

# Meeting Simeon Barclay

*'My life has been absolutely transformed by the imaginative possibilities offered to me by artists.'*

Clive Barker

The historical transition of art from an essentially craft-based discipline to the post-conceptual, post-medium, post-internet free-for-all of today's contemporary milieu was arguably made possible by the field's increasing dependence on one thing: language. While not an essential condition of all art being classified and assessed as such, the meaningfulness of a great deal of contemporary work is absolutely dependent on what is or has been written or spoken about it. The language capable of this alchemical transformation of objects, pixels, bodies, images or experiences into art, is a specialised, quasi-scientific mixed bag of expressions and idioms borrowed from cultural theory, philosophy, sociology, and political science. It is also (in contrast to a thing like talent) relatively easy to acquire – for a price.

These developments have arguably led to an ostensibly more democratic and much richer field, aesthetically and theoretically speaking. They have also produced conditions in which language itself can stand in for, and indeed sometimes simply is, the work. Today what an artist says can carry more weight than what an artist does, and so it's not uncommon to come across individuals who've been completely schooled in the art of verbiage, but lack the imagination, experience, perspective and formal sophistication of an original artist.

What has always kept me energised and engaged in contemporary art, are those rare moments when I come across the polar opposite of what some might call 'bullshitters'; rare moments when I come across an artist who is, without effort or affectation, *real*. This is because like Clive Barker, the great writer and creator of one of the most indelible cinematic conceptions of transcendental purgatorial torment in *Hellraiser*, my life has been transformed by the imaginative possibilities, the new psycho-physiological horizons for experience that have been offered to me through the work of artists, and I mean artists in the expanded sense (musician, writers, dancers, philosophers and so on). Contact with work that has the ability to do this is what keeps me reading, writing and seeking out experiences with, and actually believing in this human construct we call art. Such an encounter took place the first time I met Simeon Barclay.

We met in 2014. I'd been invited to do a day's work as a visiting tutor (VT) at Goldsmiths University where Simeon was a student on the MA course. From ten to five I was contracted to spend time in the studios of six separate artists, talking through their respective practices. Like much of the tired pedagogical tool box of higher education in art schools, the VT convention is an approach to 'teaching' I found incredibly frustrating. In the brief allotted hour that you (as the VT) are given, you have to spend time getting to know the artist personally, discovering their interests, and uncovering their creative histories and future ambitions. You also have to offer some useful and original insight into their work and a potential course for its development. Whether or not this actually happens is a complete shot in the dark. At its best, the VT hour can function as an interesting introduction to the formation of an artists practice. At its worst, the hour long session can feel like a failed attempt to communicate between two people who lack a common language. I didn't know there was a third possibility until I met Simeon. Instead of a halting and stilted exchange about 'work, assessment and postgraduate life' we had a long conversation that enriched my

own conceptions of British socio-cultural, political and aesthetic life. I think the feeling was mutual.

I can't remember how the conversation began, but I do remember some of its defining features. Minimalist sculpture, the iconography of racism in football, masculine peacockery, the limits of externally imposed and defined identities, slang, a universe/society composed of only floating signifiers, the collision of 'high' and 'low' culture, and the by turns tragic and heroic figure of champion snooker player Alex 'The Hurricane' Higgins. I'd spotted an image of Higgins somewhere in his studio space, possibly in *What A Charming Name for A Dog* (2014), a piece forming part of a series of wall-based work made at the time. It used the untreated silver of aluminum panels for a surface to which images, usually in vinyl adhesive were applied. I remember floor standing angular sculptures (some finished, some fully formed) that used the same aluminium too. That's when I first recognised the deft mix of materials and signifiers that are Barclay's stock in trade. It's what makes his work so explosive for viewers, willing and able to travel the associative routes his work sets up. Here is what I mean. On the one hand aluminium and 'truth to materials', the fastidious, protestant austerity of American minimalism; on the other the hushed, smoke filled, working mens' ambience of the snooker world of the 1980s and a seditious anti-hero, an Irish man whose cocky brilliance was also a middle finger to British imperialism, to decorum, to fastidiousness. Aside from this dynamism, the work just simply looked fantastic. It was clear that here was an artist who not only had talent, but was perfecting a formal language of assemblage and display that was, to my mind, quite unique. Here was an individual, an artist that I could and would learn from.

*'Somehow, a somehow, a somehow – might escape'*

Jim Cartwright, Road

There are many grounds from which you could confidently assert Simeon Barclay's work is launched from. For me one of the most important is class, specifically the working class. Not 'the working class' as some easily definable, homogeneous community with a set of traditions, values, and a kind of fixed 'total culture' that some look to Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* as evidence of, but the working class as a heterogeneous community. A community, and not some utopia, where cultural collisions are par for the course. Against the solvent tepidity of much banal middle class life in Britain, the working class of this country are frequently the innovators of cultural life, social integration (not without tension), cross-cultural expression and anti-establishment action that actually alters the structural characteristics of oppressive socio-economic systems in the UK. However, working class experience in this country is almost always denied an imaginary beyond the cod social-realisms of, say, the BBC and its many derivative and limited takes on 'regional', 'urban' or 'rural' life. In my own experience, there has always been a deep metaphysical current running through British working class life. Surrealism, hyperrealism, magic realism, I wanted anything other than the pallid social-realisms I was often fed growing up. That 'kitchen sink' reality was and remains nothing but an insight into the limited imaginations of middle class minds than anything else.

In fact, the richness of British working class cultural life, in contrast to its bland bourgeois counterpoint, is frequently pillaged, distorted and then stereotypically determined by those

positioned outside and apparently 'above' it. This has led to a situation where almost wholesale, the arts are read as a thoroughly middle or upper class affair. In fact, today someone's credentials as a legitimate 'working class' person are immediately questioned as suspect if they possess even a modicum of cultural awareness, theoretical knowledge and sophistication. So now, if you've grown up working class (that is you've come from a background of limited economic means and have lived within the socio-cultural environments that such difficulties engender) as soon as you begin working in the arts, particularly the 'fine arts', you undergo a miraculous and involuntary transformation into a middle class aesthete. Such a position is of course maintained and policed by non-other than the bourgeoisie itself. It is built on the prejudiced and ignorant presupposition that working class people grow up in a cultural and intellectual vacuum. The logic goes: the only option working class youth have for 'betterment' comes through escaping their social milieu, in order to access the privileged bourgeois territory of expressive cultures.

In my professional life, however, it has always been the steady stream of privileged art world mediocrities that I can't escape. I'm talking about artists, arts professionals and finally senior managers who all come from backgrounds of economic wealth and cultural ignorance. This glaring lack is usually plastered over by the psychology of class-based entitlement and a near constant practice of appropriation, co-option and mimicry. In my youth I also yearned for escape, but not necessarily from my class status, not from my experiences, the people I was surrounded by or my background. I sought to escape the artificial construct of the phenomenal world. I longed for a kind of transcendence, not just out of poverty into solvency, or away from my seemingly constant close proximity to violence, but out of the bind of signs, signifiers and the vast network of interpersonal and economic relations that made up my reality. Out of that into a more metaphysical territory. I wanted to see fiery angels ripping through the sky in South London like William Blake did, and I found them in music, cinema, art, theatre, and writing. I also found them through the cocktail of amphetamines, psychotropics, depressants and marijuana I ingested every week.

A year after our first meeting Simeon and I worked together on a day-long solo exhibition of his work with DAM PROJECTS, the curatorial collective I'm part of. These day-long shows were a challenge for the artists involved, not only because of our limited budget for production, but because of the time constraints. If we were lucky we could install the night before show time. More often than not we installed and de-installed on the same day. Simeon presented an entirely new body of work and installed it with his usual eye for sophisticated arrangement. The exhibition was a mix of image-based work, a subtle installation (a mannequin placed in the same space as a screening of Marlon Riggs 1989 film *Tongues Untied*), and a huge floor to ceiling print taken from an episode of Coronation Street. The still image was of a seated woman, looking just away from our line of sight, a cigarette in her hand, her hand next to a crystalline glass ash tray, and on her finger a ring whose ornate modernist design spoke of an aesthetic sophistication over and above the domestic scene. The still, captured and framed as a portrait by Barclay, was of the character Elsie Tanner played by actress Pat Phoenix. Tanner's position in the soap opera was liminal, a character perceived as greater than her surroundings, but still somehow bound to them. Being a South Londoner, I wasn't familiar with Tanner, or with the fictional northern working class neighborhood of Coronation Street, but I could immediately see the significance of Barclay's figure and the image. In that moment, she represented a kind of existential complexity seldom seen in media representations of the working class. Even more frequently it is seldom recognised.

The last time Simeon and I worked together was in 2016. I was curator at Cubitt Gallery in London then, and I invited him to do a solo show. He produced another virtuosic mixing of images, from pop-culture references to obscure histories and cultural practices. In one corner of the space he installed one of my favourite of his works, *Handicap* (2016) a neon rendering of the flat-capped everyman Andy Cap. A nice effect of the work's placing meant the figure of Cap would appear on the reflective surfaces of other wall based works, following you around the room like the eyes of Mona Lisa. I'd like to bring Simeon in here to articulate part of where this tendency to deep dive into cultural references comes from, why it's so attractive to him, and also rewarding for us, the viewers, to engage with – if we make the effort. I'm going to do this by reproducing a section from the Q&A Cubitt published as an exhibition handout. At this point in the interview I said:

**MQ: What's seductive about your work is that it stands as the formalised outcome of what feels to be a really considered process of cultural archeology. I'm always struck by the way you exhume images, ideas and social practices that are so rich with meaning and association, but usually these meanings and associations have been forgotten, suppressed, or maybe emptied. [The image of Princess] Diana for instance...**

SB: I think we are at a really interesting point where all this stuff is up for grabs. The realisation that I could take ownership and expand the lexicon of disparate sources that informed my world view has been really liberating. Diana, in a way we take for granted now, was ahead of the curve in understanding the power of the image. Spurned by the House of Windsor, Diana used the language of fashion to rewrite herself, becoming the master tactician of a highly orchestrated performance. So yes there is all that psychological upheaval, but also a symbolic awareness that is harnessed as a means to enact a recovery.

Although I've focused on the working history that Simeon and I share, with a particular focus on where I see complex issues of class articulated and materialised, this is just one aspect of Barclay's work. His is in fact a multi-themed approach realised across a multidisciplinary practice, deep enough to enter into and find what is most resonant for you. That's not to say that the work is a mish mash of 'all things to all people' vagueness, there are definite through lines and socio-cultural territories that are continuously interrogated and returned to. It is rather to suggest that the work has enough in it to sustain a multitude of interpretations. In other words, what you'll get out of Simeon's work (if your intention is to get beyond a straight approval or disapproval of its surface) is to some degree dependent on what you bring to the work and the effort you expend to engage with it. It is a feature of Barclay's practice that I've seen in all the tonal variations present in successive solo exhibitions, from 2015's *'Man's Not Ready'* at the gallery Set The Controls For The Heart Of The Sun in Leeds, to *Bus2Move* at Workplace Foundation in Gateshead this year in 2019. It is what makes Simeon Barclay one of the most compelling contemporary artists working in Britain today.

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