

Ask an artist: we talk to Marcus Coates about his 'Answer Painting' project

For his 'Answer Painting' project Marcus Coates is offering to create works based on Londoners' inspiring questions. Chris Waywell meets him in search of a solution to a toughie

By Chris Waywell

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Marcus Coates at work on his 'Answer Painting' in response to Chris's question. Photo: Mara McKeivitt

Got a question? Ask Marcus Coates. As part of **'Station to Station'**, the Barbican's month-long festival of happenings, the artist is finding answers to visitors' conundrums. You write a question on a card and pin it on a board outside his studio space in the gallery, or book a time for a consultation. He creates a painting in response to

the questions he finds most interesting. Then, if your question is selected, you go back to discuss it with him.

Coates is best known for his use of shamanic rituals in semi-hilarious, semi-profound performances. In 'Journey to the Lower World' (2004), he dons the skin of a stag, complete with antlers, then communes with animal spirits in a flat on a Liverpool estate to help tenants answer the question: 'Do we have a protector for this site? Who is it?' Even on film it's pretty disconcerting. I'm not sure what to expect at my consultation.

I'm also not sure what to ask. I feel it's important to take it all seriously but I'd also like to know: what's on my cat's mind? 'A lot of the questions on the board, people aren't particularly interested in finding an answer to,' says Coates. 'I have to find the questions that people are really interested in answering.' He's a very healthy-looking man, who emits a tremendous benign energy. He asks me to write my question on a piece of paper. Here it is: 'How can I maintain my relationship with my father when he is so cut off from the world by illness?' Coates looks a bit nonplussed. I explain that my dad is bedridden with Parkinson's: his world has become very circumscribed and this has changed his family's relationship with him and with each other. I need a new way of dealing with it.

Coates explains that he is going to go on a journey into his imagination, and puts on a pair of sunglasses with Tippex-ed out lenses. He sits perfectly still in front of me.

Five minutes later, he's back. He describes how he went to a lush, jungly place. A large parrot was mimicking his movements, and the canopy of leaves became individualised as thousands of animated forms: arms, legs, faces, penises and all kinds of creatures. That was the end of his vision. I ask him about his process. 'We are fairly inadequate in our approach to problem-solving,' he says. 'We rely so much on conscious reasoning, which is pretty narrow. If you look at indigenous cultures, they use dance, they use art: it's about the body having knowledge and experience.'

I have to come back on Wednesday. I leave feeling surprisingly light-hearted.

Wednesday is the hottest day of the year. My dad doesn't cope well with very hot weather, so I'm thinking about him back at home, suffering. In Coates's Barbican studio space, the paintings are hung next to the question cards. A horse's head melts like fondue ('Why is there so much hate?'). A ghostly figure has a rainbow-hued outline ('Will I be remembered?' – 'That's quite tragic,' observes Coates). He's had a lot of people ask him about cats, and he likes kids' questions best ('How big is the sun?').

I spot immediately which painting he's done in answer to my question: it's big and green and splodgy. It's like leaves under water, maybe the Barbican's pools after all the culturati have gone away and the vegetation and animals have taken over again. In one glance it vibrates with hundreds of pareidoliac forms (like when you see faces in clouds or piles of laundry): there are dogs, foxes, chickens, the manes and legs of galloping horses. In another it's just a swirling abstract.

'I'm pleased with it,' says Coates. 'It tempts. That's the sense I got from the green mass. It's very, very simple. It depends on how much you invest in it. I don't mind if you don't like it, but I hope you find something in it.'

And that's the big question: does it help? Basically, yes, I think. The process itself is so odd that it forces you to think laterally about what you're asking. Maybe I should be seeing the life that remains, not what is absent? And given that the traditional psychological help offered to my dad in coping with his condition has been exactly zero, I'm grateful to Coates and his spirit parrot. Though my dad won't see Coates's solution in the flesh (questioners don't get to keep the paintings), he's politely entertained by my account of it when I see him next. I think it was the right question to ask.

Although now I'll never know what the cat is thinking.