real, than what caused them.

So you have made tables that are not really useful and shadows of illusions, it all sounds a little negative, have you never had any interest or concern for current problems?

When I first went to art school in the 1960's after hustling to get the appropriate exams the place closed down because students had overtaken it, protesting and complaining about what I considered petty matters. To be an artist you just need to commit to being an artist and get on with it, I was moved by Jean Genet who whilst in a French prison wrote his work 'Our Lady of the Flowers', the manuscript was confiscated and destroyed but he rewrote it with the stub of a pencil on toilet paper. As for politics and protest for me it was not necessary, I was fortunate, the 1960's had opened doors for kids like me, I was being paid to create, in a warm well equipped set of studios, people were being paid to encourage me, what's not to like? Also hashish was the drug of choice, 'mythologizing the mundane' as Baudelaire put it, This had been my art education where painting was a branch of philosophy light. I emerged from 6 years of full time art education into the cold wind of the domestic problems of the early 1970's, the hangover from the 60's. I was offered a part time fine art teaching job in the countryside and fled London back into the self contained little world of artschools. Answering your description of my work being negative, I would describe it more as questioning, posing the problem and the answers together in the same piece. That sculpture is now a table, can I put my glass down on it? That cube has all of the letters of the alphabet, what is it spelling out? Those fat books have 2,000 rectangles, which one do I like best?

Thinking about how different cultures displaying art, you did a show in the US in 2006 entitled The Game of Life where the works could be folded in half when not on display

Yes, it was a collection of coloured drawings that all shared a common characteristic of displaying a sequential ordering principal. The drawings were mounted onto cardboard and folded down the middle like game boards, once common now obsolete apart from chess, I added cotton cords so that they could be tied flat when not in use and also used to hang them, like a chart. Again they were contemplative objects, presenting an arena that the viewer can enter, perceive the sequence and speculate about the journey, their journey, in the game of life.



At the close of the decade you exhibited the now expanded Seneca Collection of the 'If you wish to be loved, love' work.

Yes the original 3 pieces had expanded to over 20 and what had originally been an art piece for a specific location had now become for everywhere. I was now trying to add meanings in addition to just making them appear to be in the style of the country. The Hindi I made as a ruler but without gradations implying that you can't measure love, the Vietnamese as a US flag, the English in mirror writing from an optician's, do your eyes need testing? Also I hung them geographically starting or ending with Latin in the west and the reverse in China, the viewer could compare the similarities and more likely, the differences between the scripts of different countries. One of the problems with ongoing developing art projects is, (which is also common to the collector), when to stop. There is an urge to continue simply because the collection has momentum and if the opportunity for an additional piece presents itself one is obliged to add it. The problem was solved for me when the whole set was purchased by a hotel in Italy where I hope it baffles the guests.

Without introductory texts or labels, viewers are not necessarily going to realise that the pieces in different languages are all by the same creator, you, who can't speak these languages. It seems to me that your work and your collecting have become dangerously entwined.

Maybe, and to make it even more complicated, or worse in your view, is my working on top of existing works by other creators.

Really! Such as?



I used to have a stand in an antique arcade on London's Portobello Road selling Asian art, it was as much about the social side as the mercantile, friends would pass by, chit chat about what they had acquired, upcoming auctions, exhibitions, travels. Opposite me was a dealer in paper ephemera who early each Saturday morning would unload huge quantities of prints, documents, maps, letters,

pamphlets, the stand was an enormous chaos through which myself and others would rummage, honing our skills on making split second decisions about whether or not to acquire. There was an etiquette about the searching, you were discouraged from making a big bundle and keeping it to yourself then editing it when you had finished looking, you were expected to handle paper items with care and not damage them when rifling through. Then there was the psychology of negotiating the price, if you were well known to the dealer you didn't barter, knowing that you were being given the cheapest price. Occasionally, if the dealer didn't really know the value you would be asked what you wanted to pay, and this is how relationships were developed, on trust. You were expected to pay on the spot, Some people, known as runners would ask to pay next week and would then literally run around trying to sell the stock that they had yet to pay for. People would ask if they could photograph pieces, this was a scam where they would put the photos onto online auction sites and if they sold would return and buy the pieces, another way of not having to actually buy stock. There was a lot of expertise amongst some of the older dealers, they had been doing it for years, and being elderly they were not setting up online sites.

Thanks for the history lesson, what did you buy?



Old engravings from broken books. One, an 18th century print of Pythagoras, clutching a book, hand raised in teaching mode. I enclosed him in a silver drawing of triangles, enmeshing him in his eponymous theorem. Having established my input I looked for other 17th century and later prints that I could add drawings and collages to. Prints, unlike paintings are usually not unique, if I altered a print then there was always other copies somewhere out there. Although Pythagoras had insisted on having his triangles, I continued the theme of adding geometric imagery to the human figures, there seemed to me to be a dualistic interaction between flesh and hard straight lines, In Greek mythology, Apollo and Dionysus are both sons of Zeus. Apollo, is the god of the sun, of rational thinking and order, and



appeals to logic, prudence and purity and stands for reason. Dionysus, son of Semele, is the god of wine and dance, of irrationality and chaos, representing passions, emotions and instincts. These two attitudes, combining the humans and geometrical forms, became the new work, it wasn't just doodling over somebody else work, it is something that I have tried to achieve in my work, this idea that perhaps there are enough things in the world and that we can make art by rearranging what already exists.

There are precursors, of course Duchamp worked with existing objects, forcing new meanings onto them and in a closer work, The Chapman brothers' additions to Goya's 'Disasters of War' etchings from the early 2000's, did these works influence you?

I knew about the Chapman's and went to see the exhibition in Oxford. I felt connected, but their motivation was different to mine, although the medium was the same. I felt that I was rescuing the prints, resuscitating them. They had originally been executed as illustrations to text, the image had been graven into sheets of metal, inked with black carbon and glue made from boiled horses hooves, hand printed on mechanical presses onto paper that had been made from discarded cotton goods, bound alongside the text in books with marbled endpapers, leather bindings with gold tooling and had sat on shelves, rarely looked at, and now, after a few hundred years, were at the last stage of their lives, languishing damp and creased in the bottom of tea chests alongside other unrelated flotsam, I cleaned them, repaired tears, pressed them, coloured them in and gave them a new meaning and a new audience. The arcade in Portobello was closed down, given over to becoming a new restaurant and the connection with finding the prints was over, and to bring the series to an end I bound the 30 works all up into a book which meant that in future they would be viewed as they had before being attacked by time and me, now seen by sitting in a chair, the volume open in front of you and not framed on a wall. I entitled the work 'Heteroglossia' - literally other tongues. I came across the word first used by the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1950) who told us "*heteroglossia is a double voiced discourse , as it serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions : the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author*". He was referring to literature, I applied it to images. I also worked on top of a book of early lithographs that had been published in 1830, they were expressions of emotions, fear, disgust, etc for would be artists to use. Seen as rather ridiculous today, these illustrations were a late version of the work of Charles Le Brun from the mid 17th century, the beginnings of the Enlightenment that sought the ennoblement of art as a scientific practice. I saw them as a precursor of modern day digital facial recognition technology and I drew triangles onto the prints connecting key features of the face creating triangles whose shapes could be compared between the prints, triangulation is a psychological term that derives from research into emotional states. I veiled the heads to make the triangles more prominent. I retitled the book The Geometry of the Emotions.

From 2012 onwards you began a series of retrospective exhibitions looking back over your work in decades the first being 1970-1980. What motivated you to look back at you work



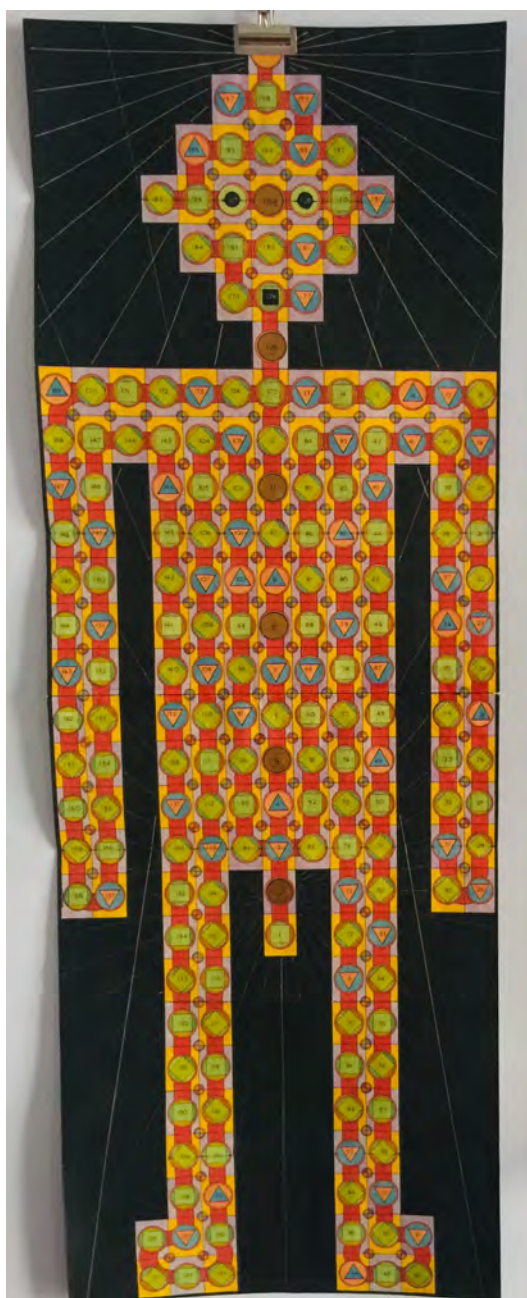
Getting old I suppose, I made several paintings thinking about change. Also technological change, back in 1970, long before computers became available, I used, lead type, the same stuff that Gutenberg, who died in 1468, had used to print the bible. Fifty years ago it was a pre digital time, objects were evident, they were there on the table in front of you, so different from now, prints were made in limited editions, limited because the plates wore out, I'm not saying it was better back then, but the meaning and value of prints was different, unlike today where the press of a button creates more stuff, back then you knew that, although a print was not a unique work of art, it was however part of a limited set, there were only so many of them in existence. Again the collector mentality is evident, which shows my age, and demonstrates a lack of belief in the reality of the digital universe despite the amazing accessibility and ease of transporting images. Back then you had 36 shots on your expensive roll of film, that you very carefully loaded into your camera, before taking a photo you made quality judgements about the worthiness of the subject, when the 36 shots had been taken and if it was colour film or transparencies you carefully removed them from the camera and took them to the chemist or printing company, waited a week and made a return journey to collect your prints, you had no control over cropping or colour adjustments, that all had to be achieved by you in the camera, there was belief in the veracity of an image printed on paper, whereas now there is so much that can be done, what you are looking at is just one version of what it could be. So the retrospective exhibitions were looking at my progression of image making through the decades.

Whilst you were arranging the old work for those shows what new work were you making?



I combined my naïve maths with the game boards and made a snakes and ladders game where some of the the 100 numbered squares had snakes heads that you slid down, these were the the soulless prime numbers, numbers with no family apart from themselves - 17, 29, 37 etc and such like which were coloured black and the munificent numbers made up of identical components - 9, 16, 25 etc were the foot of the ladders which enabled you to ascent, these were painted red. Snakes and ladders was originally an Indian game where the numbered squares had moralistic values, and was a way of teaching how to lead a good life, English Victorian colonialists brought the game back to England where it became popular, the teaching element was discarded and became just the race to the top, which had originally been Salvation and now was merely the triumph of the first to arrive at the finish. I tried to make the numbers themselves have qualities that you the player could contemplate as you progressed.

Another painting I made in the form of racegame was entitled Chakra the painting, which folded up, was of a figure of a man with the body divided into 200 separate squares. The game was played with 2 dice starting at the penis and ending at the top of the head, the squares were marked with arrows pointing up for ordinary numbers and down for prime numbers which if you landed on them you had



to retreat one square, there were 7 golden squares representing the Hindu Chakras, landing on these gave you an extra throw of the dice, the first player to reach the end won.

This sounds rather light hearted, again I come to my problem of your possible cultural appropriation, you take elements of a culture different from yours and, literally, play with them, how do you justify doing that?

You approach this with the question “ what are the rights of ownership of this culture” whereas I approach with “are my intentions disrespectful” which I consider they aren’t. They might be considered light-hearted I agree, but my model was the original Indian snakes and ladders pictures where the audience physically interacted in the pleasure and fun that is incorporated into the ‘access’ of the picture. This ‘use’ of my art is evident in the very first piece from 1969/70, the Centralisation walking ritual, the same as with the tables, that I made, you could contemplate the apparent meaning and connections within the image, admire the aesthetics, the shapes and colours, and also use it as a table, or play it as a game. I attempt to make my art deal with my comprehension of existence, I am attracted to images of how humans seek to understand and explain life and its mysteries. I spend my life looking at images rather than speaking to people so I suppose that I have a blinkered view of how other people ‘see’ life.

You also started using Chinese texts.

If you are attracted by the form of text then Chinese is an obvious choice. There is a tradition of western interest in Chinese, the American Ezra Pound’s interpretations of the ‘architecture’ of Chinese ideograms in the early years of the 20th century had an influence on poetry, although his translations have since been rubbished once Chinese philologists took a look at his work. I took the well known compendium of 100 ways of constructing the Chinese ideogram for Longevity. That appealed to me because in 2016 I turned 70 years old and longevity seemed a genuine subject matter to explore. I made an image of a jade suit with 100 square plaques and on each one I drew one of the 100 different ideograms. During the Han dynasty around two hundred BCE an emperor’s body would be encased in



a jade burial suit that represented the completion of a magical transformation of a deceased body enabling it to achieve immortality. I entitled my picture Metaphysical Armour.

I made other pieces using the 100 ideograms for longevity, one was a vertical scroll that deteriorated from the pristine beginning down to a stained ashen base, also a concertina book that went through the same



progression. I made two large pieces with the 100 ideograms, 50 on each 'slab' looking as though they were rubbings from ancient stone inscriptions, over the top of each ideogram I printed the ideogram for 'completed' in red. I had survived that year.

What has been the response from Chinese speakers to these pieces?

I showed the jade man to a Chinese dealer in ancient art, without telling her that I had made it, she recognized what it was but struggled with the calligraphy, when I told her they were the 100 ideograms for longevity she laughed, I asked her what was funny and she replied asking if it is in a museum, but she thought that it was probably a forgery, saying that it was hard to tell from this drawing of it and would need to see the real thing close up. I made Chakra man and Jade man in the same way, concentrating on organizing the squares in such a way that the numbers and ideograms would perfectly fit each other, what I hadn't intended, but in fact emerged, was that they would look funny and make viewers chuckle. I think this aids the defence of my work against your charges of cultural rape, in that I didn't make my work look like the models from which I took them, I took the ideas that generated the originals- how can I make myself eternal, my body is a model of the universe- and



presented them simply, in my own culture, in watercolour on white paper, the fact that they appear light-hearted is I suppose a failure on my part, I had wanted to present ideas in a serious way, and all they did was make viewers smile, but, perhaps that's profound after all, I can't help but quote the bard here, describing the artist perhaps...

"Life is but a walking shadow, A poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more: It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

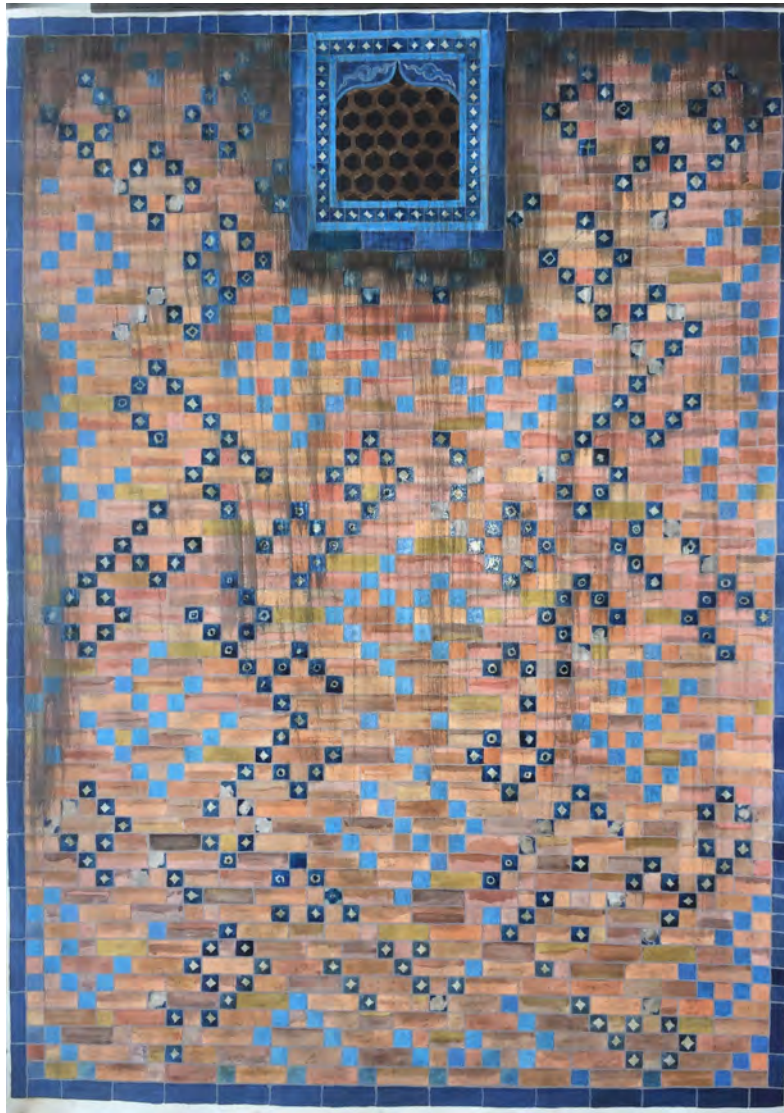
You can't have it both ways, without being facetious that is, are you religious or not?

Not, yet I collect religious Asian art, what does that tell you?

That you are weak minded and avaricious, lusting after pieces of paper that you consider were drawn by fools.

Guilty as charged, I can see that you are not an artist, you must have been educated to think about what you see rather than see what you think about.

Okay, I'm looking. Show me some more of your work from this time.



Another project was to paint images of actual existing street architecture such as brick walls, that could be interpreted as though their meaningless decoration had profound meaning, I labelled them 'Innocent Yantras.' I suppose it was me who was the innocent because I did some of walls in Istanbul where the bricks did actually have meaning in that there were words on them but I had been attracted by the shapes and colours, and yet, the original purpose of the Turkish buildings whose walls I had painted had changed, had lost their meaning, the outer wall of what had originally been the harem had a football goal painted on it; the Arabic Kufic text on the entrance arch of an ancient sports pavilion was now a gift shop.

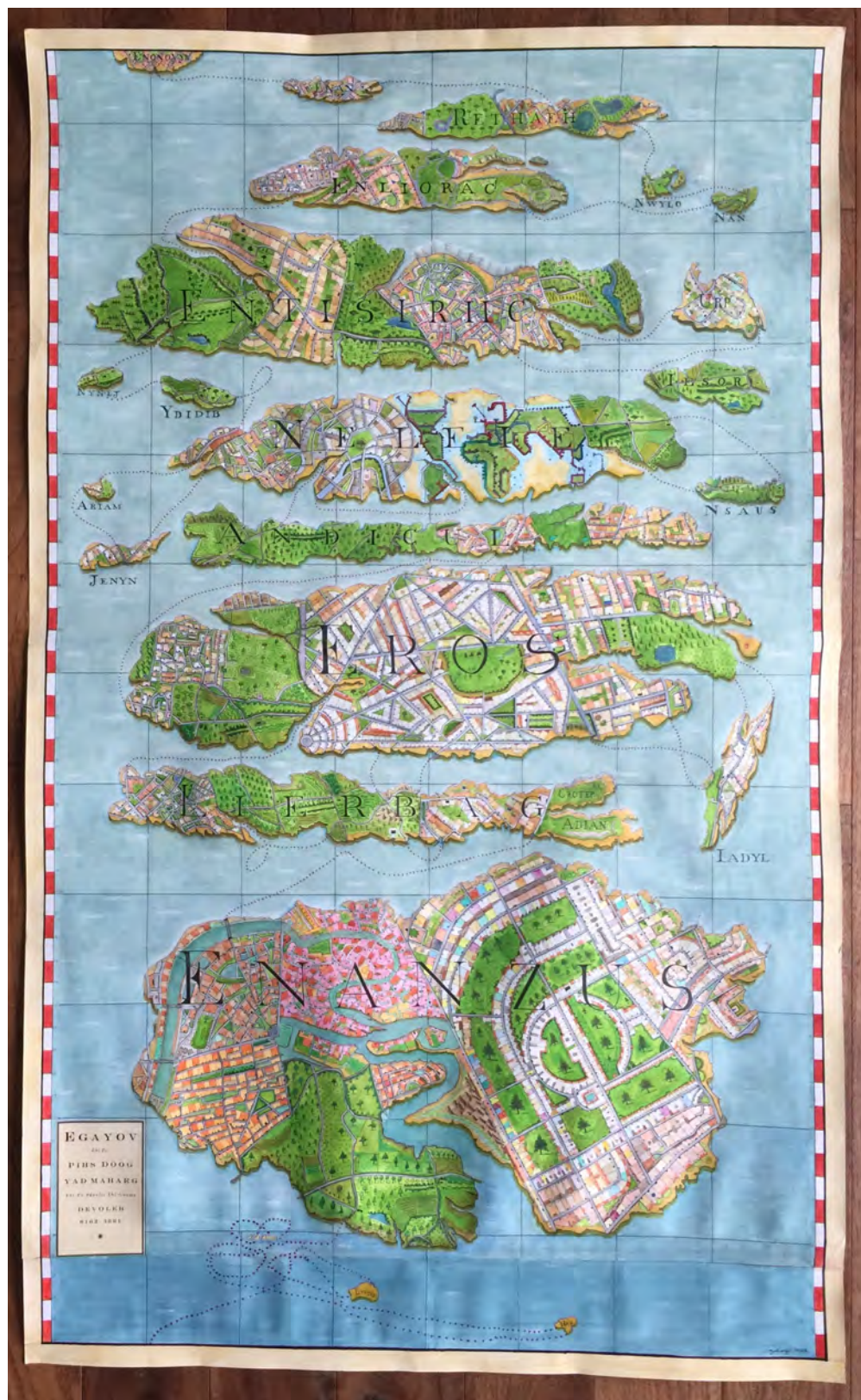


Talking of travel, you who have pictures from all over the world yet hardly ever go to these places, why is that?

I use various excuses, quoting in my defence “The further you go, the less you know” or “he who looks outside only dreams, he who looks inside awakens.” I'm not interested in countries current social problems, I don't go hiking or fishing or play golf, travel is like shopping, people go because they haven't got what they want or need at home, I'm a long way from seeing everything in the British Museum and the V& A. I love maps, but don't want to go there, I desire an earlier edition of the map with better colouring.

Talking of maps, you have recently made a large one showing Islands, tell us about that.

In 2015 I found myself alone, no partner for the first time in over 50 years. Thinking back, having lots of time, and looking at those partners and how I was the connection between them I visualised them as islands that I had journey to and from. I had read in the biography of Bertrand Russell the English mathematician that he had described his lover Ottoline Morrell as an island. I embodied them with coloured drawings of the locations, the streets and fields in which we had lived, worked and loved, a dotted red line showed the often indecisive route that I took. down those years. I named the islands with anagrams of the partners' names so that they were identified but a little mysteriously. I think that I made it so that I could look back and speculate about why relationships begin and develop, come together and drift apart,



Did you come to any conclusions that answered your speculations?

Yes, that artists are selfish, blessed or perhaps cursed with a selfish gene, in fact any activity that is a matter of life and death puts relationships at risk. I have always guarded my freedom and tried to ensure that I never did anything that might mean that I would not have time and freedom to make art, such as borrow money or have children, so the map represents the people in my life that I have been close to.

How did the people represented on the map respond when they first saw it?

A few of the 'islands' have seen it and identified themselves, they have their understanding of the relationship its highs and lows, the map doesn't comment on the nature of the people depicted, there is a beginning and an end. I continue to know all of the people, still walk down the streets depicted. I did think about putting some words on the map such as 'mountains of misunderstanding' or 'bay of endless delight' but then I remembered Grayson Perry's witty Map of an Englishman from 2004 and realised that I didn't want to invent emotions just for the sake of filling in space.

I can see that it was important for you to engage in a spot of introspective psychotherapy in making the map but is it of any interest to a larger audience?

Obviously not to you, it was as you say introspective, a backward trip down memory lane, literally down the lanes, I drew the islands with a computer alongside me so that I could bring up detailed views of streets and houses and gardens of London, Paris, Venice, Moscow and Wiltshire. I don't worry about how my work is perceived, I find that if you get up in the morning and go straight to you'd desk in your pyjamas to carry on where you made yourself stop the night before then what you are doing is important and needs doing. I think people can relate to my map, it shows a journey to and from people, doesn't that apply to everybody? You can think about your own journey, the islands that you have discovered or fled. Introspection is common in fiction, think of the Proust's *Search for Lost Time*, 13 volumes and he died at 51. In visual art, self portraiture is the obvious vehicle for introspection, my map is a self portrait, illustrated by the people and their environments that I encountered on my journey through life.

Given that you are showing us your life and the people in it makes me think of Orson Wells film Citizen Kane, is there a 'Rosebud', a key moment or memory that stands out for you, that encapsulates your life and artwork?

The whole point of Rosebud is to sharpen the attention of the viewer to search for it's meaning, but everything is important, in life sometimes dramatic events dictate action and consequences, sometimes boredom and frustration, or chance and coincidence play a part, I met a partner on a train, another leant out out of a open window as I happened to walk by and smiled. Maybe my map and other works about people were made because none of my relationships bore children, if you look at your offspring do you see yourself in them, do you live through them?

Another late work is your 4 painted collages The Four Humors, how did that come about?

The four humors, the word comes from the Greek for juice or sap, were an ancient Greek explanation of the essential components the human body and how they must be kept in balance to ensure a healthy life, the theory prevailed for 2,000 years, finally being discarded as late as the mid 19th century. Whist rummaging in the tea chests of old prints at Portobello Road antique and bric a brac markets I came cross a set of hand coloured images of Turkish characters with their hands in demonstrative poses, to these I added collages of large geometric forms then created backgrounds in the associated colours of the humors finally pasting on labels in Greek naming them. One of the printed characters was the chief eunuch, known as the Kizlar Agha, a powerful position within the Ottoman court. His black hair and black face traditionally designated him as sad Melancholia, one of the four humors, so I gave him the collaged image of two geometric balls.

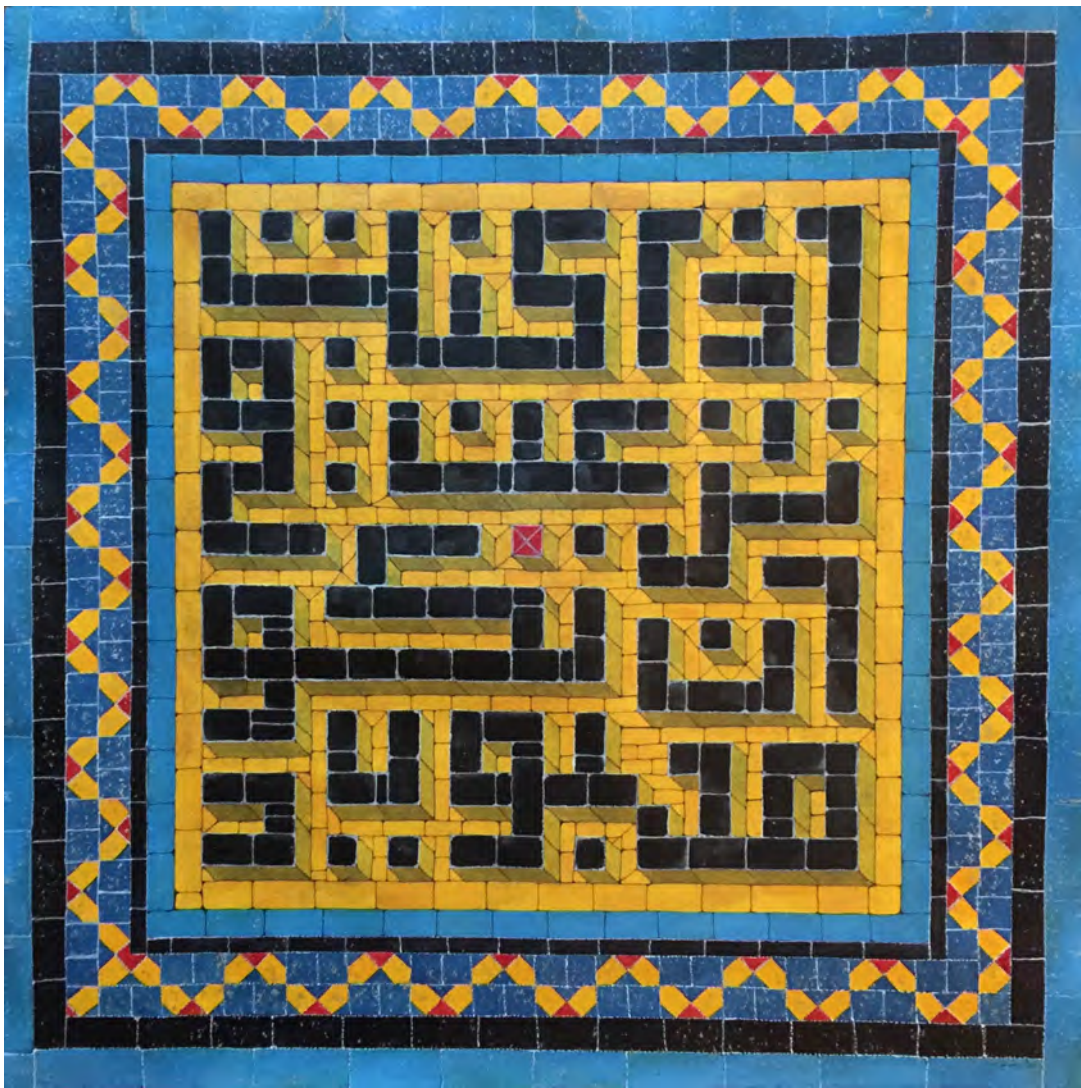


Reminds me of Max Ernst's collages.

Not really, Ernst as a surrealist used collage of existing material to create foreboding dreamscapes, that he referred to as “the culture of systematic displacement”, whereas I tried to amplify the original printed figure, choosing the geometric element to illustrate, there is no mystery in my humors, hopefully a little humour.

Next come a group of paintings with square patterns that are in fact words written in Persian square Kufic script, so we are back to words and those of other cultures than yours, what do they say?

In a charity bookshop in a village I came across an illustrated Persian text book about the use of square bricks to spell out pious texts from the Koran used on the facades of buildings. I was familiar with them but what I learnt from diagrams in the book was that the order of the words was not linear but was determined by the rules that governed the layout of the whole text, meaning that you



couldn't easily read the text, they were in fact images, a word or two that were recognized were often enough for the visitor to the building to know which sura from the Koran it was. I tested this out on friends who were native Arabic speakers, they often recognized the sura and didn't feel the need to try and read the entire convoluted text. Being dyslectic this reducing words to movable simple square blocks was very appealing to me, you could make patterns with them that would spell words. I replaced the Koranic text with poetry and proverbs, had them translated into Farsi then rendered the text into square Kufic and set about arranging them, I had appropriated the form, the language, the colours but not the meaning of the words. I gave them title The Epigram as Icon.

A parody?

No, a parody pokes fun whereas a pastiche pays homage. I can see that I've not been able to demonstrate that my intention is not to disrespect the culture from which I've derived inspiration, the book that I discovered by chance was made and published to show examples and explain their construction, it was demonstrative, to inform, to teach. I have responded, learnt and because of being blessed with a creative gene I have used the learnt facts to make my own versions. I didn't write critical slogans, I chose Keats "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty" and Attar's "If you wish to be loved, Love", and Rumi "See with your Mind, Hear with your Heart. I just don't see it as negative to be inspired by existing artworks, the early 20th century Modernist challenge to the artist was "Make it New" (which in fact is originally an ancient Chinese proclamation) nowadays it could be "Make it Old", meaning embrace the past, adapt, don't constantly seek to replace things with other things.

With easy access via computers to existing imagery, paintings etc there is a tendency to see them as not belonging to anyone or anywhere they are just there to be played around with. There are artificial intelligence websites on which you can concoct your own mash up picture of say a portrait of the king or a monkey in the style of Van Gogh. There is the original source material meeting technology and releasing endless possibilities of adaptations and alterations. This is what you have been manually doing for years so you can be considered an early precursor of this 'image play'.

In China where there has always been respect for elders and traditions there is a recent art form called 'shanzhai' that involves copying, appropriation, hacking and original creation, originally it was blatant plagiarism of fashion but now has spread to the art world where artists take trends and new technology but add elements to the original or deconstruct it with new methods, making it more accessible to the public, justifying it by claiming that one learns from the old, takes it apart and rebuilds it and represents it to the public. The end result is digital, I'm reconditioning actual pieces of paper and the end result is physical. Also as a collector, I am constantly looking at pictures, assessing their qualities, I value uniqueness, a Chinese Van Gogh copy is not as expensive as a Van Gogh said to be painted by him and of the period, but how do you know which is which? It is estimated that of well known artists there is more forged art than real art on the international market today.

What's your point?

Look and Learn. Everything has value, not only monetary value, but inherent value, determining that value is key to the appreciation of art.

We come now to the close of the two decades of your work that we have looked at, which is also the start of the Pandemic, which hit the UK in January 2020. How was your work affected by lockdown?

Everything was lived via the web, you couldn't go anywhere physically apart from the supermarket and the park. I've got 2 websites and they both got a greatly increased number of people looking which was great. I made 2 paintings that arranged the days of the year as a flowing line, you couldn't but look forward to when it might be all over. Living alone meant that I had nobody to worry about, artists are quite good at amusing themselves and are used to being in a room alone for hours, lockdown didn't greatly affect my work.



I made one painting in which I tried to sum up what I felt about it, it is a painting of a maze where you began in the centre and when you worked your way out, avoiding the nasty little virus balls, graphic designs of which were a big feature of the dramatic nightly news bulletins, once out you found yourself surrounded by other mazes, there wasn't any empty space just other mazes.



Thank you

END OF INTERVIEW

Details concerning the artworks illustrated in the interview can be found in the relevant exhibitions.

For any further information please contact :- dayfinearts@grahamday.co.uk

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