In Conversation: Alan Uglow and Robert Nickas

Backdrop

Robert Nickas: You ended our last interview three years ago by saying that "*the questions are always the questions until the next time*". Well, here we go again, but this time I'd like to start at the beginning. The very beginning. You were born in Luton, England in 1941, which is just north of London, and in the middle of the war. Do you have any recollection of the earliest part of your life? I've heard that babies during wartime are affected by the sound of air raid sirens, and do perceive the chaos and uncertainty around them.

Alan Uglow: It was strange to experience situations where I must have been two or three years old when I started to take in what was happening. It was an awakening that I could only give meaning to much later on. One was startled at night by being taken to a cupboard under the stairs during a night raid. The smell and sight of a gas mask. The night shattering with light and firemen struggling to control blazing fires, or the sight of the airport on fire after a daylight air raid. I saw myself later on in these situations almost as if in a film still.

RN: The only way you could actually fix that image of yourself in that moment.

AU: There were periods of calm that would suddenly be shattered, and this 'film' would kick in again. But I was much more frightened later on when I really understood what I had been through.

RN: You were an only child?

AU: Right.

RN: And what was it like growing up in post-war England in the early 50s? What do you remember most, or think happened then that bears upon who you turned out to be?

AU: I remember hating school. Loving cross country running. Roger Bannister breaking the world record. He was the first person to run the mile in under four minutes. Thoughts of leaving home. Lots of running for a start. The class system. Finding out that the only group activity I liked was football. I was a loner. That's what I found out.

RN: There must have been a big American influence at the time, maybe not television, but certainly movies and rock 'n' roll.

AU: Right, hardly any TV and we didn't have one. Radio was the information source. The spoken word creates images, and you learn to picture them.

RN: What got filtered through, really made an impression?

AU: I guess I was 13 or so, when "Rock Around the Clock" came out. I saw it the day after it opened, and theatre was guarded by the Territorial Army.

RN: The Army?

AU: They're like the National Guard. They were called in because the night before young Teddy Boys had ripped the place apart. "Blackboard Jungle" had given us kids some bad ideas on how to terrorize our teachers. Popular music was Frankie Lymon or The Platters, but I was already into jazz and R & B...like the same stuff that some kids in Liverpool listening to. It was an exciting time. The war was behind us, maybe not for our parents' generation, but we were ready to break out.

RN: Your parents were working class, that was your background, if I'm right. So I'm wondering how they reacted to your first serious indication of an artistic side, when that happened, and whether they contributed to that. At least I think you've mentioned musical talent in your family.

AU: My father was a cabinetmaker, had served an apprenticeship, the whole thing. He was a skilled artisan, and naturally a member

of the union. My mother played the piano and had even cut a demo record way back. My paternal grandmother had hand-coloured lantern slides. My paternal grandfather had built a strange single-stringed instrument with a saxophone bell on one end. My father's sister made lots of black and white ink drawings of local views, postcard size views. And I was always drawing, copying stuff, so it was quite normal, when I decided to go to art school. Of course, my father had the usual worries that I wouldn't be able to support myself, but my mother was really cool about it and proud.

RN: Do you remember the first art that caught your attention? Something that actually seemed interesting to you the way that, say, Gene Vincent seemed interesting?

AU: Besides what I saw at home I really didn't see much art. I didn't even go to an art museum or gallery until I went to art school. So it was all through reproductions. Although the magazine Picture Post, a British version of Life magazine, interested me with its graphic black and white photojournalism. You would see photos by Cartier-Bresson and also Bert Hardy, who covered the Korean war. And great sports photography. But when I did get to school and began visiting museums and shows, I saw Giacometti, Pollock and Newman for the first time, and that impressed me.

RN: When did you decide to go to school, and where did you study? What was prevalent at the time, as far as where your attention was being drawn?

AU: I was 15, nearly 16, and had just competed in a 1,500 metre race. The art teacher was also the timekeeper, and at the end of the race, when I went to find out the winning time, he told me to get a portfolio together because I'd gotten an interview at Colchester Art School. I had been going to the Youth Employment Office for weeks and was saying no to everything even career opportunities like floor sweeper in a factory- and suddenly I saw a chance open up. So going to art school was decided for me. But once I got there it was rather intimidating. Stuff looked pretty slick, although the subject matter was mundane- landscapes and urban scenes. It was a period of finding out what I didn't want to do, or at least the first instalment. Around '57 I went to Leicester School of Art, and although it was the second instalment, there were some people there who could open things up to me.

RN: What was your best and/or worst moment in school?

AU: Getting caught by a janitor while trying to make out with another student, and failing the National Diploma in painting. The school gave me a really bad assessment because I refused to paint the subjects assigned -which were all representational- until the time of the exams. I'm proud of that, and both of those moments had to do with the figure.

RN: So you had decided to make abstract paintings at this point?

AU: I was trying to. It was the beginning of working in a non-representational way.

RN: Did you go down to London to see any shows at that time, anything that really struck you in a big way? I know you've mentioned "The New American Painting" at the Tate Gallery in '59, as well as an Ad Reinhardt lecture at the ICA in '64.

AU: Bryan Robertson ran a good programme at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, and I saw Rauschenberg and Rothko early on. But the Reinhardt show was later, after I 'd moved to London. I was into roaming around as much as possible, to other parts of the country. I was a loner, an only child, trying to find myself, trying to prove the art school scene was crap for the most part. It gave me a certain amount of freedom, but it still had its rules, and I had to take the existential route - Solitude vs. Interaction.

RN: So when did you decide to make the move to London, to set up a studio and get to work?

AU: That was '62, and I got a post-graduate place at the Central School where I could

come and go as I pleased. They also had good bands at parties there, and I especially remember the Pretty Things.

RN: They were great. Songs like: "I'm all alone, out on my own, don't bring me down".

AU: There you go.

RN: London was 'swinging' and 'mod' in the early to mid-60s. I think of British Pop, people like Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi at that time. Certainly very different work than your own. Can you give me sense of that time, how you fit in or didn't.

Au: Well, the Pop thing was all the rage, but not the only game in town. There was influence from the New York School that was concerned with the painting 'in situ'. Large scale and installation were important. One exhibition called "Place" consisted of an arrangement of freestanding paintings. They were set up like walls, and you would walk around and between them. It was a complete environment.

RN: Who were the artists in that show?

AU: Richard Smith and Robin Denny. There was another show after that, called "Situation", sometime around '62, and both shows were actually organised by the artists themselves. A lot of galleries either wouldn't or couldn't cope with the large scale of the work, but it was something definitely happening at that time.

RN: And what were you doing at this point?

AU: At the Central School I was drawing a lot, making prints until I got a flat where I had the room to make large paintings. They got pretty colourful. Acrylic paint was a new thing, and you could get intense colours like acid greens and brilliant oranges. The paintings were kind of stripey and spotty.

RN: Could you be a little more specific?

AU: Large scale. Some had rounded corners. Very deep stretchers. There was a painting with a triangular section cut away from the top left corner down to the right side at an extreme angle. But now you've got me doing a kind of remembering-that-I-thought-I'd-forgotten thing. Maybe they weren't so bad, but at the time they seemed bad enough for me to give 'em the boot. This was around '65. And then I started to make stuff I liked, and kept...for a while at least.

RN: You came to New York for the first time in '68, a year before you moved here. What do you remember from that first visit? And did you meet anyone interesting on that trip?

AU: For one thing, being driven down Park Avenue in a Ford Mustang convertible, leaning back and seeing very tall buildings pierce the sky, and ending up at Max's Kansas City. I went back to the toilet, and in the backroom there was Jane Fonda baring her breasts, doing the "Barbarella" thing. Among other things, meeting and getting to have dinner with Barnett Newman, meeting Clement Greenberg and thinking 'control freak', seeing Jackson Pollock's "Blue Poles" at Ben Heller's apartment, being impressed by Bill Bollinger's work (anyone out there remember him?). All in all, what a German friend and I would term Very Good Productions.

RN: You've told me that when you went back to London you knew it was finished for you. Why was that? What had happened?

AU: Well, Bob, when you come back to London from New York and the pubs close at 11, and the tube stops at 12, and your part-time teaching gig is being cut because you won't join the club and go full-time, and you get a teaching offer in New York, "should I stay or should I go?" becomes moot.

Paintwork

RN: You've been here in New York more or less permanently since '69, and showing since '74. Reinhardt once joked that "A cleaner New York School is up to you". You've certainly done your part. But how do you feel about where we are now, twenty or twenty-five years down the line? As a leading question, I

should admit that I'm thinking about the state of painting as represented or even mis-represented by the last Whitney Biennial, chosen by Klaus Kertess. After all, he included your work in some group shows at Bykert Gallery in the early 70s, and Marcia Tucker included you in the '75 Biennial exhibition.

AU: Now I'm thinking that some things are better left unsaid. The Biennial is, after all, the choice of whoever is there at the time. I don't even really remember the other artists in the show I was in, with the exception of David Reed. What I do remember was being asked what colour I wanted my walls painted! They suggested that since my paintings were very light, a coloured wall would make the paintings stand out more.

RN: Why didn't you just ask for hot pink?

AU: Anyway I killed that idea fast. Today the painted wall would be the artist's idea.

RB: So where is painting now?

AU: In the present.

RN: There's a consistency -or stubbornness?- to your work where other painters from that time have become, let's say, rather gestural despite reductive beginnings. And yet it's obvious that your work has changed over the years, what could be called 'different kinds of sameness'.

AU: I like that phrase. I'm thinking about extracts...outtakes from one's repertoire, moving around a painting's constituent parts so they function in different ways. If I think about 1966 as the time when I got to grips with things, those pieces still hold the clues. It wasn't planned. It's an intuitive thing.

RN: Maybe change is more noticeable when it's spare.

AU: It may read that way, but it's not spare in the making. It happens over extended time.

RN: I have to admit it's only recently that I realised how asymmetrical your compositions used to be, really 'off' and at the same time carefully balanced -a kind of balancing act. Am I right that it's since the late 80s that the paintings are symmetrically ordered?

AU: More or less.

RN: There's something about the total look of your paintings - the elegance and quietude of colour and proportion, that order and balance - that for me stands in rather stark contrast to the world into which you bring them. I know how well aware you are of the inequities, harshness, and fucked-upness of modern life, how little tolerance you have for the military industrial bullshit, power politics, and so on. And yet as an artist you aren't exactly a social realist. Maybe this has something to do with why abstraction remains viable? You can be 'in the moment with it, you can be present, it comes from the facts of everyday life, and yet when you come back to the work it hasn't become yesterday's paper. Or maybe the connection has something to do with being dissatisfied.

AU: I think ideas are actions, declarations of intent - an installation becomes an action; it's personal, independent, and may be seen as subject matter, and clearly in opposition to all that crap. I make what I want to see, and attempt to displace the dissatisfaction, but I'll never not be dissatisfied.

RN: Along these lines I was also wondering about another unseen space between the work, and the work in the world, namely the fact that the coolness and self-assuredness of the paintings doesn't exactly correspond to the facts of their production. You've said that the work is done 'on the run, under high tension', on stolen time. And yet the end seems anything but.

AU: Well, I'm not exactly a Zen hermit, so there's perhaps a little perverse behaviour for one thing. And when you have money, you buy time. That's when one has money, and that's not always the case. There are other hassles, technical stuff, can't find the right colour, deadlines, and also an inner excitement of fear, that tension of running

against one's internal clock. But still what I expect is that the work should look like it's made itself.

Shiftwork

RN: Around the time of your show at the Kunstverein in Cologne in '92 you introduced colours and colour combinations for the first time; greys, oxide reds, ochre yellows alongside your trademark red-yellow-black. You called these paintings the Stadium Series. Is this title and the introduction of these new colours related? Anything to do with the fact that the work was made in Germany?

AU: To the extent that those pieces were spray painted in a small auto body shop, and the colours I used were at times the same ones used to paint Mercedes Benz trucks, those paintings have some relation to where they were made, but the concept of the work remains intact regardless of place. The title comes from the advertising signs that surround the football field.

RN: Since then you've taken quite a lot of photographs at football stadiums, and even exhibited a structure based on one of those advertising signs. And you've shown this alongside your paintings. The first time you've shown something from a part of the everyday world that has a direct relationship to the paintings. How did this come about, and is this something you plan to pursue?

AU: I took a lot of photographs at the F.C. Köln stadium in '92, and with a friend, Manos Tsangaris, as the sound engineer, we recorded crowd noise on match day. We were down on the field behind one of the goals. After looking at those photos, I started to think about making a floor piece based on those structures. Since then I've been taking pictures wherever I find them when I'm travelling. And I am planning to make other related floor pieces, and to show them alongside paintings and photographs in various combinations. It's an ongoing thing.

RN: For me, this floor piece emphasised the sense of structure in your paintings. Certainly, the fact that you showed paintings leaned against the wall, set up on blocks very low to the floor, shifted my reading in the direction of screens, things that are architectural, that have space behind them, or change a room spatially. The simple fact that they were not hung on the wall in a fixed position gave them a sense of mobility. The casualness of the presentation - they had been leant against the wall, and were in a sense on their way to or from somewhere, but not there yet - reinforced this idea of a screen, something which could be opened up to reveal another view. They also gave me something new to think about in your work: a sense of waiting...for someone, or something to happen.

AU: At some point early on I had them hanging on the wall, and they didn't look right just hanging there. The nature of the elements in the paintings looked more natural, more at ease, when they were on the blocks leaning against the wall. Because of the framing and divisions within the paintings, each paintings, each painting already had its own built-in wall.

AU: In a way, the gallery wall almost disappears. And then the painting comes into view, and the elements separate. I can't think of another word - but they separate themselves from the ground. The ground is still there, but they're not locked into it. It's not an illusionistic thing. It's simply how you perceive the painting when it's placed in that way.

RN: How do you personally register the changes in your work over time? Specifically given the fact that you've recently said your current work is referring back to previous paintings, and yet seems to be going somewhere else?

AU: Change is something that comes out of the process of working. It's both natural and necessary. The referring back has to do with work from 1966 to 1969 that had been left in storage in London and was lost, gone due to damage. In '88 I made a low panel piece, a 'remake' of one of those lost paintings, and I titled it "66/88". It's not a question of

remaking, but of actualising memory, and that's part of what we've been talking about here today.

RB: So who is your work for?

AU: It's for getting to another place.

RN: And how do we get ourselves out of this interview?

AU: Let's put on the Buzzcocks' single "Noise Annoys", and walk out the door.

1. Published in: "Two People in a Room. A Conversation between Alan Uglow and Robert Nickas", in Alan Uglow. Cologne KUnstverein, 1992, p. 56-59. (Editorial note)

From Monochromie Geometrie, Sammlung Goetz, München, 1996 With thanks to Ingvild Goetz for her permission to have this text on our website!