

'Several Other Gears'

Basil Beattie (B) Stewart Geddes (S)

S: When did you first meet Bert Irvin? Was it at Goldsmiths College, around 1962?

B: Yes it would have been about then. He'd been teaching at Spencer Park Comprehensive School and Wandsworth Prison. Bert had already been a student at Goldsmiths, when he'd studied along with Bridget Riley and Mary Quant. But when he came to teach, it was well on its way to being a different course.

S: How would you describe the course back in the early 60s?

B: It was fairly traditional. It was still separated into the Painting School and the Sculpture School, and there was also the Embroidery and Textile School, and none of the students mixed.

S: ...Not even the sculptors and the painters?

B: Well, no, it was very odd. They pretty much kept to themselves. We were in the Goldsmiths' main building and some old properties opposite, where the library is now. There was Rob Brazil doing Foundation work with students in the main building, and Bill Tucker and I were in what they used to call the 'Jam Factory', which was opposite. There were also other buildings; workshop-type buildings that the sculptors used. It was rather good actually. Once or twice I was asked to do a tutorial with a sculptor (laughs).

S: So there was no Head of Fine Art as such?

B: No, there was a Head of Painting and a Head of Sculpture, and then a Head of Embroidery and Textiles.

S: Did you seek out teaching as a means of surviving after being a student at the RA?

B: Yes, I nearly took up a teaching post closer to home at Sunderland art school. The previous head there, Harry Thubron, had really put it on the map, and around that time nine Sunderland students from the same year got post-grad places at the Royal College. It was unheard of. I remember Picture Post magazine did a feature on it. But before I took up the offer I heard I had an interview and got offered two days a week at Goldsmiths, and decided to go there instead. Compared to the regions, London was a much busier centre for cultural events— exhibitions in particular - and as I was a lad from the North East, this was very attractive.

S: What was so extraordinary about Harry Thubron? I've heard you and Bert talk about him a lot. I think Bert described him as having, "...the wayward logic of genius."¹

B: Harry was very aware of what was going on. He was aware of the changes in art schools and changes in practice. He was innovative in every way he taught really. I think it was at Scarborough that Harry organised influential summer schools. I went to one of these, but at a private girls' school near St Albans. Along with Harry there were one or two teachers from Leeds where he was working by then. Alan Green, a sort of Constructivist, was one of them; a former student of Harry's I think. I went on this course which took place in huge outbuildings, and in one there was sand on the floor, and the students were in a big circle. I think there were two models, and Harry was saying to the

models "Move around, move around". Now, because I had done National Service in the army, and then went to a very primitive art school in Hartlepool, I hadn't learnt anything about 'Basic Design' 2, and I was curious about it. Getting the models to move around - it doesn't sound that adventurous now - broke up the kind of expectancy that went on in the life room; of sitting down and making work that takes a lot of time.

Schwitters was an important artist for Harry, but also Matisse. He'd do Matisse-like prints. But when he was doing his constructions, they'd turn out to be more like Schwitters.

S: Had you known of Bert before Goldsmiths?

B: No, I hadn't. We met a year or so after I arrived there. From the start it was obvious that we had the same heroes - we were both interested in the Americans for example.

S: Who also taught at Goldsmiths then?

B: There was Kenneth Martin. Ken was one that Patrick Millard, the principal, who hadn't been in the position at Goldsmiths for very long, brought in. Millard had come from the Regent Street Polytechnic, and I think the old guard at Goldsmiths resented him somehow, probably because he introduced new ideas and people. There was 'Bobby-Jones' who was head of sculpture – he did the sculpture of Churchill in Parliament Square – and Paul de Mancaux, also a sculptor, who is Cathy de Mancaux's dad. And Betty Swanwick, the painter illustrator.

Later on, the painting and sculpture schools were merged, and Andrew Forge was made Head of Fine Art. Then came Jon Thompson who restructured things into six groupings of staff and students that were idea and issue led. Actually Jon brought in Harry Thubron and Harry's wife Elma to teach. Damien Hirst had a rapport with Harry, particularly in relation to Schwitters.

S: At the time you met Bert, what did you think of his painting?

B: There were references to things being done in St Ives, and he wasn't using the brightest colours in the paint box then; that came a bit later. Perhaps he wasn't being quite so optimistic as he was later on – I am joking. He'd had one or two shows at the New Arts Centre in London, and, you know, I liked those paintings. I still do.

S: Talking earlier of your shared heroes, the Americans for example, what do you remember of the show, 'The New American Painting'? Were you still a student at the RA at the time?

B: Yes, it must have been right on the point when I was about to leave. It affected everybody...even people who weren't interested in art. It had a ripple effect for so many artists and art schools. I remember Tworkov and Grace Hartigan, as well as Pollock and De Kooning and the like. There was so much variety amongst them. But what struck me was the energy, the kind of confidence that all the works seemed to express. I've thought about it a lot since; and I think the overall feeling was that one was looking at a new form of realism.

S: What do you mean by that?

B: Well, the reality of the image; the power and purpose of the image, and I don't mean an abstraction from something seen. But in their works there was a kind of physicality to the image that was very much to do with focussing on the object you were making.

S: Do you think that reflection and understanding came later?

B: Yeah, I think so. I don't think I would have put it like that at the time; but there was an energy; a powerful dynamic that was exciting, and yet they were all very different from each other.

S: Bert commented on that too. He said one of the things that struck him at the time was that De Kooning was very different to Newman, and Newman was very different to Pollock etc.

B: I think De Kooning was rather jealous of Pollock at one point; and Pollock was a crazy man. One wonders if one would have liked to have known him (laughs). But nevertheless, I think the qualities that he achieved were recognised by the others. De Kooning in particular was very enamoured. And it was a very short time after he knew Pollock that De Kooning burst forth.

S: Bert talked about De Kooning being important to him, because, ironically, he had a vestige of figuration and it was that which showed him a 'way in'.

B: Yes, I think that was what happened. De Kooning shapes can be read as 'body', although they weren't abstracted from a body. They're sensuous, done with a sign writer's brushes with long bristles – you could flick them. If you look at the drawing of some of the curves it could only be done by that gesture. Those paintings came out of Cubism, they're 'Cubic' in terms of space.

S: It's interesting you should mention Cubism because of course abstraction was not a new thing when the Americans arrived. European modernism was forty plus years old. So what was particular about the American work – was it to do with the scale and gestural confidence of their painting?

B: The scale was something very important. Much larger than what we'd call easel painting. It's a form of mural painting, and no doubt the Federal Arts Project 3, that several of them had been on, played a role in this. A lot of them certainly got to know each other through it.

S: What was the experience like for you, a student at the RA schools, to see a show like that? Something was building wasn't it? Just the previous year Pollock had a solo show at the Whitechapel Gallery, and before that there had been the first Tate show – 'Modern Art in the United States' - with one room of Abstract Expressionists. How did this all contrast with what you were experiencing at the RA?

B: Well, as students we were always invited to send in work to the Summer Exhibition – I can't remember if I got anything in (laughs) – but I know John Hoyland, who was in the year above me at the Academy, had his rejected because there were no figures in his painting. He was kind of Rothko-esque.

S: And was it right he was told he wouldn't get his RA diploma, unless he submitted some life drawings from the first year or something?

B: I heard that, yes.

It was around that time I got prospectuses from all the London colleges to see if anybody did a 'Basic Design' course. I'd heard interesting things about it, it but I didn't know what it meant. There was only one evening class at the Central School and I mentioned it to John.

S: Who was running it?

B: Bill Turnbull. William Turnbull. So we used to go along, and I remember Turnbull would read Space magazines in the corner while taking the evening class. He'd have a model, and I think he'd say something like "Make it look as though it's new and not something that's been dug up". Privately, I've always thought his work looks like it has been dug up (laughs).

But it really worked for John. He was motoring by then, and soon after the Academy he got a show at Marlborough's New London Gallery.

S: Coming back to 'The New American Painting', were all things American very attractive at that time? We were only recently out of rationing, and for Bert having been in the Air Force during the war, perhaps his memory of the swagger and confidence of the American airmen and soldiers was part of a wider cultural attraction that these works seemed to represent?

B: I can't quite remember that, but of course for Bert there was a feeling that the war had taken valuable time, and consequently he became prolific.

S: Yes it struck me whilst in his studio and looking through the older paintings, how hard he worked from the earliest period. He was making a lot of work, and using a lot of oil paint, which was an expensive medium.

B: Yes. I remember going to a diploma show – as they were then - at Chelsea, in the late 60s, and I met Peter Sedgley. I mentioned I was looking for a studio. And he said: "Well, why don't you come to our meeting? We are going to meet down the road next week." And it was when he was with Bridget (Riley) and they were the two great motivators behind 'SPACE' and AIR'. 'AIR' was for Artist Index Registry, which of course, if computers had been around then would have been fantastic. And 'SPACE' looked to provide studio space for artists.⁴ Before the big building boom, the Pool of London was full of empty warehouses.

So around this time I said to Bert: "Are you interested in a studio?" And initially he said: "No, I've got the studio at home. After a day's work when I'm going to bed, I can go and have another look and do a bit more". Later on when Bert had taken a studio, I overheard him talking to someone at a party and they said to him, "Bert, I hear you've taken a studio. I thought you liked working at home?" And Bert replied, "Well you know how it is. When you've got a studio at home and you're off to bed you think, I'll just pop in here and do a bit more. So you pick up your brush and start f***** it up. You can't do that when you've got a studio somewhere else".

Anyway, we were talking with the council about an old building down Borough High Road, part of which had been Marshalsea's Prison, mentioned in Dicken's 'Little Dorrit'. Unfortunately that didn't come off, but meanwhile Peter and Bridget had been negotiating for St Katharine Docks, next to Tower Bridge, which is almost surrounded by water and was fantastic. Various boats had traded across the world from there. So we moved in, and although London was on the way out as a port, I remember seeing dockworkers in 'The China Ship' pub, up that cobbled street outside the gates. And Bert did move in, to the middle floor I think.

S: Did he get a commission for some big paintings or something, and needed a larger space...?

B: He may have done. He certainly wanted to work bigger by then, and I remember he used to have big drums of turps to thin the paint because he was still working in oils. But even in the large space of the warehouse the fumes and smell was so strong. Good job he didn't smoke, it could have gone up (laughs)!

And then acrylic came along and it was just what he was looking for.

S: Were you both using acrylic paint toward the end of your time at St Katharine Docks?

B: Lots of us began using it, but ironically Bert started using it later. We were given stock from Rowney when they first started making the stuff, and we did this exhibition at the Royal Academy called 'Big Paintings for Public Places'. I think it may have been a publicity thing on Rowney's part,

and I remember they gave us big plastic jars of acrylic paint - a whole litre each colour! It wasn't particularly good stuff but it was just what we needed at the time. Actually, I only threw some of those jars away a few years ago (laughs).

S: How long were you all at St Katharine Docks as a group?

B: I think it couldn't have been more than three years - a very short time. We had to leave. And then some of us took over the old Jewish School in Stepney Green in around '70 '71, and I had a studio next to Bert.

S: Those last turps-stained oil paintings of Bert's, that he did at the beginning of your time at Stepney Green, they were painted upright weren't they? They weren't done horizontally as he worked later, correct? I notice the paint runs down the surface.

B: Yes that's right. But then he started using acrylic paint, and of course he took to it like a duck to water! And it's where his work really began to change in size and imagery. If you look at the history of painting, a lot of art changed because of the paint changing. You could make paintings in a way that you couldn't before. It can be a great release. It was certainly was for me and Bert at the time.

S: ...Like the development of the paint tube for the Impressionists.

So what made you go back to oil?

B: Ah, that's a good question. I think I took hold of a brush to draw into the picture again.

Acrylic is brilliant for making stained paintings. But when you apply it thickly, it's more like what it is - plastic. It has a quality of inertness. But when oil paint is thick, somehow it doesn't look inert or dead. And I began to draw thickly.

S: But Bert's paintings don't look dead do they...?

B: No. They're not thick though.

S: They are almost in the watercolour tradition, but on a vast scale?

B: That's right. There was one point when he said he'd never use white.

S: Like a water colourist...

B: Yes.

S: But going back a little... around the time of seeing the American shows, Bert had another significant encounter when he got to know Peter Lanyon.

B: Yes, I think it was before we met, during Lanyon's 'gliding' period. Did you see the exhibition at the Courtauld Institute recently, of some of those gliding inspired works of Lanyon's? I thought they were exceptional. Through the material of paint I recognised the experience of flight. They brilliantly evoked the exhilaration of flying through space, through clouds and glimpses of land below, swooping.

Lanyon and Bert had that mutual interest in flying and must have talked at least briefly about it - of course Lanyon's experience was different from Bert in that he wasn't being shot at.

S: Yes. Bert talked about the parallels between his later painting and his wartime experience as a flight navigator - the process of describing a body moving through space, on the flat surface of maps and charts.

B: Yes, he'd refer to the connection of flying and his role as navigator and journeys. He obviously didn't want you to imagine his painting as through the eyes of a bird looking down on the ground. Of course navigation can relate to moving through a city too. Bert followed that through when he went away to a new place and would often pick up a title for a painting; perhaps a local name, of a street perhaps, or road.

At one point at Goldsmiths Bert took his students into the city. He took them down into the tube and then up the highest building above ground. He wanted to put them into different spatial experiences. Just as in normal behaviour - you go upstairs, you go downstairs. And that led to thinking about Bachelard's 'The Poetics of Space'. Bachelard spoke about the space in draws and wardrobes, and attics and cellars, and the way it affects the emotions. It wasn't just a physical thing. It could affect your attitude towards all kind of things.

S: He also talked about the analogy of the journey of a brush across the surface of a canvas, and a journey through an urban landscape space.

B: That comes from Pollock and De Kooning. Pollock particularly - he wanted it to be a trace of where he'd been.

S: I'd like to talk about the relationship of artists and pubs. They were important weren't they, in terms of artists gathering and throwing ideas around, as well as having a good time?

B: Absolutely. Well, there was 'Finches' on the Fulham Road. That was a good artists' pub. And the 'Queens Elm' near Chelsea Arts Club was well known; I think at one point there was a writer who owned it. Not being a member of the Club I remember going to the 'Queens Elm'. At the time the Chelsea Arts Club was closely associated with the Royal Academy – and I didn't want anything to do with that (laughs).

S: Wasn't it you who told me that when you were a student at the Royal Academy there was a prize for the best painting of a woman in evening wear with no sleeves.

B: No it was, 'A lady in her evening wear showing arms and hands'. Henry Rushbury, an engraver, was the Keeper, and for me the Academy and its surrounding streets *was* the Art world! Cork Street and Bond Street were three minutes away, as was the ICA in Dover Street. The only time we had to make a pilgrimage was when we went to the Tate or the Whitechapel Gallery. The Serpentine didn't exist, the Camden Arts Centre didn't exist, and so it was a very small world.

S: Was the ICA quite a challenging institution?

B: Yes, it was great. It was where Lawrence Alloway was based, and Bill – William Turnbull. He and Alloway were close. Alloway was terrific. It was a very small space, but I remember seeing a marvellous Morris Louis exhibition there. The Cohen brothers were active then too. I remember at one evening event, one of them sat in the front row while the other stood at the back, and they both flew questions at the panel. As students at the RA we could go straight from the studios – three minutes and we were there!

S: Could we talk about Betty, Bert's wife? That was a very important relationship wasn't it?

B: Yes she was terrific. There were times when Bert would be away, in some distant part, and she would turn up at a Private View. But not in the role of debutising for him... She didn't have to go

there as Bert's wife; she wasn't Mrs Irvin in that sense. She was Betty. And everybody in the art world knew and liked her.

S: I think that's a very nice observation Basil.

B: I'm sure I'm not inventing this, but I have a recollection of Bert telling me that in the early days he was hoping to show some work in an exhibition, and he and Betty loaded up some kind of barrow on wheels with paintings and pushed it over London Bridge to the gallery together, because of course they never had a car! And before all that, in her own right... she went to Clapham Art School...

S: ... which, along with all the other London art schools, was evacuated to Northampton in the war, and is where they met.

B: Yes. It was a great relationship, and ah, you now... toward the end; when they were both in St George's hospital in Tooting at the same time... that was extraordinary... he was downstairs, and she was upstairs, and they'd have dinner together (chuckles).

S: You and Bert were very close friends, weren't you? What was it you liked about each other?

B: I used to pick him up in my car to drive over to Goldsmiths together, and before we got out of Gorst Road where he lived, he'd have told me his latest joke. It was often a Max Miller joke. What annoyed me no end was I always thought, "I must remember that", but I never could remember the bloody thing. The thing is, all that day you would hear him telling the same joke to everybody else.

But it was painting really; our chemistry was through painting. I didn't find him moody at all, or anything like that. And I don't think there are any black clouds in his paintings. By that I mean, I don't think there is any angst in his paintings.

S: Yeah, they are very celebratory paintings.

B: Yeah, and I think once he'd identified that, in his head it became much clearer.

S: Oh, that's interesting – you think it took Bert a while to find that, and be confident about it?

B: Well, I think it grew from when he was looking at St Ives painting.

A lot of abstract paintings are made through looking at things, and the artist can be torn in terms of loyalty to the original - the issue of a painting originating from, for example, a landscape, but not looking like it in a direct way. In the end I don't think Bert was interested in that kind of thing, although he may have moved in that direction early on.

I remember a Life Magazine article in which a reproduction of a Rothko was placed against a photograph of a sunset, and a Franz Kline was next to a photo of the girders of an iron bridge at twilight. In effect they were saying, if you know where to look, you'll find the stuff these artists are interested in. It got under my skin.

When I saw the Rothkos at the Whitechapel 5 they didn't make me think of sunsets. Rothko *made* visible human things, the human experience: living, being human, feeling. It wasn't to do with mimicking the visual world, nor a straightforward abstraction from a visual origin; it was philosophical thought.

And so with Bert, I think the spirit of the painting he wanted to make eventually became clearer, and somehow he identified the idea of making an image that was joyous and optimistic. And the use of bright, high-key colour began to be more prominent as time went on.

S: Some time ago I spoke with Bert's dear friend Terry Frost, and Terry told me he'd been at a reunion of men held at Stalag 383 prisoner of war camp. Apparently everyone was talking about how terrible the conditions were; how they were perpetually hungry, and how cold it was. Terry said "I have absolutely no recollection of that at all". He said: "All I remember is being stood by the perimeter fence, looking across 'No Man's Land' to a forest, and seeing the fresh green leaves on the spring trees, and thinking – that's the most vivid green I have ever seen in my life!" And Bert was like that. I don't think he chose to be like that, he just was, and eventually he came to accept it.

B: Yes, I think that's right.

He was asked to visit a lot of different art schools around the country, and I think the general impression for students was of an enthusiast. Someone who would try and engage with their ideas and guide them towards themselves.

S: I had that. I had a tutorial with Bert at Bristol, as a first year student, and he basically told me, "You've got to make it more so. What you're doing is valid, but you're being a bit inhibited about it."

B: Well that's a very good criticism really. There must be several other gears! (laughs)

S: I think that was it – several other gears!

1. Geddes, S, *Stewart Geddes in Conversation with Bert Irvin*, Turps Banana Magazine, Issue 13
2. A radically new form of art education, that transformed art school training throughout Britain from the 1950s.
3. Federal Arts Project/Public Works of Art Project were part of the Works Progress Administration developed by Franklin Roosevelt to alleviate difficulties arising from the Great Depression. Artists – including several that later became 'Abstract Expressionists' - were employed by Federal Government to paint murals for hospitals, schools, post offices, community centres, and other government buildings. Many of these were in the Social Realist form espousing the virtues of community and the 'American Way' despite the difficulties, but some abstract murals were also executed.
4. 'SPACE' - Space Provision Artistic, Cultural and Educational – remains one of the main organisers of artists' spaces in London
5. Mark Rothko solo exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, 1961.