

OUR SIDE OF THE WATER

MARCUS
HARVEY
ON
RAY
RICHARDSON

“Why don’t you make films?” I say, and Ray responds, “Well I already do really. With a film, you have so many specialists in different technical areas, sound experts say, then the script, then the acting; you probably start to lose control. If you’re a painter, you’re the director”.

Ray Richardson you will know as the artist who paints English Bull Terriers, South London Geezers, fat motors strobing through the Rotherhithe tunnel, and gauzy coastal Essex Landscapes. And sideburns. *‘The Sweeney’* on canvas. For decades now.

This doesn’t seem to sit squarely with so much art out there.

Can this be tolerated?

An affection, a pride, and a tenderness toward local white working class machismo, swagger, at ease with black friends and wedded to soul music, united by geography and council estate ennui, and with no one barrelling into shrill identity politics...

In the early 2000s, Karen Wright asked a group of artists to illustrate a literary work for *Modern Painters* magazine. Ray was asked to respond to Hanif Kureishi’s *Ladybirds for Lunch*. Kureishi and Ray clicked over their similar stories – coming to art from working class backgrounds – and in turn,

Kureishi later penned a catalogue essay for Ray’s *Beaux Arts* show, *Storyville*, in 2004.

When the two met, Kureishi – scanning Ray’s back catalogue in old slide format – holding the sleeve to the light, said, *“you should be directing films”*.

In 2012, Ray was asked by Dexter Fletcher (the actor/director from *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*), to come on set whilst he was directing *Wild Bill*, a film that combined social services drama and gangland intrigue, and described by The Telegraph as *“English council-estate miserabilism refracted through a spaghetti western lens”*.

Ray was there to help frame the shots and bring his visual clout to the direction. Much of the action was filmed around East London and Stratford, where the Olympic Stadium was later built.

What is the figure in *Our Side of the Water* looking at? On the other side of this raw, industrial part of the Thames, where dredgers prowl the wide muddy bends, I imagine that he’s looking at the infestation of tower blocks thrown up for city workers; their steamed-up, street-level yuppie-gyms casting the streets of Limehouse back into Dickensian daytime-darkness. He is not one of Hopper’s passive creatures, secreted in a sad motel or foyer; he has a weather eye for all that’s piling up ahead. Bullshit detector switched on.

Ray and I are having a pint of Guinness. He’s having a pie and I’m having a bowl of chilli at the Anchor & Hope on the Thames at Woolwich.

Ray’s CV says: *“Born in Woolwich Dockyard”*.

As we chat about his work, he tries to define what and where he is as an artist. To illustrate a point, he uses someone else’s perspective; a guy from his studio block at Thames-Side Studios, who says to him, *“Ray, how come you just get to paint what you want?”* And Ray says, *“I dunno, I just do what comes into me head”*.

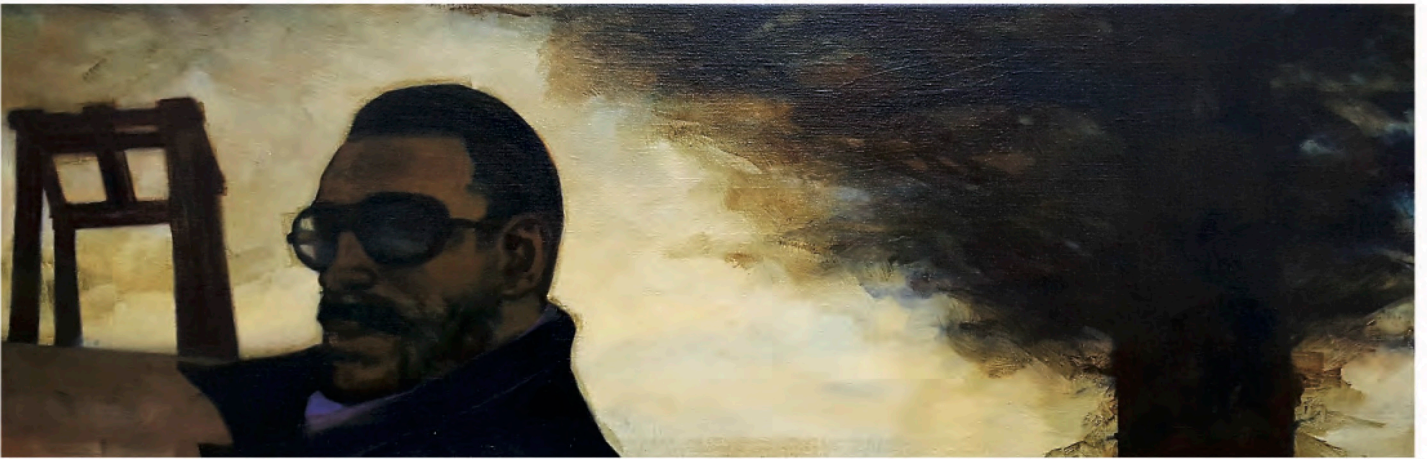
Ray offers this rather

Our Side of the Water
2012
Oil on linen
137 x 127 cm

Courtesy of the artist







Previous pages, left page:

You Wear it Well

Oil on linen
51 x 152 cm

Previous pages, right page, from top:

All the George

2015
Oil on linen
51 x 152 cm

Divided Soul

2015
Oil on linen
30 x 91 cm

Dreamtime

2012
Oil on linen
38 x 152 cm

All courtesy of the artist

awkwardly; head bowed as he searches the floorboards for ways to explain his solitary stance away from the art crowd he studied with, and, let's be honest, from the standard fare flowing through the system. The tone of this accusatory question is by equal measure resentful and imploring; it's the kind of question that can provoke a cold sweat in the dead of night. *Are you allowed to paint what you want to paint? Can you risk looking naïve as you feel your way towards what really matters to you?*

Think of Guston's remark about getting steamed up over the Vietnam War only to then go to his studio to worry about running a blue brush mark into a red. An old teacher of mine had the guts to say to us, when we were rehearsing interviews for the BA, *"You can just be honest about what you like painting; if you just want to paint elephants and tigers, tell them"*.

Some painters do just paint what they want. But, for the most part, we seem, in general, to have drifted into a rather rudderless position, where the subject of painting has just become Art or Painting itself, merely reacting to what has just been done.

A painting can never be just a felt thing seemingly; it acquires relevance only where it is questioning its own existence or consciously stroking its past. If you want access to the serious reaches of the art world, that is. Over the doorway of every painting must blaze the right credentials – an engagement with current academic opinion and market requirements.

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Since the end of World War II, one route for the faces and stories of the working class to trickle onto the cinema screen and pages of the TV and Radio

Times has been through British versions of American gangster films. These mainly London-centric movies run from the gentle Ealing comedies to *The Sweeney*, to *The Long Good Friday*, until, getting nastier as we pass *The Krays*, they become a torrent of violence as we hurtle towards the drug world anarchy of the *Essex Boys*.

A frequent device in these dramas is the arc pan camera shot that cinematically scoops up the villains and cops as their 'motors' jiggle on to a post-war bombsite/light industrial wasteland, before panning a hundred and eighty degrees to drop them at the 'lock up' for the torture and mayhem. This typical panning shot, as seen in *All the George*, *Dream Time*, and *Divided Soul*, is something that has been imbibed into Ray's work – stretched to a vertiginous degree in paintings where the format seesaws as the left-right action balances out. This deliberate tribute to the moving image aligns his paintings with a cinematic quality and palpable East End'erry grittiness; so bringing them to the attention of directors and novelists as providing a measure of authenticity and authority. It's a form of contemporary storytelling, one in which the actors have been tipped in from Ray's own social circle, and the locations are his own haunts – places where he walks his dog – Woolwich Common or the river path at the Thames Barrier.

Commissions come from odd places. A woman asked Ray to paint her husband from a photograph in his youth. They live and work in Dubai now, but he was an ardent fan of *The Sweeney* back in the day (something that gave rise to his moniker – even today, in the otherworldly Arabian heat, his colleagues and new acquaintances, without knowing why, call him 'Guv'). The setting of the resulting painting is Woolwich Common, the sheepskin is Ray's own, and the old Ford Granada is his Dad's. Sweet!

In 2015, Ray was contacted by the young Manchester-based writer



Clockwise from top left:
Guy (detail)
 Oil on linen

Somewhere on Sea
 2002
 Oil on linen
 127 x 142 cm

London Irish
 2015
 Oil on linen
 76 x 76 cm

Ye Old English (orange dog)
 2016
 Oil on linen
 30 x 30 cm

All courtesy of the artist



Treasure island
2015
Oil on linen
122 x 122 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Austin Collings, who had recently interviewed the writer James Ellroy (*L.A. Confidential*, the *L.A. Quartet*), and had broached the subject of the visual arts. Ellroy's response was that most art was shit except for Ray Richardson's. Ray had had a show in L.A., at the Mendenhall Gallery in the 90s, and Ellroy had bought a couple of paintings of English Bull Terriers, one being the painting *Ye Old English*. Ellroy has had bull terriers.

Mulling over Austin's news, as you would, Ray sent an email via publisher and gallery machinery to Ellroy. It eventually ended up with Ellroy's long-time partner Helen, who must have been screening communications for the notoriously technophobic writer.

A week later she emailed a warning to Ray that "*the demon dog will be barking at you soon*". Then Ellroy wrote to reminisce about acquiring his paintings nearly twenty years previously.

One week after that, Ray was in the middle of *EastEnders* when he got a call from the lord of West Coast crime fiction himself. Since then, there have been a string of nocturnal high-voltage calls wherein the two discuss art, writing, dogs, and London girlfriends. Ellroy promised that the two should meet in London, and that he would just *"Hang out with Brian"* (Ray's dog), *"and see how much pussy they could get"*.

As I learn more about Ray's whole story, a sub-group of collectors, supporters, and collaborators emerge, and my curiosity is piqued. They see his work as a world they can interact with; maybe a world they've inhabited. It's a very refreshing endorsement of an artist's oeuvre, one where there's a community of actual artists who support it as opposed to the art fair goons.

To regain permission for what one is allowed to do, try to see painting through a filmmaker's eye, or within the mind's eye of a writer, and not simply in terms of empathy with a specific subject matter. When I read what certain writers and filmmakers say about paintings that inspire them, I see that they are able to de-clutter them of distracting painterly shrubbery and dabbiness. They see dramatic potential in the setting, the lighting, and the mood obtained; the specific nature of the characters... they are not distracted by the ornament of painterliness, they are not caught up in the lexicon of modernist painting manners, which is where so much of what is done today starts and nearly all ends up. Paint can get in the way.

I spoke to Anselm Kiefer once about this kind of thing and he was very clear about grasping the subject at all costs as the primary driver of a work and not to worry about the means. Sooner or later the painterly mechanism would manifest itself out of *"need"* (although I think he used the word *"desperation"*).

For what it's worth, Goldsmiths College was Ray's side of the water

literally. He studied with an influential group of artists at Goldsmiths in the mid-80s. One afternoon in 1988, he and his Dad ferried fellow student Ian Davenport's paintings to the *Freeze* show in Surrey Docks. He was, and is, good friends with a lot of the artists in that seminal show, but he skipped the private view to play football.

Concluding our banter, Ray says he likes Ellroy's quote for himself; when asked about why he writes about the past, Ellroy answered, *"It's because that's all I know about"*.

One episode in Ray's career stands out for me. He was the artist-in-residence at Eton College. A somewhat unexpected combination, it came about after he showed prints in a group show called *'Advanced Graphics'* at the Eton school gallery. The head of the art department said that his students had reacted very positively to Ray's work, and casually said that he was thinking of setting up some kind of residency for an artist.

Five years later, when the programme was up and running, the school called Ray up and he stayed there for three or four months.

"Yeah, they were all running around in the clobber, the penguin suits".

Addendum

The *'Strictly Bull Terriers Forum'* describes the breed's character thus: *"Fiery, energetic, and loving, this breed can also be protective of his owner and his territory, giving off somewhat of a fearless presence. This breed makes a good watch and/or guard dog. The Bull Terrier is very hardy and sturdy and can tolerate quite a bit of child's play, however should always be supervised, as Bull Terriers can be snippy if they are overly pestered. With proper socialisation and training, this breed can do well with other dogs"*.



Dad - Marcus Harvey
2012
Acrylic, ink and pastel on newsprint
60 x 75 cm

Courtesy of the artist.