

A Glasgow Boy: Gerard M Burns

The success of a traditional painter □ by Bob McNab

Without a doubt Glasgow School of Art has a very well-deserved reputation for excellence, established over the past 150 years. It continues in this tradition and has produced most of Scotland's leading contemporary artists including, since 2005, 30% of Turner Prize nominees and two of the last five Turner Prize winners: Simon Starling in 2005 and Richard Wright in 2009.

But for many, today's artist and conceptual art in particular, has simply 'gone too far', losing relevance to the man-in-the-street. Not surprisingly then, back in 2003 the Daily Mail populist UK tabloid, started awarding the 'NOT The Turner Prize'. And again, not surprisingly, they chose another graduate of the Glasgow School of Art as its first recipient – the 'traditional' painter, Gerard M Burns.

Born in Glasgow in 1961, Gerard like many Glaswegians of that generation was relocated from the once mighty ship-building city on the Clyde, upriver to the satellite new town of Cumbernauld. Son of an engineer (naturally) he first went off to study civil engineering at university for a year – and hated it.

That's when he made a major career decision, to follow his childhood passion of painting. And so he took himself off to the Glasgow School of Art. As a Glesca boy himself, inspired by some of the city's famous painters of the late nineteenth century, The Glasgow Boys, it never occurred to him to anywhere else. Indeed, why would it? However, his next four years were not to be fulfillment of a childhood dream. Far from developing his painting the way he wanted, the School, enamored of the abstract and conceptual art that has dominated the post-war art scene movements, demanded conformity. For a young man whose inspiration was Velázquez, and nineteenth century realist artists like Jules Bastien-Lepage, and the Glasgow Boys (George Clausen, James Guthrie et al) this was asking almost too much. After years of trying to pursue his own goals, Gerard finally succumbed and simply delivered what was expected.

But his heart was never in it. Disillusioned, he dropped his art altogether when he left college. There followed various jobs and some success in a band, but " the music business wasn't very nice," he says, "so I gave up trying to hit the big time and for a while I

just jogged along with the band." Gerard went off to train as an art teacher.

Ironically it was back in the classroom that re-awoke in him his love of painting. " I remember being overwhelmed by the thrill, the magic and the power of holding a brush again and by the sense of achievement when your paint sweeps over the canvas you're your strokes come out as recognisable images."

After ten years as a teacher, he finally took the plunge, leaving his post as a successful post as principal of art at St Aloysius College Glasgow to pursue his painting full time.

"By then I had a young family and the pressure was on me to make it work," he says. "I did some commercial watercolours of Glasgow, but they didn't sell so I had to scabble around for a while. We weren't exactly starving but it did take me a while to find my feet. Then I decided to stop trying to please others and paint what appealed to me. It was another terrible risk and it felt like I was dropping my security blanket."

Well, this risk has obviously paid off. His commitment to his own vision has resulted in his current standing as one of Scotland's most respected artists. In the words of one enlightened art critic, Anne Ellis:

His canvases consist of a series of human dramas that allow him to work on a truly epic scale. His faultless figurative technique, which is marked by a feeling for volume and space rather than line or pattern, invests the human form with all the solemnity required to picture extraordinary events. It is a manner originally derived from the old masters. Burns exploits it to give mythical and religious subjects new meaning and relevance. Eternal dilemmas set against the harsh realities of the modern urban wilderness elevate these scenes beyond temporal boundaries. There are powerful observations of familiar things that convey fundamental truths about human existence. Burns never confuses motion for action. Figures are caught in a monumental stillness, pondering the gravity of their situations. And for all there is a pared down quality to the images, the options seem somehow endless. In this way canvases which could seem empty of activity, are full of potential. As much thought as paint has gone into their making: the act of knowing is as important as the act of seeing. Compositions have evolved slowly and carefully with due respect for the many different possibilities of the subject matter, and therefore, they will maintain the interest and respect of the viewer. Such perplexing enigmas will not be solved easily; there will always be an intriguing shadow of doubt to stimulate the intellect.

Paint itself is laid on with all the gravity of an artist who respects and understands the skill of his predecessors. His surface textures range from the smoothness of alabaster to the roughness of crumbling plaster. He is no colourist; his is a truly tonal approach. "We live", he says, "in a tonal landscape which tends to be more sombre than light. My paintings reflect that mood." Despite his dedication to the figurative in art, there is an almost wilful delight in the abstract quality of the painted backgrounds to many of the most telling of scenes: as if the eye has to find some relief or distraction from the difficult psychological dramas that are being played out before it.

Art's role is not to record but to add to our understanding of the world around us. Burns' powerful observation of familiar things, his ability to present the human condition without artifice, and his facility for working on an epic scale brings something into that world that did not previously exist. It is a sublime experience that at its simplest and best extends the range of human consciousness.

When I spoke with Gerard for this piece in *A Broad Scot*, I had to confess that I had not come across his work before; he acknowledged that although he is well known now in the UK, and although his work is now hanging on some pretty prestigious walls (including the office of Scotland's First Minister, in the Scottish Parliament) international recognition is only now gathering pace.

Indeed, it was the First Minister's use of one of Gerard's paintings on last year's Christmas card – or more accurately – the snide 'political' criticism of it from *The Scotsman's* Visual Art Critic, that first turned me on to Burns' work. It prompted me to ask, given the recurring use of the Saltire in the paintings, whether Gerard himself was a Scottish nationalist. The answer was in the negative and endearingly candid,

"I'm Scottish; it's my flag, and I just like the look of it; its form and its folds".