

Brian Blanchflower. *The Substance of Colour*.
Turner Galleries 7 June to 6 July 2019.

Brian Blanchflower (BB) and Chris Malcolm (CM) in Conversation Saturday 15 June.

CM: This has been described as a conversation but my aim is to ask Brian some questions and get him to do most of the talking and encourage the audience to ask any burning questions.

CM: Before we talk about the title of the exhibition, and how you would like us to consider your paintings Brian, I'd ask you to take us back to the beginning of your life as an artist, because for me the two long walks that you did back in '61 and '62 seem to, in many ways, describe everything you have done since, in one way or another. And just to remind people in the room who aren't aware, just after Brian finished art school in Brighton in 1961 he went off with his life long friend Bob Brighton on two three month long walks along pre-historic pathways through Great Britain, visiting prehistoric sites along the way.

Can you tell us what inspired you to go on these long walks in the first place, and how did your experience of the journey compare to your expectations? I'm particularly interested in the how the pace and the duration of the walking journey itself, as well as the antiquity of the sites you visited, have contributed to your lifelong sense of scale, both in time and space. What inspired you to travel, and how did what you encountered on that travel accord with any expectation you had, or discoveries you made along the way?

BB: I had just done five years at art school at Brighton in England, my home town, and I had just about had enough of art school to be honest, and people were saying, 'why don't you try and get into the Slade School of Art or the Royal College', but I said 'no way, I've had five years of being lectured, and told what to do', and I felt it was time for me to find my own way. So the opportunity arose through my friend Bob, who I hardly knew at that point by the way, as he had left art school three years before me, and I hadn't actually met him at art school, only after he left. He had this idea of walking through the landscape, which is a fairly romantic sort of idea, the sort of things that romantic English poets would have done a hundred years before, that seemed like a very good idea, to completely clear myself of all that art school stuff, and try and find my own voice, my own way. And it proved very very helpful actually, towards thinking about art, eventually. Initially we got ordinance survey maps, which mark out all the footpaths, rights of way, ancient tracks, whatever, they cover the whole of Great Britain. We were just going to deal with the southern part, the south to south west. So we plotted a journey, aiming for the west; Tintagel being the furthest we got, on the Cornish coast.

We planned it to some extent, but the whole point of such a journey was to leave it as open as possible really, and although it takes a few days to get into the idea of walking all day and sleeping in tents at night; it takes a few days to get used to, after a while you start to get into to the rhythm of it, and you are just open to everything that happens along the way. And it wasn't just a matter of visiting ancient sites, but getting to know my own country, and getting to know the places and the people along the way.

(7.18)

So that was a fairly extended trip that first one, in three months we did a 1000 miles there and back, from Brighton to Tintagel and back. We crossed Dartmoor, Exmoor, Bodmin Moor... some of the most wild places you can find, at least in the South West of England. There was no attempt to record it, we didn't take cameras, we didn't take sketchbooks or anything. It was just a matter of absorbing, day after day, whatever came up, whatever the weather was, you just ploughed on, you find you become totally in tune with the landscape.

CM: How did your experience compare to any expectations you had?

(8.25)

BB: To be honest, I didn't have great expectations because it was something totally new to me, and I was at a certain age when I was open to all experience, and I was trying to find my own way, trying to find my own subject matter. It was incredible, and took a very long time to recover from when we got back,

because you're totally still in the landscape, and it remains with you. In fact it still remains with me, and I can remember incredible details from that first journey even now.

The second trip that Chris refers to, I did on my own, as a solo walk. From Brighton through the South West and then into Wales, and right down into the far tip of southern Wales, the Preseli Mountains, which is where some of the stones from Stonehenge were obtained. How on earth they got them from there to Wiltshire, no one is quite sure. They were a particular blue stone, and used as part of the Stonehenge structure. That was one of my aims; to go to that site.

That was quite a different experience, being totally on your own you have to think of everything yourself, and that can be an analogy for what painting can be; you're basically on your own when you start painting. You start from scratch, with an idea, a particular size of canvas or type of paint, and you work on that, and that in a sense becomes a journey as well. A journey which you're not quite sure where it's going often, you start out without having any impatience about getting to the end. Which is what the walks were about really; being totally open to whatever came up, and however much time it took was not the issue.

(11.05)

It's the same with some of these paintings here. When I started off, you think to yourself, 'well it might only take a few weeks'. But no, this one went on for a year and has about 22 layers of paint that have gradually built up over time, and that is a pretty slow process. You have to have other things on the go, so you can put down a layer and then you have to let it dry, as it's oil paint, and then come back to it in a few weeks time and do another layer. And the colour will change slightly too; though you start off with an idea with one particular colour, that would change with each layer; each being slightly different, or a different tone of the colour.

There you have it - the journey and painting are much the same.

CM: The time that I have been able to spend with you over the last 20 years; I'm intrigued, and I've come to think of your practice as almost like a river system or a delta, where everything is moving in the same direction but you've got multiple forms, which sometimes can be concurrent; you can be working on horizontal Concretion works, or vertical Megalith works, such as the works in the front room of the gallery.

Brian worked on the design of this exhibition over many months, I've watched it evolve, and the Megaliths were very much an introduction to this room [Concretions in the main gallery]. The Megaliths are very much a kind of doorway, their form is vertical, it's more to do with the human body than almost any other work that Brian has done, in my mind.

So Brian, I was just wanting to ask you about that in particular, the Megaliths are the only suite of works in the show that hark back directly, through their names, to what we were talking about on the long walks. Can you tell us a bit about how it is that you work, about how those decisions arise in those periods when you need to let works dry, as to what you will work on next. Will it be the Concretions, or will you work on a completely different form, like the Floats? When I visit the studio, there are usually two or three different forms that you are working on concurrently. Do you rely on intuition on how you decide what to work on next?

(14.44)

BB: It is largely intuition, but I have a repertoire of things dating back. If you want to take, for example, the Octagons and even the Megaliths. There are precedents back in the '60's with the octagon, I was working on several shaped canvases, as a lot of artists were in the 60s; the shaped canvas became almost a genre thing. One of the shapes I chose was the octagon. Luckily in London there was a company making stretchers in any shape; the octagon shape, hexagon, triangle or whatever shape, in almost any size.

There are such memories that remain with you, of works you have done in the past, and often perhaps you haven't fully developed them. So in a way that is how the octagons cropped up, and also the

Megaliths, because there was a series of four Megaliths, that Murdoch University has, that were done back in the '70's. And its only a few years ago that I did these [works in this exhibition], but I hadn't actually called them Megaliths to start with, they were vertical canvases of a particular colour, but then the memory of the Megaliths came back to me and it seemed like a good title.

Then there are things like the small Floats at different times, there's also the painting books and the drawing books – the difference between those is that in one I am using pens and felt tip pens, and in the other one I am using paint and brushes. But it is a matter of a kind of repertoire, and I like to think that I can move back and work on an idea that I had years ago.

And then of course there is the Canopy series that has been going along all this time since about 1985. Which is quite different to the works in here, because they are done on freely hanging hessian panels, unstretched. It was a way to get away from that idea of solid objects in a sense, and they dealt with an early interest of mine, which was cosmology – they are about looking up upwards and outwards.

(17.30)

These [the Concretion works] are more like looking into something, looking into the surface, or looking into matter you might say. The Canopies are more open, more like looking into the sky rather than the land. But yes, it might be confusing for some people that there are several things going on more or less at the same time.

CM: I wasn't suggesting that it would be confusing, but it is interesting that some people might imagine that an artist's career has a linear trajectory, you move from one thing to another. Sometimes one thing might resonate with something from the past, but the form can change.

It is interesting that you mentioned the books, as there are two conspicuous absences from this show, one is the Canopies that Brian just mentioned, and the other one is the books. The books have only been displayed in Perth two or three times in the last 20 years. Most people in the room would have very little knowledge of what they are or what part they play in your practice. Having been blessed with the opportunity of visiting Brian's studio so often, I see these books and understand how copious the work is you put into them. As Brian mentions, he always has two books running at the same time. One is a painting book and one is a drawing book, one in the studio and one often in the house, these are two spaces that you work on more or less everyday. I was intrigued in the role that they play, the books are almost like, in my mind, keeping the motor running - pure experiment.

(19.55)

BB: Yes, it's like keeping your thoughts flowing, they really are about colour and about how to apply it. They keep going on and on, I wish they'd stop in a way! I thought I would have run out of ideas. There's about 130 painting books and about 30 something drawing books - black hard cover sketch books. Some days you can do several pages, and other days you are slogging away at just one page, or you might rip the page out. It's just a way of keeping my thoughts running. They don't directly relate to the paintings I might be doing, they are not sketches for anything, they are purely for their own sake. The book ends up being an artwork in its own right I think. It's a visual diary really, but I don't use words much, and that's my way of thinking and speaking in a way.

CM: In some ways, this exercise today is kind of absurd, Brian will often talk about the ineffable, and the inexpressible, and here we are trying to describe and express. Unfortunately when humans get together the only way we can commune with these works, is to talk to each other about them.

(22.00)

BB: You can only say so much about painting, you can say how you made it, or how long it took, what colours you used, etc which is really the painters language. Then you get to a point where there is silence, and that is the point where something happens, hopefully, in the viewer. As it happens to me when I've decided it's finished.

CM: Can you talk a bit about how you feel when you recognise that moment?

BB: Its difficult to describe, as it is a moment that comes after a long period of thought and effort. It's a rather crucial point; you don't want to overdo it. There comes a point when the thing is out of control in a way, it gets too heavy. Personally I can't actually lift this one on my own! [Gesturing at *Concretion 1:10* 2008-09] There are some practical things involved with painting, you can take things so far. But you have hope to have found something at the end. I plan to find something, but in the meantime I enjoy the journey of painting. All the time I enjoy that journey I will keep doing it, but if I suddenly don't enjoy it – I will stop doing it.

CM: Well, you've been enjoying it for a very long time and I hope this journey continues!

A comment that Ian McLean made in the catalogue that John Barrett-Lennard put together, for the exhibition at Lawrence Wilson in 2010, Space Matter Colour, and here, I am still probing about these moments, trying to understand or comprehend, the moments that make you act, or change direction. He [McLean] brought up the word 'unconcealment', talking about Heidegger, and I'll just quote this sentence where [he is] talking about you: "At times I am not sure he is making anything at all in a conventional sense of the term, but instead patiently waiting like Godot until something that he has intuited makes its presence known." So I'm interested in when you understand or feel that something just needs to be left alone.1a1

I'm also interested in how you have different streams of work, and being able to work on concurrently different physical forms, but colour is the underlying basis of all of your work, whether it is the horizontal Concretion, vertical Megalith, or Octagons; colour is the key that you have to decide when you're painting. I'm interested in how you assign different colours to different forms, and that the different forms can have similarities in shape but very different surfaces. In terms of colour, how do you decide that a colour is presenting a feeling to you that you then hope that the viewer will share? Those decisions in the studio, the form and which colour, is it completely intuitive or do you have a sense that something needs to be dark, or bright, or blue etc?

(26.36)

BB: Well often it's a matter of finding a colour that you haven't used before in that particular form. For instance, with the Concretions, I have done some very dark ones before, including a very dark blue and a dark grey one that UWA has, but I hadn't actually used black. So its only a few years ago that I chose to do a black one, that one over there. [*Concretion 1:7*2014-17] For example with the Octagons, I have discovered these Old Holland acrylics that are iridescent, a huge range of them, and I was determined to use quite a few of these in the work. It started with six Octagons, then decided it should be 12, so I found another six colours, and I'm trying to use the colours more or less straight from the tube, in that I haven't actually (multilayered?) them very much, so they are the full impact of that colour and its iridescence. So with each type of painting I have to think of a different way of working, a different kind of paint maybe, switching from acrylics to oils on different works, so on. Most of it is intuition obviously, but I also try to discover new colours and new relationships with colours, and hopefully something will come from those. But I'm never sure that that will happen, until it happens.

CM: I know that these paintings, though they have 22 layers of colour, but its not all the same colour.

BB: They vary somewhat. They usually start off with more or less the colour I hope they end up as, they don't change dramatically. It's a matter of weighing and balancing as you go along. What looks right within that format. How much depth the paint's got, and so on. You might be interested that I usually have a method in a sense. This one has a ratio of 1:10. [Rising to stand and gesture in front of *Concretion 1:10* 2008-09]. I will mark off on the wall ten squares basically, then I work from the first one, and then I work the other end, then I come back to no.2, and then I come back to 3, 4, then I do that until I get to the middle. Trying to keep the consistency running through. Then the next layer, I might start at the other end, 1, 2, 3, 4, so on. So there is a sort of method, if you like, in doing these layers.

CM: The other thing that people might not be aware of is that all of these works are multiples of squares. They have all evolved from the co-joining of works like this, [gesturing at Four Black Boxes 2005 and then to Concretion 1:4 Indigo.]

30.18

BB: I was working on multiples, but then I started thinking, why not join them together, so that [*Four Black Boxes*] in a sense became this one which is a 1:4 ratio – which is really how this [*Concretion*] series started.

CM: In terms of the viewer's participation with the work, these [Concretion] works, they invite you to walk along them, walk up to them to look. In terms of the ratios, how do you decide on the ratio? What do the different ratios mean to you? Do they evoke different kinds of feelings or is it mathematical methodology?

BB: Well they create a different type of shape really. The 1:12 one [*Concretion 1:12 [mineral violet]*], you have to decide how high and how long it will end up as – this one is the longest one I'll ever do, it is practically difficult to go any further than that. So it was a matter of going through 1:4, 1:5 then I would switch to 1:8 or whatever, it's just a way of working and a way of keeping control of it.

CM: Looking at works that you were doing from the mid 80's after the trip to Orkney, when you were back in the UK for a period; when the Canopy series started. The entire history of the painting is evident at the end, or most of it, with the thousands or tens of thousands of marks mostly still visible. Whereas with these works [the Concretions], we need you to tell us that there is 20 layers of paint, we have no idea what that is, other than it feels like an object of substance, of paint. We don't know whether it's constructed as a box with a thin layer of paint, or 40mm thick. Some of these concretions seem to have evolved, the human mark making is almost absent, whereas for many years the mark making, the gestural kind of artefact from you as the artist is very different.

BB: Yes, quite different.

CM: I do see drawings that you do now, that still have that artefact, but I don't see it appearing in these paintings. Is this a conscious decision to maintain a minimalist trajectory?

BB: Well it was almost like those mark-making, all those particles or specks, which built up those works you refer to, congealed, came together and formed something more solid. The earlier Canopy works are more open. But these works are quite different, and you are either more drawn into them or repelled by them, I don't know, but you are drawn into them to try and find something. A bit like scientists who are trying to discover how particles behave, or what dark matter is. They become condensed in order for you to depict them in that way. Whereas before you were involved with all these marks flying around, all the gestures and so on. But again it is part of the evolution, it was painting. It still occurs in some of the drawings in the books. It's that repertoire we were talking about, you still have that thing in the back of your head, directing.

CM: Brian and I are working together on a very large project, to bring together all of the Canopies, all 80 of them.

BB: 76 at the moment, they are spread out all over the place.

CM: Yes to bring them all together is the grand plan.

*Finally, I would like to talk to you about the Octoboxes. After seeing those appearing in the studio and in your home, we've never really spoken about them, not in the way that we have spoken about other works of yours, and the fact that they are appearing in this show, in quite considerable quantity. I was interested in the name of this exhibition, *The Substance of Colour*; is this title speaking more to the Octoboxes than*

other objects in the exhibition, or not? And can you tell us a little about how the Octoboxes came about? They are not a new thing, you've been working on them for a number of years. But they do present colour as object in a very literal way.

BB: The Octoboxes, some of which are here, are part of a repertoire, going way back to the '60's in London, I was doing boxes that I found in junk shops. I found all kinds of boxes, some were boxes which had scientific instruments in them and were quite unusual shapes, so I would search for these and put objects into them, which usually had a science fiction theme. There might be toy robots or spaceships that I melted down to some degree in some of them, or modified. That idea of boxes goes back to the '60s.

These boxes started around 2013 when I found an octagonal box in an op shop in Armadale, I think it was. That, and one other, were the only ones I found myself. But my daughter Cathy has been very obliging in finding them in op shops. So every so often I get these boxes sent to me or brought to me. And then I have to think of something to do with them. They have been quite an interesting sideline. Ideally you should approach them when they are closed and then open them, but we couldn't really do that here, a pity really, as when you open them might get a surprise, you might not. They are a vehicle for colour and other materials, some have objects in them, stones or wooden spheres, or in one case sulphur powder; whatever suits at the time. So that's the story of the boxes. I'm attracted to that shape anyway, the octagon.

CM: do you want to talk more about the octagon?

(40.59)

BB: It goes back to the 60's, the shaped canvases. It's an interesting form for me – part square and part circle really. You can construct an octagon from a circle or a square. I hadn't really seen it used much in painting. I'm trying to remember when I first saw it used. I think Titian used it in a work, on a ceiling, he crammed his octagon with figures, which is something I wouldn't do of course. I'm very reluctant to divide up a shape, I rarely divide a canvas with any divisional line, because it's got enough interest, for me anyway – it's got its shape, its edges and its substance. I've never seen a reason to divide it, or using more than the one colour. The octagon is an interesting shape to construct.

CM: The way you assemble them in multiples, there is very specific geometric tension.

BB: Yes it's like a rhythm running through which comes from the fact that there is an invisible square between them, one side is the actual side of the octagons and the other is the same length apart, so that causes the diagonals to link up. So that you get a rhythm. In the 12 that are there [in Engine Room 1], I tend to see that as a kind of rhythmic thing with an improvised colour going through, like a piece of music really.

I think with the octagon, especially when it's a fairly small size, it tends to speak, almost like a sound, for me anyway. Whereas the square is much more static.

CM: You have something you want to share with us... a statement?

BB: This is something that I wrote out before I came today.

CM: It's not a retirement speech is it?!!

BB: Well, almost!

"I am very interested in Nature – the landscape, the skyscape, the spacescape.

I don't want to illustrate natural phenomena.

I'm often moved by Nature, often mystified by it.

I live in a semi-rural area and absorb what's around me. I often feel part of it.

But I have no desire to represent my surroundings in a pictorial way – a painting of a tree, a landscape etc.

Somehow this seems to be futile.

I'm interested in the sub-atomic world of Nature. The nature of particles, the forces at work in the Universe.

I don't want to illustrate the ideas of scientists, but the more creative of them have been important to me. They are on a quest.

Art for me is a quest. Intuition and imagination play a big part.

Art, and painting in particular, can play a part in understanding the nature of matter – what the Universe is made of – what forces are at work within it.

It is not the sole domain of physicists!

That is part of what I feel my work is about, but I'd also like to think that it is also very much about human feelings and spiritual states, and of course the nature of Painting itself – how mere objects, shapes and fields of colour can affect us.

I paint to find something – but also to enjoy the journey.....”

APPLAUSE!!!

Questions from the audience:

Q: I'd like to ask you about your relationship to landscape. You've been living in Australia for many years now, in a semi-rural area. If you could reflect on the relationship between the presence of the landscape and the perception of it, in terms of how you deal with the infinitesimal feelings and responses to the landscape, via taking a walk, being present in the landscape etc.

BB: Living with the landscape around me, on the edge of a forest, on a steep hill and near a valley, I get the full effects of the weather. It's constantly affecting me and I'm not always conscious of that. But then, that's why I moved there. I'm much more at home with the elements, than I am in a city environment. I've lived in cities, I've lived in London, but they weren't really for me. And I have a sort of relationship with certain animals there, and birds, they're constant visitors, a few human visitors, but not that many. More animal ones really, echidnas, bandicoots, numerous birds.

Q: You alluded to your Megaliths, and then with the Octagon pieces, you made a direct correlation to them and your time in the '60s in London, and correct me if I'm wrong, but the Megaliths relate to your walks in the south of England, Stonehenge, and they're obvious. Would these works here, [the Concretions] relate to your time in Australia? They are more horizontal, and more landscape in shape. Am I being too obvious? Are they more representative to WA in a way?

BB: Well I suppose they are. I'm not conscious of that while I'm doing them, I'm not thinking I'm depicting the Australian landscape. As I said before, I'm absorbing this all the time, so I'm not going to deny it's there.

The Megaliths, again that's a kind of anchor of the past in a way, they relate perhaps more to that time, in England. In an abstract sense, they are just vertical canvases. And shouldn't be interpreted too literally.

Q: Chris has said that you are not one to speak of your work, but a word that I first learnt from an artwork of yours, was 'syzygy', and its no coincidence, I think, that an Englishman in London this week, in launching his pitch for Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, used the words 'sizzling syzygy', which I thought was a lovely tautology. It's a celestial word, and it talks about the sun, the earth, the moon and their connectedness. Could you tell me a bit about why you choose syzygy. Quite apart from the obvious cosmological references.

BB: Well syzygy, basically means an alignment. So anything greater than one thing, take two, is an alignment, so that's why I've been using it. I also like the word. it's an incredible word. The way it is spelt. S.Y.Z.Y.G.Y. No vowels.

Q: Is the word 'fibonacci' used in your work as well?

BB: No, I haven't used that. You think it might be present there somewhere? Hidden? Or unconcealed? Maybe it is there.

CB: Maybe in the works from the late 60s. Fibonacci spiral once or twice?, but not the word.

BB: No, I've never actually used that as a method of doing anything, it might somehow overlap with what I'm doing, I don't know...

Q: I have a question about the structure of your paintings, I found I was looking at the edges of your paintings, almost more than the surfaces. A lot of them are like solid objects, and others look thinner. How do you decide on the look of the work? Are there mathematical formulas that you are working with?

BB: Well, no not really. The thickness of them is due to the thickness of the paint that's put on them. The actual thickness of the stretchers doesn't vary a great deal. But I do modify the stretchers, I get a stretcher made and then I modify it by adding strips of wood at the back to project it from the wall, so it's floating to some degree. Some of them, the edges are quite interesting I guess, people try to look around the back of them, you never know what you're going to find!

Q: I've been trying to look through the layers, how you view the layers, I can't see any evidence of that process, to me it almost seems like the colour itself is at odds with the structure. Have you ever heard of the term 'structural colour'? In nature butterfly wings are not a pigment colour, they are a structural colour, so it's the way that the light goes through the structure of the material that it's made from. And to me [your work is] almost like rocks, and the crystals of the rocks, and that solidity as well, that sculptural solidity.

BB: It also depends what light is on them. These are quite different in daylight than how they look in here, and they look different in other kinds of light. For some reason the fluorescence brings out a particular quality in the purple one [*Concretion 1:12 [mineral violet]*] that I hadn't seen before to be honest. [laughs]. It's always had a certain glow, but it has another type of feeling about it in this light.

Q: I still see the gesture, your mark, in these works.

BB: It still is in some of them, definitely. Maybe not so much in that one over there, the purple one is not quite so obvious. I'm not trying to get away from the fact that they are handmade. But it's just a way of creating a constant surface; that would be my main concern with these.

Q: What light do you use in the studio?

BB: Daylight. I very rarely work in artificial light. The thing with painting, is you never really know how it is going to look elsewhere. Different spaces have different effects on them as well. I'm happy with the way they look here. But they are going to look quite different somewhere else.

Q: Thinking back to those *Canopy* paintings from the 80s, which are large, often multi panelled works that can fill a wall and are covered with highly gestural marks, there's a kind of very clear form of expressive element.

BB: Yes in the earlier ones.

Q [continues]: These [the Concretions] here, are smaller, condensed, but still have a panoramic feel about them, you can come to these and see not just an horizon or landscape, but an encompassing feel. But I can look at these and see a kind of Brownian motion at work. The surface is still moving, it's very obvious, very apparent in a kind of performance that you have done, as is recorded in those Canopies, but there's still the sense that nothing is static. The surface is faintly fluctuating and moving.

BB: Yes, it's all those particles moving around in there. Jostling around. I often see these as condensed Canopies. In a sense the same amount of materials go into a large Canopy as what goes into these, they are just squashed down and condensed, under pressure. I suppose the other analogy, is the black hole, the idea of the black hole, is that things are poured into this dense collapsed star, or whatever it is, and of course it appears black because no light can be emitted from it. But I like the idea of the light being behind that black, if you could possibly pass through that event horizon, then you'd be bathed in incredible light. So maybe all this jostling is just an indication of what's beyond it.