

GERARD BURNS - The Human Condition

□Gerard Burns is one of Scotland's leading 'human condition' artists and easily ranks alongside the best and most influential contemporary artists in this group: Howson, Vetrriano, and Bellany. Burns has played a central role in the emergence of this powerful figurative genre over the last decade.

His growing value is testament to that.

If we attempt to categorise paintings, they tend to fall within four art genres: landscape, still life, figurative and topographical (or historic). The figurative genre has made a potent shift from the passively descriptive portrait to a more emotionally and intellectually engaged platform; instead of simple reproduction, the buyer is getting a skillfully constructed human narrative, which is what makes this group of artists and paintings so evocative and so frequently commented or debated. As with any painting, a Burns painting draws the eye, but his art goes much further; it also has that element of 'thrill' where it pulls your mind and emotions into an active sensory play.

Typical of artistic genius, Burns has a very restless mind - indicating that he is still searching and considers that he is only part way through a journey. Life's experiences have also taught him to be a fiercely independent and self sufficient person.

His subject focus is people, and he cleverly suspends his individual within a visual narrative, leaving the viewer to interpret what the individual represents, where they are going, what they are about to do, or what they are thinking. He cleverly creates a sense of movement or motion in his paintings using a number of visual devices. His subjects either look away or out of the side of the painting, which helps to impart this sense of story or narration rather than static, moment in time, portraiture.

The roots of his thoughts are deep and cerebral. He has had many cathartic moments in his life and he draws on these and his understanding of humanity, christianity and the early development of civilization, to nurture and create his influential compositions.

Burns was born in 1961 and entered the Glasgow School of Art (GSA) in 1979. Typical of the individual, Burns studied what he wanted to study and not what the institution wanted to teach. On leaving Art School in 1984, it would be several years before Burns picked up his brushes again. Following a diversion into a music career, he came back into art by entering teaching and went on to have a very successful teaching career as Principal of the Art Department at St Aloysius College, Glasgow. However this success would create its own pressures, as it was in conflict with his desire to paint full time. This would take a personal toll on him and in 1998, Gerard suffered a breakdown - 'it buried me'. The trauma made him very unwell for several months and he lost all of his hair. The illness turned out to be an 'epiphany' - 'The decision to give up teaching had been made for me'.

He found immediate success creating epic paintings that challenge us to think, by 'mirroring' the real world and illuminating many of the personal and social issues that we face in contemporary society. He uses a series of clever visual metaphors (the concept of understanding one thing in terms of another), including: (1) the child to represent innocence (2) wolves - protection (3) doves - the universal symbol of innocence, gentleness, faith, peace and constancy (4) the solitary figure - reflection, incident and the possibility of loss (5) the waiting figure - love and expectation (6) flag - identity (7) graffiti - moral decay and (7) he uses tightropes and bank notes - to symbolise our dependence on finance, and how precarious that overdependence can be.

You are invited to enjoy his paintings at, either a simple one-dimensional visual level, or you can choose to enjoy the deeper metaphoric layers and triggers that challenge you at a more emotional and philosophical level. Gerard describes it as achieving the 'chemical moment' that makes a painting powerful and successful. When you understand these layers, then you also start to understand the subtle challenges and reminders about the human condition. His images highlight our responsibilities within society: the importance of our children; the significance of our relationships with those who are important to us and around us and yet, at the same time, he reminds us that life can be fragile and he warns us about the dangers of placing too much emphasis on financial wellbeing, rather than emotional or spiritual contentment.

People that buy a Burns tend to be 'people-centered' people, who have an innate human empathy and they are happy to display that confidence on their walls - they enjoy the human messages embodied within the paintings. Our life, after all, is defined by the people around us that we know and engage with !

Notable individuals who have acquired Gerard Burns paintings include Ewan McGregor, Sir Philip Green, Sir Tom Hunter, Alex McLeish and the Malaysian Royal Family. Burns is also a favourite of Scotland's First Minister, Alex Salmond who has one of his epic paintings 'The Rowan' hanging on the wall of his office at the Scottish Parliament and who has used a Burns image (above) on his 2009 Official Christmas Card.