

A Silent Shout

An interview with Adam Ball.

Words: Helen Wilson



Arriving at the front gate of artist Adam Ball's North London studio, it is cold, wet and miserable but, despite the weather and the fact that he has had a busy morning delivering works, the artist greets me warmly. He leads me down a cobbled path, through a garden and into his studio. On the way he explains how he came about the space, an old workshop that he had converted. What's great about it is this, "hear that?" he asks holding his hand up. Yes, I nod. It's the sound of silence - something you rarely come across in London.

After offering me something to drink, and apologizing for the lack of seating, the friendly host gets down to answering my questions. Meeting the artist for the first time, I find it impossible not to mention his Goliath work - the 700sq ft canvas, *The Tree*, which he installed in Golden Square, Soho. "Are you really fed up of talking about it?" I ask, "No," he replies with a smile, "Although it was a really long time ago."

To Ball, who has since shown in exhibitions across the world, from the Goss-Michael Foundation in Dallas to Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York and now his most recent show, which is currently open in Tel Aviv, creating that canvas in a Sussex barn must seem like a lifetime ago. It was his first project out of art school, and one that he freely admits he went into with a lot of naivety, "but I had nothing to lose then - I was young, excited and really enjoyed making it."

I can't imagine where you would even start working on a canvas that was half the size of a tennis court, but with the help of some

100 litres of paint and 35 paint brushes, as well as a couple of mops, brooms and builders trowels, Ball created what has since been labelled the largest canvas ever made in England.

It attracted a lot of attention from the public and the press alike, something that the artist hadn't really anticipated when he first imagined the project. His primary aim had been to create a work on a large scale and to challenge himself, he had only modestly predicted that a few people might pick it up. "I was blown away by the response" he says, with genuine sincerity "but it really helped as a platform for future shows."

Although he hasn't created anything on such a large scale since, Ball is still challenging himself in his work. "If there is a long and a short way of doing something, I'll inevitably do it the long way," he explains. And indeed, every aspect of his work seems painstakingly rigorous. He has gone to great lengths to acquire his source material; during our conversation he relates tales of his trek into the depths of the Taman Negara rainforest in Malaysia, and his journey to the Palm Oil plantations in Sri Lanka. Once back in his studio work doesn't get any easier, the artist describes how making his cut outs in particular can be "quite tough physically, working on your hands and knees."

These laborious processes mean that he will produce just "one or two works a month, usually working on one painting and one cut out concurrently." Because the two forms involve totally different ways of working. For his paintings he builds

up layers and layers of paint and glaze, continually adding to the piece until the image is complete. While for his cut outs he uses a more reductive method, and instead of adding he meticulously cuts away at an image.

There is no room for error in these works, which are often white on white, "there can't be any creases, marks or spillages. You have to get into a mindset, an almost calmic state to make them," he explains. "If you rush it, or you're not prepared properly, you can spend 50 hours working on a piece and ruin it. And I have done that" he adds, regretfully.

Despite the long time it takes and the risks he runs with this method of production, Ball is devoted to creating each of his works by hand. This ethos and almost craftsman-like way of working has led to two quite interesting and unusual collaborations for the artist.

The first was in 2009 with American fashion designer, L'Wren Scott, who, after buying one of his works and hanging it in her studio, noticed how much it had inspired her latest collection. For this Ball made eight very large white on white cut outs, all based on photographs taken in the Taman Negara Rainforest. These were hung in the Gagosian Gallery in New York, where Scott's models sported the designer's latest collection by walking along the gallery and each posing by one of the pieces.

Despite the obvious dichotomy between their practices, the two creatives have a lot in common - most noticeably their exquisite

eye for detail and devotion to their craft. Reflecting on their collaboration now, Ball describes it as “a natural fit.”

“We work in quite similar ways – for L’Wren every stitch and piece of thread is important, in the same way that each cut is important to me. It was very interesting to collaborate because you open yourself up to a new audience and new potentials. You end up in a third place that you wouldn’t have necessarily got to on your own.”

The second interesting and quite unusual collaboration for Ball is a forthcoming project he has planned with Munich-based porcelain manufacturers, Nymphenburg, for which he will create two quite different works, both of which will involve realizing his previous works in porcelain.

“For the first piece we will start with a white square of very delicate and beautiful porcelain.” He explains. “By manipulating the depth of the porcelain in different places, we can dictate how much light is let through the piece. Then, by putting very minimalist LED lighting behind it, we will illuminate the image. For the second piece we will echo a cut out in porcelain, so that every detail, every ripple and texture, will be reproduced in the piece.”

It is a highly ambitious undertaking, which will require both the artist and the craftsmen at Nymphenburg to research and learn new processes, but it is one that he talks about enthusiastically. When he completes the work he will join a list of artists and designers that have already collaborated with the company, such as Carsten Höller, Clemens Weisshaar and Reed Kram. But it is the prospect of learning a new technique and method of production that most interests the artist.

“I’ve never worked with this material or technique before, so I’m going to be learning a lot from the people who have been doing it for centuries and passing down these skills. What we will be creating is something that links to all my work and is part of it, but which is at the same time slightly separate from it.”

It is clear that Ball doesn’t take the prospect of collaboration lightly, he has to be convinced of the integrity of the project, and he stresses the importance of choosing projects that resonate with his established body of work. “It took me quite a long time to be in a position where I could and wanted to collaborate.” He explains. “I think you have to find your own voice, you can be overcome with all the other possibilities or pressurized into doing something that you’re not really comfortable doing.”



It is fair to say, that Ball has very much found his own voice.

There is an unspoken connection between the works that he has produced thus far in his career; although they differ in form, subject matter and colour, all of his pieces resonate with a certain energy that comes from the fact that his “driving force for each work is life.”

What he is most interested in is not depicting the appearance of the subject but the feeling of it. “A lot of my work is based on the landscape and my travels, but it is not site-specific in the sense that I’m not trying to reflect or respond to a particular place in a formal way. For example I’m not interested in describing a place as in a time of year, to me that’s not particularly important. What is more important is the feeling I get there; my work echoes the essence of a place.”

In this sense, his mysterious and introverted landscapes are as much about an experience as they are about an aesthetic. By always working from black and white source material, the artist allows the colour “to come from my head, I let the colour speak and do whatever it wants to do.” And indeed it does a lot, the plain white of a cut out, speaks volumes about the undisturbed silence of the rainforest, whilst wild and passionate reds can imbue a painting of a Victorian graveyard with an energetic dynamic.

This method leads the artist to reason that “if you are going to make a work about a particular place you have to go there.” This, however, is very time-consuming, so he is currently working on a body of work based on source material that he can collect a little closer to home. “I am really interested in creating landscapes in my studio, from found source materials, as this gives me the ability to create what I want here in the

studio, which I find quite refreshing.”

He points to a canvas, on an easel at one end of the studio, “This is a composition of lots of layers of imagery that I have found of microbiological elements – stem cells, blood vessels, neurons, - interwoven with electrical car parts and wiring. Each element is put on a sheet of acetate and built up, layer on layer to create a corresponding composition, which echoes a landscape, without having any element of a landscape within it. These semi-abstract works open up a lot of new potential for me.”

The canvas is unfinished, yet it is already recognizable as quintessential Ball, with its highly stylized strokes of vivid blue. But, from the acetate composition hanging behind it, it is clear that this is something entirely new in the making, something strikingly different to what he has done before. It leaves me feeling interested as to what direction this new body of work will take the artist.

Luckily I won’t have to wait too long to find out. The first piece from this series goes on show this week at Gift 10 Vyner Street, as part of the group show *I Am Solitary*. Also opening this week is *Cadavre Exquis* at Zero10 Gallery in Soho, an exhibition that will include a number of the artist’s pieces alongside works by artists Gordon Cheung, Nikola Savic and Piers Secunda.

***I am Solitary, curated by Beers.Lambert
Contemporary Art at Gift 10 Vyner St,
London, March 3rd - April 16th 2011.***

***Cadavre Exquis, Zero10 Gallery, 8 Silver
Place, London, W1F 0JU,
March 1st - March 31st 2011.
www.adamballonline.com***