

## Chris Villars: Self Interview (September 2001)

*When did you start painting?*

Easter 1993. My wife suggested we decorate some eggs for Easter. So we pierced a few and blew out the contents and then she, I and our two children all sat around the diningroom table painting those eggs with acrylics. I painted the top two thirds of an egg blue and the bottom, wider third green: the result was a simple landscape! I added a couple of white clouds and some birds. Then, while the others went on painting eggs, I got a piece of old hardboard and painted the first of the cycle of paintings I've been doing ever since then. It was a sunset, I think.

*How would you describe your paintings?*

They are highly simplified, or stylised, landscapes. Sometimes there's a figure in the landscape, sometimes not. Sometimes it's day, night, sunset, dawn ...

*I've noticed that they're quite small ...*

Yes, just 18" by 12". They're not Rothkos!

*Do you think maybe they're too small?*

No. They only have very little to say. For me, to make them any bigger would be to indulge in serious overstatement!

*What is it that they express?*

I think you have to resist the desire to translate the meaning of a painting into words. I paint these images because that's the best medium for what they express. I'm not going to try to put that meaning into words. I think Rothko says somewhere that a painting either makes a plain statement or it's a failure. I go along with that. Of course, I believe that some, at least, of my paintings succeed!

*There's religious imagery in some of the paintings - church spires, crucified forms ... Is that intended to convey a specifically religious message?*

Oh, you can't tempt me into commenting on that! I've just said that the paintings must make their own statement. Yes, there are religious forms and colour symbolism in some of the paintings. And, in those paintings, those things are there quite deliberately and consciously.

*You've mentioned Rothko a few times. How would you describe his influence on your paintings?*

My pictures are a step backwards! In his advance into abstraction, Rothko - to use his own expression - "pulverised" representational images. You can see what he means quite clearly in the transitional multiform paintings of the late 1940s: there are people and other objects blurred and distorted into abstract shapes. This led to his wonderfully ambiguous classic paintings of the 1950s, not quite totally abstract but not quite representing anything specific. My paintings are strictly representational. Though some of them resemble classic two- or three-part Rothkos, they are definite landscape images again, with none of the subtle ambivalence of his paintings.

*Apart from Rothko, have any other painters influenced you?*

There are many other influences, sometimes just in specific paintings, sometimes on my general style: Munch, Mondrian, Guston, Avery, Moore, Frink, Riley, ... Hopefully you can see these influences in the paintings. Sometimes there are literary influences too. For example, there are paintings inspired by images in novels by Melville and Pinet.

*Can you describe your working methods, how you go about making a picture?*

I think that would be pretty uninteresting. There's nothing clever about the way I make pictures. I'm completely untrained in painterly techniques - as you can probably see! I don't think of myself as an artist properly speaking, just a "Sunday painter".

*What do you mean by that?*

Someone who just paints in their spare time, as a hobby, rather than a professional artist.

*Do you think that makes a significant difference?*

It means I take less risk. Professional artists risk their life on their work, they earn their living by it. That can be an advantage or a disadvantage according to your point of view.

*Are all your paintings shown online?*

No. Most of the paintings start life as a small drawing. Only about 1 in 3 of the drawings get painted. Then over half the paintings turn out to be unsatisfactory. I put most, but not all, of the satisfactory ones on the website.

*What makes a painting unsatisfactory?*

Maybe it turns out to be badly painted or it just doesn't work for me when it's done. In some cases there may be an accidental effect I didn't anticipate. For example, I did a picture called "Cathedral" consisting of a large white spire against a black sky. Unfortunately, when it was done, it looked for all the world like a giant pair of black trousers!

*Have you ever sold a painting?*

No. I did once offer some paintings for sale online for a week or two, but I got no response and I thought better of it almost immediately. I don't offer them for sale any more.

*How do you see your paintings developing in future?*

I think I've probably painted my last picture.

*What do you mean?*

I mean that I think that what little I have to say is said in the paintings I've done already. Several times in the past year I've worked on a picture only to realise when I've finished it that it's similar to one I've done before! In short, I'm repeating myself already, and I don't think I'm likely to produce anything significantly different from what I've done before.