

Fearless journeys



Sometimes a significant contemporary artist disturbs the deep roots of art, brushing aside the "pretty frail wisps, chimerical freedoms of the picturesque". Mark Nicholls is one such artist, and you can see his arresting paintings and drawings at Royal Cornwall Museum.

Working in a tiny studio in Newlyn, Mark is not an archetypal Cornish artist - he is one who is fearlessly exploring the deep engagement between art and life. He says: "My paintings come from within me. I work solely in the studio. Obviously, while walking to the studio in Newlyn from my home in Penzance, I look at the sea and the landscape around me, but I have no desire to put it onto canvas. The overriding drive in my art is an examination and exploration of the journey of life."

Mark's apes and other creatures, like Francis Bacon's crouching screaming figures, evoke a "primitive, ancestral memory of man's animal origins and instinct" that are never far from the surface in the modern world. His creatures, caged behind bars, perched upon a pole or chained, surrounded by romantic decorative backgrounds, possibly symbolise man's frustration and inability to ever be truly free from the expectations and trappings of society.

Although metaphorical, Mark's work is, of course, open to interpretation. "I am gripped by the need to paint and make strong images which ask more questions than they answer, using paint to leave an 'after-taste', an impression, a fleeting feeling that perhaps

Intellectual and sensual, Mark Nicholls' paintings reach beyond the merely optical to express the human condition

Words by Peta-Jane Field

Main M2 Top Hyena Below Z-06
all paintings Mark Nicholls



will change, just to a small degree, the way people look at life. That's really my ambition."

According to Fritz Saxl, one-time director of the Warburg Institute: "Images with a meaning peculiar to their own time and place, once created, have a magnetic power to attract other ideas into their sphere." Arguably, Mark's paintings are a *mélange*, overlapping art histories, the long line of European painterly painting with the modern genres, the liveliness and spirit of American art of the 1950s and 1960s, and the superlative figuration and realism of the 1970s London School. Yet fuelled by pent-up energy, Mark has a punchy visual language of his own.

A painting should be a vehicle for intellectual as well as sensual communication. Mark's intellectualism is balanced by a sensuous appreciation of his materials and the joy of painting is evident in his work. His execution is extraordinary. Within the flatness of the canvas, with no visible source of light to throw any shadows, he creates a powerful illusion of depth, and figures and objects seem to soar. Yet all there is, is simply the flatness of the canvas and his dexterity. If Mark's paintings are criticised and censored for being difficult or unseemly, it is because his subject matter is no less than the human condition, in all its inhumanity and imperfection. <

Info Recent work by Mark J Nicholls can be seen at Royal Cornwall Museum, River Street, Truro, from 14 March - 24 April. Call 01872 272205 or visit www.royalcornwallmuseum.org.uk for more details.

