

John Sherwood: A Potted History of My Work

As a child I drew obsessively. My interest was encouraged by my father who brought paper home from school and introduced me to pen and ink drawing as well as Renaissance religious paintings in an art textbook. Certain school teachers (not only art teachers) also recognised my ability and interest, and encouraged my desire to study art at an advanced level.

1972-3: Loughborough College of Art and Design's Foundation course took away the natural development I arrived there with, telling me to forget what I did before arriving at art school. They removed my preconceptions about art, and taught me drawing. They broadened my understanding of what art is and how it is made, gave me a grounding in art history, and prepared me for my degree course.

1973-6: I applied to attend the Fine Art Honours degree course at Leeds Polytechnic because it was seen as being the radical art college of the day in the UK. There I was introduced to conceptual and performance art, as well as the other forms and ideas that were fashionable at the time: abstract painting in its various forms, David Hockney, Jean Dubuffet, and Surrealism were all current. I was able to intermingle with other students and learn from them. I was taught by many different practitioners; polymath painter/writer/performer Jeff Nuttall being the most well-known. An attempt was made to push me down the path of abstract expressionism, but I was always my own man and inevitably really, started along my own individual path not adhering closely to any fashion or movement.

1976-9: Whilst developing a personal dark surreal fantasy fine art in ink, I tried to develop a career as a graphic artist to make a living. But travelling round a variety of record and book companies, illustrators, advertising agencies and so on, I realised that this type of work was not for me, because it wouldn't allow me sufficient freedom to pursue my personal interests...



Proposed album cover design for rock band Jethro Tull

1979-80: ...so I applied for, was accepted by, and attended the one year Art Teacher Training course at Goldsmith's University, London.

1980-2013: I pursued my career in art education, earning a living teaching Art in a variety of English schools in the county of Essex. Throughout this time, I doggedly pursued my own work as an artist, selling work privately, and working to commission, aside from exhibiting in galleries.

1980-86: As a young artist in the 1980s I declared that I wished to be free to express every aspect of my subjective life. But I wanted to be a painter primarily, and to start off my post-college career, partly because of what I thought to be the shortcomings of my radical 'creativity first/technique later' Leeds Fine Art education, I felt that I needed to acquire 'the skills of my trade': I developed a more crafted, closely- considered approach to painting than I'd had as a junior abstract expressionist student. I have always felt a pull between my desires to be wildly creative whilst at the same time wishing to craft artefacts. The semi-abstract but sharply-defined paintings I made during this time were based on my photographs. These paintings were primarily on modern urban themes.



'Tower and Clouds'
Oil on hardboard

1986-1998: The tightknit paintings I had been making created a tension which had to be broken. So, under the liberating influence of Jean Dubuffet, I explored a variety of spontaneous and 'untutored' ways of working. These included different kinds of abstraction, and 'naïve' drawings and paintings of people and other subjects. They were stylistically diverse.



'Hot Head' by Eric Bloodorange, my alter-ego
Oil on hardboard

Eventually, in my desire for unity and continuity in the work, I developed a collage-like approach to picture-making that brought the different elements together. I called this type of work 'amalgams'. An amalgam allows image and text from any source to be mixed and matched in accordance with my need or whim at that moment. There had been a conflict between the desire to devote my time to art and the necessary demands made of me by other things in life. During an attempted recovery from the self-doubt and discomfort ensuing from these concerns, and having first encountered Dubuffet as a student at college, I re-read his ideas about art. This caused me to remember that spontaneity and human imperfections can be good in a painting. And that crude handwriting is better than the finest calligraphy. I was reborn artistically. Amalgams allowed me to address the things going on in my life: mulling over things, making sketches from and taking photographs of things I'd seen – anything really – and bringing them together in a collage of sorts to make an

'imprint' from my reality. These earlier amalgams were of varying shapes and sizes...

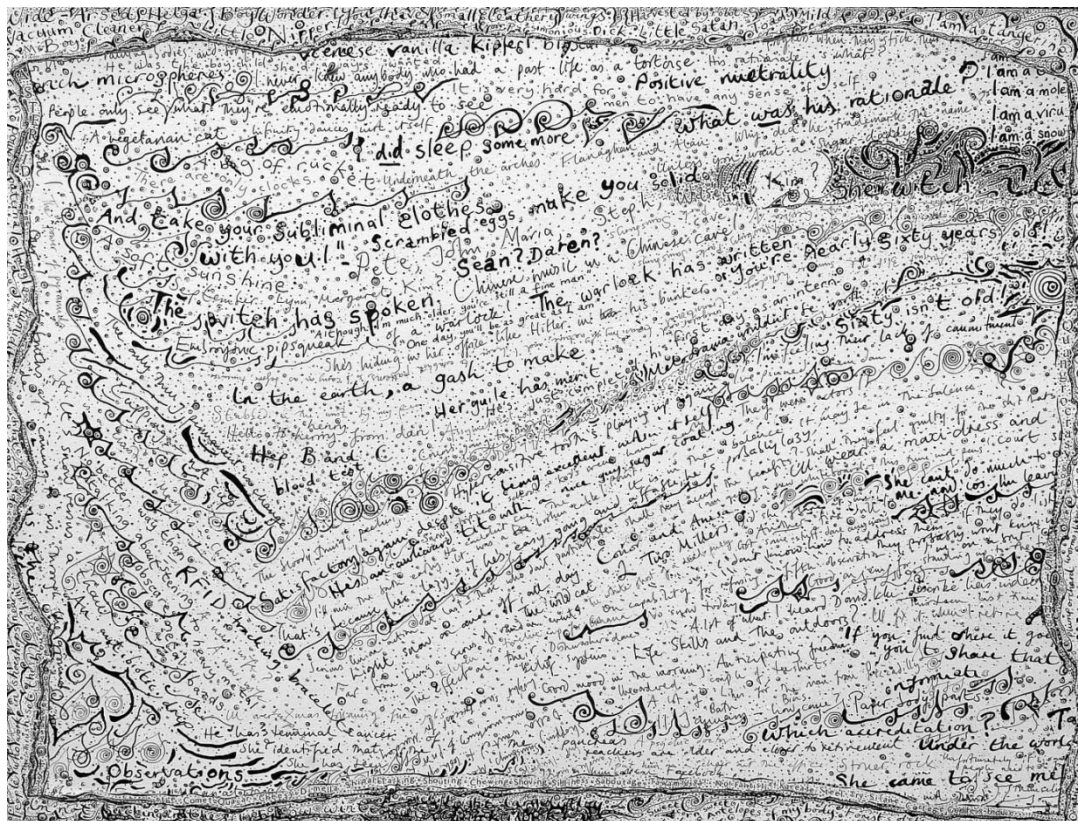
1998-2013: I was the art co-ordinator in a school for youngsters with special educational needs. To be able to cope as an artist with the pressures that came with this teaching role I had to make the art-making in my spare time as easy to manufacture as possible. So I refined the amalgam into a one format continuous 'Lifetime Series' of almost identically-shaped 'Sixty by Forty-Fives' executed mostly on watercolour paper.



'Please Cast Level' 60 by 45cms
Mixed media on watercolour paper

The initial idea was to continue making an accumulation of spontaneous statements of any kind (brushstrokes, words, drawings, photos etc.) that could be unified and stand as an expression of my reality just as an accumulation of brushstrokes in an Impressionist painting might do. 'Sixty by Forty-Fives' refers to the size of every piece in the series: 60 by 45centimetres (with a plain 22mm border). Over time these became slower in execution, and I tired of the format. I produced around three hundred of these during my fifteen years at the school...

2013 until the present: ...and am still making them. However, their role has changed since I retired from work and have acquired the time, reasons and resources to open up my activities...

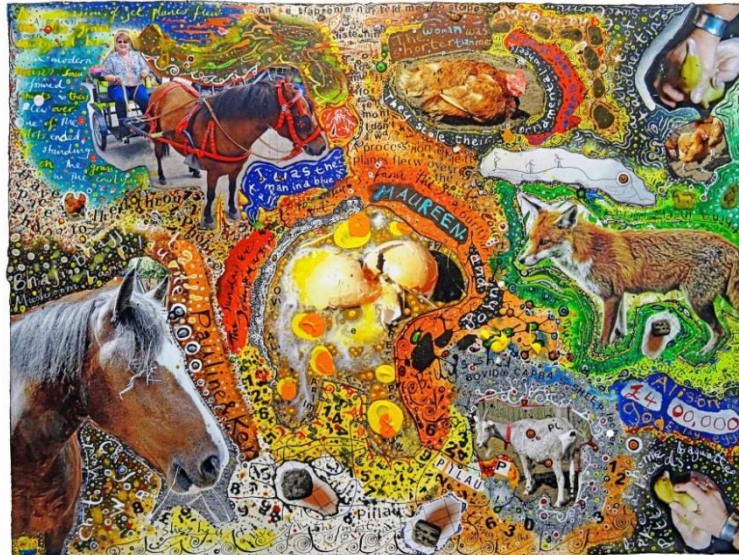


'Black Writing' 60 by 45cms
Calligraphy ink on watercolour paper

Interacting with my life, the Sixty by Forty-Fives have become the spine of an oeuvre that blends with my general experience. I call them my 'Psychobabble', where thoughts, experiences and ideas of any kind can be recorded and knocked around. I make art primarily for myself and use it as a tool to enhance and deepen my experience of life. Furthermore, I like to blur the boundaries between that which is recognisable as art and other things that may not be. I work without strict rules (though limitations can be productive). I embrace a variety of forms, and am adaptive according to my needs and situations: hairstyles or the telling of a joke tend not to last, but an image/text painting dealing with something in life; or a photograph taken as I walk through the park for exercise; or a transcription of me emoting into a cathartic recording, can. The practices that had been only seen together in an amalgam are now allowed to exist separately again, sometimes, like the photography, as discrete bodies of work.

Here are those activities that are readily recognisable as being art, and which I have been engaged in:

Amalgams of different kinds – Sixty by Forty-Fives are still at the core of my various activities



'Urban Farm' 60 by 45 cms
Mixed media on watercolour paper



'The Son of Mr Heaven'
iPad art

Paintings (of any kind): Oil paintings; acrylics; watercolours...



'Fragment'

Oil painting on canvas developed from free-flowing lines

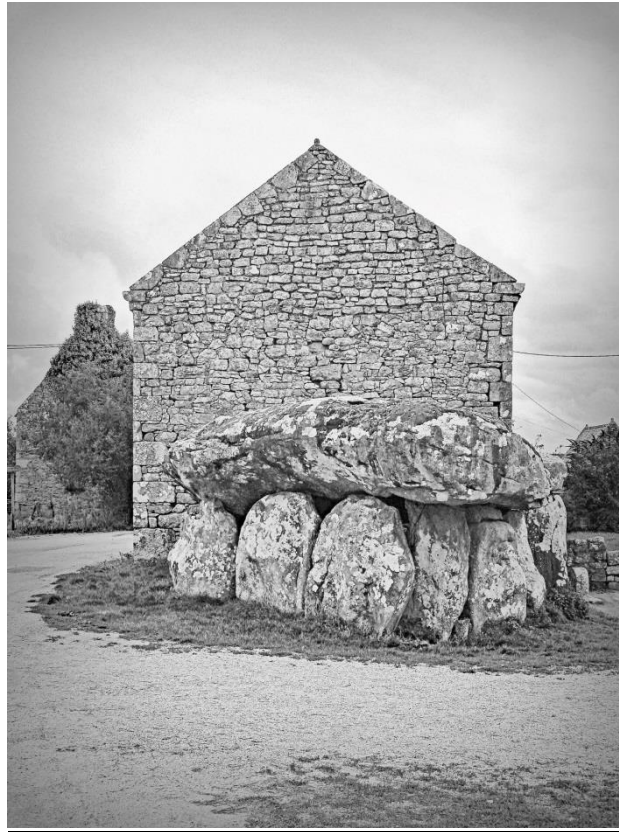
Drawings – iPad, pen and pencil



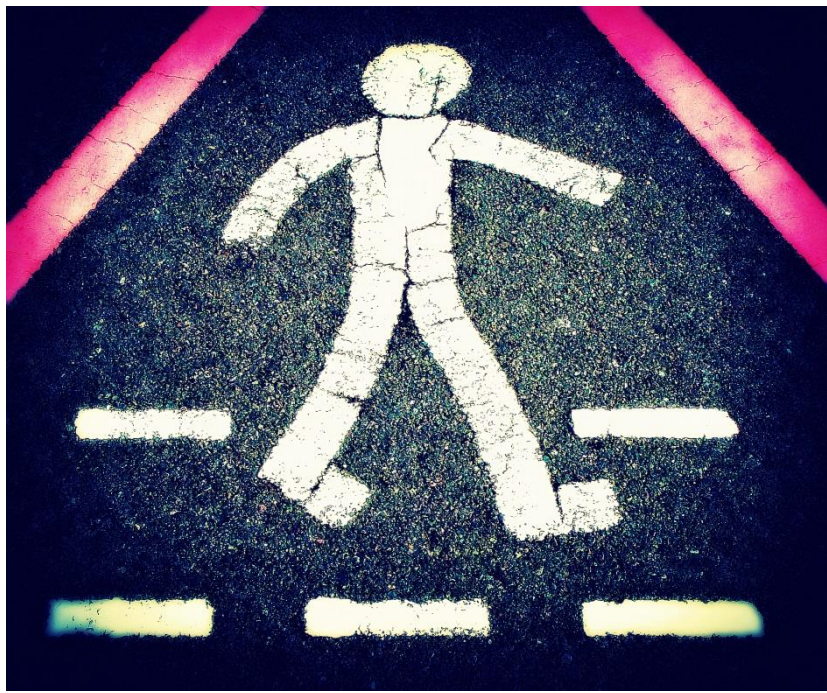
'Youths Walking Down a Path'

iPad art based on a sketch in a book

Photographs of anything I happen upon that interests me

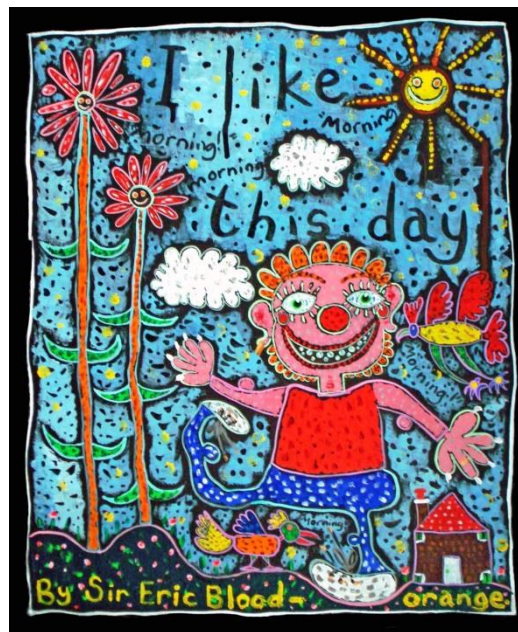


'House with Dolmen'
Digital photograph

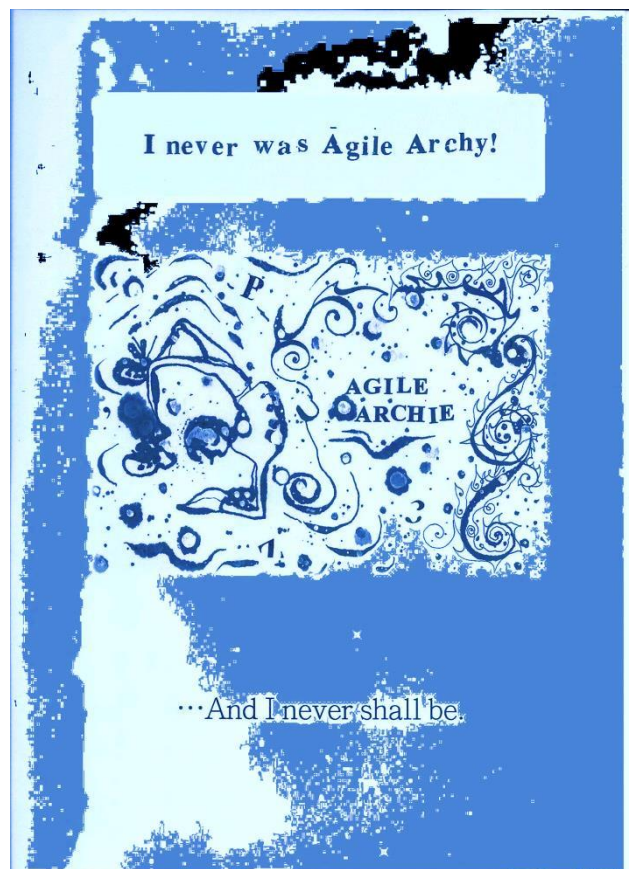


'Crossing'
Digital photograph

Image & Text



'I Like this Day'
Acrylics on canvas



'Agile Archie'
Digital art – potentially a page from a book

I do not see why I have to limit my self-expression to fine art. Hence my creative writing: short stories, poetry - these usually come from life events or thoughts about life. Often they are written when making fine art is more difficult: when I'm on holiday, for example.

The Ghost of a Mischievous Boy

You're the ghost of a mischievous boy –
Hidden in cupboards,
And slamming doors.
There's your creepy space look!
'I'm back!'
(Battering tables).
Never mind, aih?
(After the sun the rain).

Needy with greed,
It's tough at the top.
You're thrown to the dribbling wolf-
You with your book of gold-
Exposed to the elephants,
Wandering school fields,
And valleys of snow.
On grey crags you're stranded.

Stop or go!
Goading? You try.
'Stop it!' you cry.
'Stop or die!'
Loudly, I lie –
To Martin,
The mischievous guy.

Poem based on real life events

One-liners (usually snatched from the atmosphere):
“I wonder what it's like to be a fish”.

Planning and 'To-Do' sheets and calendars can be made into art by combining them with other elements in an amalgam:



'Red Luscious Bed' 60 by 45cms
Mixed media on watercolour paper with a central calendar

Other activities that may not readily appear to be art but which perform the same sort of function and which can be made into and combined with it include a handwritten daily diary and art notes on which my weekly journal recordings are based. I have kept a diary all my adult life. Furthermore, I make spontaneous Walk and Talk recordings. These can be on any theme, and are usually made on my afternoon walks. Also, I make recordings of sounds around me on my walks, or when I'm somewhere visiting.

The most natural thing for me is to be creative as I move through life: to just let it happen. I have no favoured domain: memory, imagination or direct observation are all valid sources. It is normal for me to draw a map for someone or make a joke spontaneously; or talk to myself in a recording about what's been happening. I may write a poem or short story about something that's happened, or paint a picture too. All of these things come from being alive, and they interact with my life. My subjective experience can be seen as being my project, with the overall output as my self-portrait. And the upshot of the process is arguably the interaction between different expressions within the amalgam, especially the Sixty by Forty-Fives: where things are jotted down and teased out at the heart of it all.

John Sherwood