

## Mornings with Michael

‘No one creates ... the artist assembles memories’

Jack Yeats

Michael Broughton and I once went to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford to see a Camille Pissarro exhibition. Michael drove in his big car, during the journey I learnt that he had been a taxi driver in Cornwall in another life. Pissarro is one of his favourite painters and I thought I could see why; those glistening Parisian boulevards relating to the wet streets of Clapton in London, Michael's main subject for several years now, though the postcard from that trip that ended up on his studio wall was a landscape, a humdrum corner of a road on the outskirts of a provincial town. It reminded me of a remark made by the painter and writer Lawrence Gowing about the coincidence in the programming at the Hayward Gallery of exhibitions by Pissarro and the English painter, Michael Andrews. ‘Wonderful’, he said, ‘one artist who painted nothing but masterpieces and the other who never painted a single one’. At the time, or rather at that moment, I wondered which was which. But it is a matter of ambition, of the way to approach the painting of masterpieces. Pissarro as the journeyman artist, the great journeyman artist. Michael's paintings of Clapton are in the line of Pissarro and, to cite a more recent master, of Leon Kossoff, whose subject was the London we live in, and who might be regarded as a mentor for this artist though I doubt Leon himself ever realised this. One only has to be in the presence of Michael and a painting by Kossoff to become aware of this relationship. Sickert once referred to Whistler using the phrase ‘la voix du bien aimé’, and I can imagine something similar in Michael's mind in relation to Leon Kossoff.

Michael works then in a tradition of English ‘painterly realism’ which takes its subjects from landscape and people. An exhibition which looked at British art between the period 1750 to 1950 took place in the MSK museum in Ghent in 2007. The director of the museum, Robert Hoozee, a scholar - he was the first person to make a complete catalogue of Constable's paintings - looked at the period under the title ‘Observation and Imagination’. The observational strand began with Constable and Hogarth - the Hogarth of *The Shrimp Girl* in our National Gallery and of the great city scenes in the Soane Museum. This way of making paintings was decisively energised in the past century by painters such as Lucian Freud and Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, all of whom were represented in the Ghent exhibition. These artists, directly or indirectly, were part of a great wave of coerced immigration to this country from central Europe, a phenomenon which contributed markedly to culture in England in the post-war period. Walter Sickert, father of so much twentieth century painting in this country, might also be regarded as part of this, remembering that he too came originally from the European continent, ‘born in Munich of the purest Danish descent’.

Michael's most distinguished admirer has been that most European of English writers, John Berger, a writer with both imagination and observation to a superlative degree. His short essay in the catalogue of Michael Broughton's first London exhibition, at the Art Space Gallery in 2012, began with one of his characteristically startling juxtapositions:

*Let's begin with the Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century architectural painter Pieter Saenredam. His speciality was church interiors. These interiors are filled with light in a striking and unusual way. The light does not enter from the outside, it resides there. The light is the inhabitant of the space. Something comparable and different occurs in Broughton's paintings.*

This seems to me the most unlikely comparison, and yet light, English light, is the essential component of Michael's paintings, and his subjects are the buildings of the part of East London in which he lives and works. There are not many places in London where you can see Michael's paintings nowadays but there is one, perhaps even better than a museum or gallery, in Casey's bakery near Clapton Ponds. A large and expressive painting of local buildings, local streets, local weather. It looks perfectly at home, in the light, almost, in which it was painted. I don't know if its presence in this excellent bakery entitles Michael to free bread, but it reminds me of those artists' Inns in Barbizon or Pont-Aven, the walls lined with paintings, the tables full of bearded pipe smoking artists.

I have been 'sitting' for Michael for much of the past year and made brief notes after several sessions thinking that something might result and, tangentially, throw a little light on his work. What follows is an 'assembly of memories', as in the quotation at the head of this essay. I am aware that these memories may serve only to illustrate the totally different worlds inhabited by sitter and artist. On a different occasion Jack Yeats declared that 'painting is an event'. After a year's sitting for Michael, the nature of that event remains for me as elusive as ever. But I should make it plain that I admire Michael Broughton's work, especially the Clapton views. They seem to me to capture the changing light, the varying weathers and even the atmosphere, the feel of this suburb within a city, a city which has the great asset of parkland, English city parkland, that is, country within the city. I can almost sense the moist air and indeed the pollution in these paintings. I don't think they could have been made in any other city and in any other light. Of his paintings of people, as one of his subjects, I would hesitate to comment, except indirectly through these post-sitting notes.

\*\*

*Studio notes from 2021-22*

Wednesdays at 10.30 was what we agreed but I am often a few minutes late, sometimes more. Michael accepts this without demur, as if I was doing him a favour by coming at all, though I think I get as much out of these sessions as he does. The privilege of being in a

painter's studio and the conversation which over time has become more relaxed since I ceased trying too hard to make intelligent remarks about the ongoing paintings.

My lateness is such that Michael has learned to wait before mixing the colours used in my portraits. He does this on the surface of an ancient heavy wooden table that stands beside his easel. When I look the colours seem already to be swimming into one another. I wonder how he can pick out what he needs. For some time, I wore a blue shirt, and it has been one of the pleasures of 'sitting' to see this shirt transformed into paint, glistening, almost moving, after each session. But first I look at the face, almost automatically. I suppose that would be the case with anyone. Sometimes I think I can see a reflection of my mood, perhaps a little hangdog after foolishly mixing drinks the previous evening, or depressed, thinking of family or medical problems. Rarely can I see the reflection of anything more elevated.

I sit there, in a chair which Michael bought for me, or found unwanted outside someone's door. It is not especially comfortable, the support for the back hurts after about a half an hour. I rather envied my fellow sitter Rachel who came one day in a heavy shower, without a mack or an umbrella, so that she had to take off her soaking skirt to pose and has been in this more natural situation ever since. I sit there in my blue shirt and black trousers, like a retired head teacher, still anxiously gripping the arms of his chair.

My view is of the edges of other paintings and of the marks on the studio wall, and Michael towering above me at his easel, jabbing away at the board, like a fencing master. He has a cloth or an old towel over his arm to wipe his brushes - today it was bright red, reinforcing the image of a toreador... If I swivel my eyes to the right, there are a few drawings pinned to the wall above a long shelf beside a ladder that leads up to the roof. The ladder features as a studio prop in the background of a fine self-portrait. The studio is full of self-portraits - Michael himself is his most reliable sitter, more dependable, more readily available than me or my predecessor Henry, or Rachel. I can identify a few things, a drawing of Michael's son Aloysius, an illustrated letter from Yves Berger, a reproduction of a painted head that I keep meaning to look up. I dare not guess its authorship as I should know... [It is Rembrandt, Michael tells me one day.]

Michael doesn't talk while he works. I hear his breathing in short bursts that match the jabbing movements of the brushes or the sound of angry scraping. I know his struggle is internal, to find himself 'bodied' somehow in the material that he is applying to the board.

The sessions last an hour or longer, before he slows, and I know he is coming to an end. He slows and looks at the board, and also looks at its reflection in a mirror sited behind him, a strategy to give himself momentary distance from surface and subject. Mostly he seems to stop in a state of despair. On one occasion he stopped in disgust because of a conversation in the corridor outside his studio, a conversation that went on and on and clearly disturbed him. After a moment or two he leaves the studio to clean his coffee pot and fill it with water from a service point down the corridor. My turn then to have a quick look at the morning's work. When he returns, I try to be encouraging. I am not always good at this.

Why did I begin this? Well, Michael asked me. I am not so busy, I thought I could help him. I admire him. I have never been in a painter's studio when he or she is working. Why does he not get tired of the same subject, the same face? My pose seems to me quite boring. Once I crossed my arm over the other arm and he asked me to hold it. It is odd, but I know it is the living presence that must be here sitting in this chair. There is, apparently, no substitute for someone trying to embody that living presence in paint. And yet we don't talk while he works and speaking animates the face and the person. I find myself wondering about my slightly negative human presence. Then again, I am conscious that I do not look or see with the perception and acuteness of a painter.

In the studio the evidence of the week's work is leaning against the walls. Around the same time as our trip to Oxford Michael began painting a scene near his house in Clapton, a bus coming up the street on a blustery day in early spring. The first large sketches in oil had an impressionistic freshness about them, but they matured as the weather and the season changed. I was not sure that this was a good thing. How do you decide whether something is finished? Is it all provisional? I have no idea, although sometimes I think I should try to stop him...

13 July 2022

Michael struggles a little, understandably, finding words to express what he is hoping for in his paintings. But his intelligence is exceptional. Today, he was speaking about space in painting, about space in terms of quality not quantity, about inner space, about something that comes from within. It's clear he thinks one of the paintings of me has this quality, the one which is narrow and in which the arms are crossed over each other. I also find it an impressive painting, but I am not entirely sure I would think so without Michael's affirmation.

Rachel and I sit on the same day, Michael thinks of it as the best day of his week. Today, after a late return from Barcelona the previous night, I delayed my arrival, with Michael's agreement, and then hung on after our session. There was a voice from the street and Michael said, 'that's Rachel'. Then I realised I had overstayed, there was no time for him to prepare mentally or even mix the palette for Rachel's painting. He had told me earlier that his anxiety about these sessions, his mental preparations for them, begins in the middle of the night. I must apologise, though it was good to catch sight of Rachel whose 'portrait' is so often in my line of sight.

I had been looking, while 'sitting', at one of the Clapton landscapes, at the road which runs through it, like a river, like the river Seine in those early paintings of Paris by Albert Marquet. I learned that Marquet is another favourite painter of Michael's. But Michael's street is darker than the river, reflecting the northern light and the asphalt.

Michael had been at the weekend to his father's house in the west country of his childhood. He had drawn the landscape, the familiar landscape (places you know in this way are 'inside one', he says) and is thinking of how he could paint this subject.

14 September

After a summer break, me in Tuscany, Michael in the west country at his father's place and in Reggio Calabria. But I had come in the wrong shirt, and he couldn't continue the painting we had left in July. I thought he had decided it was finished, but that was presumption on my part. To use the session Michael did a charcoal drawing instead, of me in my nondescript sweater. It is an image I promptly titled 'The Ex-Catholic', someone clearly not reconciled to losing his faith. Odd how convinced I was about the specific mood, even the subject. There was talk about hands, the way I place one hand over the other (rather than clutch at the arms of the chair as in the paintings). Michael thought it a gesture that brought the image, painting or drawing, together. I volunteered to return the next day with the right shirt.

15 September

(M. scraping vigorously.)

A: "Are you getting rid of me entirely?"

M: "No, I'm scraping off your bumps."

There was a little tension in the air this morning. Michael clearly found it difficult to settle. It was reflected in the work. There was not much conversation. At one point, and perhaps this was what upset him, I remarked – I had been looking at Rachel's right leg folded over the chair - I said, the difficulty, your difficulty, is reconciling a painting and a portrait, matter and detail. He replied that there was an optical truth and a psychic truth. It was towards the latter that he aimed, how everything becomes whole. Today, the painting, our painting, went backwards.

21 September

A good morning. We both ended up with smiles on our faces. Before Michael started, I was talking about the Maupassant novel I was reading and its description of the art world of Paris in the 1880s, varnishing day at the Salon in the Palais de l'Industrie, how similar it all was it was to major openings in London now, the care with which people dressed, to be seen. Michael told me he had been reading an extract from Dante to five-year-old Aloysius,

from the first canto where they are treading on souls, squishy substances. He went on to mention Seamus Heaney's lectures (read some years ago) where he talks about Dylan Thomas as a 'bucklepper' [one who leaps like a young buck]. He thought he had been a little too much 'the young buck' last time. I presumed he meant, at least in part, his attack on the board, and indeed it seemed to me, later in the session, that he was more deliberate, even more gentle.

Today Michael placed the mirror almost opposite me. It is balanced on an easel and normally sits in the corner of the studio by the window. I watched his head moving across the mirror as he worked, obscuring my view of the head in the painting which in any case was obscured by the many marks on the surface of the mirror. It was odd looking, half-seeing, in a mirror, a painting of me, rather than my actual head and face. No flickering of the eyelids, slight movement of the shoulders, those involuntary movements to change position. The painting didn't droop, yawn, blink...

An hour perhaps of sitting during which the painting changed radically in mood, it is remarkable how much the painting changes. Last week's was definitely gloomy, this week positively sunny. Michael thought the result a reasonable conjunction of paint and person. The best response to my strictures of the week before!

28 September

A Whatsapp message from Michael seemed to suggest that my blue-shirt days were numbered - last week's 'portrait' finished, or at least 'resting' for a period before a decision was taken about whether it really was finished or had not gone far enough or should be destroyed. Michael's friend Yves Berger is one of the trusted judges, another is a childhood friend from Bude whom Michael trusts absolutely. Anyway, I was hoping for a different pose, not the retired head teacher. I suggested standing up. Heaven knows why as I am in some pain and waiting for a knee operation. But I was thinking for some reason of Sickert's informal portrait of Aubrey Beardsley, Beardsley and his cane. And Michael accepted this. He had been planning to do a new drawing and a little work on a previous portrait head, and indeed he did so but with me on my feet with my stick – I would never have been able to keep the pose without being able to lean on my walking stick. So, the new drawing became a standing portrait, 'like a proper nineteenth century portrait', though afterwards I thought I looked a little too informally clad for that.

*A little dialogue*

A: "Catherine doesn't recognise me.

M: "That's bad".

(Perhaps I should have told or reminded Michael of what Leon Kossoff once said to me, with some vehemence, when I used the word portrait to describe one of his paintings: "Andrew, I don't do portraits!")

And then, when we started the standing pose:

M: "I'm thinking of Manet's Little flautist", and after a pause, the comparison being unsustainable, "or Velazquez's Aesop."

A: "Oh, I don't think I'm on that intellectual level. I'm thinking of Courbet's 'Beggar at Ornans'. Do you know the painting? It's in Glasgow. A terrifying image for a Glasgow middle class teenager. I've never forgotten it.

5 October

The first session in the standing pose begun last week as a drawing. M. had transferred the drawing onto a large vertical board, as big as I would attempt, he said, something like my arm span. So big that he had to crouch and even to kneel to put paint on the lowest part of the board. I found myself wondering whether Velazquez or Whistler ever had to crouch or to kneel. I can't imagine such a thing. But, of course, as Michael said, the view from down there was completely different. He could only put on the background. My grubby trainers had to be painted from his vertical position (he said they made a good rhyme with my not quite white hair...). We agreed on a half an hour session then a five-minute break with a minimum of talking, then another half hour. The first half hour passed quickly enough (though I needed the break) but the latter part of the second session was difficult. By that time the pain in my leg had been transferred down to my foot and was proving troublesome.

I had made the mistake of saying to Michael that Catherine didn't recognise me in the last painting. It worried him, now it is his ambition to make a painting in which Catherine would recognise me. He cited one of the portraits in Frank Auerbach's Piano Nobile exhibition and said he had walked across the room knowing it was Catherine. Frank is a very high bar.

12 October

This morning I stopped Michael from setting the alarm every half hour as I thought it would be best if I just stood for a complete session. And I managed it. Truth to say I was weary (the usual reason) and my mind refused to unlock or to roam. Michael had been in Barcelona at the art fair, the trip especially memorable for the El Greco in the National Museum on Montjuich. My picture is looking more and more like a nineteenth century portrait, in its pose and grey ground, though luxuriant in paint (Michael's own home-made mix – the last time he said if he had used manufacturer's paint it would have been £50 pound's worth at least). My painting is progressing, Rachel's is regressing, 'getting stale'. It is to be scraped down and have a wash put over it before beginning again. I have learned that

there is a great deal of 'beginning again' in a painter's studio life. I return across the park buoyed. I don't know why this is. Standing for an hour and more in the same position isn't exactly comfortable. But I do feel it is worthwhile.

We have a break now while I am away, and have my operation, so no more standing for a while...

\*

Earlier I mentioned that the 'event' of a painting, in the Jack Yeats-ian sense, has remained for me as elusive as ever. I think of myself as a layman in the world of artists. The beginnings of my connections with this world were in the 1950s, reading romantic biographies of major figures or fiction such as Somerset Maugham's 'The Moon and Sixpence', based on the life of Paul Gauguin. At the same time, I was reading and looking at those little Skira paperbacks, small enough for the pocket, with jewel-like illustrations, on Van Gogh and others. That aura of romance has remained; indeed, it has seen me though a lifetime of making art exhibitions in England and in Europe. But focus on the artist as much if not more than the work of art is definitely the wrong way round. In contrast, I have always been struck by the sharpness of intellect, of almost mathematical intellect, of artists, who tolerate no such nonsense. Michael is no exception, and I should like to conclude this discursive essay with an example of the gap between *this* artist and *this* sitter. During a recent session I told Michael I was floundering a little with this text. He suggested that I read Book X of Saint Augustine's Confessions! For me this was even more extraordinary than Berger's comparison of Broughton with Saenredam. Book X is rather long, and I was not finding it easy to read, so I took the book in next time and asked Michael to indicate the passages he was thinking of. He marked sections 19 to 29. I then read these and was no whit the wiser, so that I had to ask him again, to be more specific. What follows is part of what he marked, and can be read in relation to what I witnessed in his studio, the intense effort to get beyond just the facts of my physical presence, not only to find the equivalent in paint but to 'compare it with the truth within himself':

*'... I said to all these things in my external environment: 'Tell me of my God who you are not, tell me something about him'. And with a great voice they cried out: 'He made us.' My question was the attention I gave to them, and their response was their beauty.*

*Then I turned towards myself, and said to myself: 'Who are you?' I replied: 'A man.' I see in myself a body and a soul, one external, the other internal. Which of these should I have questioned about my God, for whom I had already searched through the physical order of things, from earth to heaven, as far as I could send the rays of my eyes as messengers?*

*[...] Surely this beauty should be self-evident to all those who are of sound mind? Then why does it not speak to everyone in the same way? [...] If one person sees while another sees and questions, it is not that they appear one way to the first and another way to the second.*

*It is rather that the created order speaks to all but is understood by those who hear its outward voice and compare it with the truth within themselves. Truth says to me: 'Your God is not earth or heaven or any physical body.' The nature of that kind of being says this. They see it: nature is a physical mass, less in the part than in the whole. In that respect, my soul, I tell you that you are already superior. For you animate the mass of your body and provide it with life ...*

Note: the passages from the *Saint Augustine Confessions* at the end of this essay come from the Oxford University Press edition translated by Henry Chadwick and first published in 1992.