

Spring without End**Stevie Dix, Danny Fox, Norman Hyams****23 February – 15 April 2023****Interview with Norman Hyams by Riccardo Pillon**

Riccardo Pillon: The title *Spring without End* is freely inspired by *Frühling und kein Ende (Spring and No End)*, the title initially chosen and then discarded by Gustav Mahler for the opening movement of his *First Symphony* in 1888. The symphony is described by the composer as a journey of its protagonist facing life, beginning with the joyful days of youth to the darker years of maturity. How does this title resonate with you?

Norman Hyams: I really like the title, and the story behind it. One only has to look at the earlier figurative works I made to see how it resonates with me. Embracing the darker years of maturity is, and I suspect always will be, a theme running through my work. I would have to say that the darker years of my life are a constant source of material to draw on. I very much believe in the idea of using painting as a mean to process one's thoughts and feelings about the past.

We all have our stories to tell, some are easier to tell than others, and some of us find a way through the forests of our past and experience the light. I strive for these moments, when things seem clear, and I feel a sense of space from the madness of my past. I am still processing the darkness, in order to consider the joys of youth. I'm looking forward to that point. I imagine my paintings will hold the keys to open those doors, set up deeply in my subconscious.

RP: Could you tell us a bit about yourself and your background? When did you approach drawing and painting and how did things change after your graduation from Chelsea College of Arts in 2006?

NH: I grew up in the east end of London, one of five children, in a typical working class east end family. Irish Mum, Jewish Dad, needless to say my influences inside my family circles were unusual. It was a tough upbringing, there was love and stability, enough to get me through anyway. As a child, I relied on my older brother and cousins to help me negotiate some of the situations which arose as a result of the characters, young and old, around me. I witnessed lots of hardship and deprivation growing up, not necessarily at home, but certainly throughout close circles, which left scars on my psyche and created in me a strong desire to escape my environment.

Without going into too much detail, I can say I took some very dangerous routes to get to my present location, scary at times. But looking back and considering the people, places and things experienced along the way, I wouldn't change anything. Experiencing London life as a teenager through the 80's, especially the east end, watching the bankers and the artists move in and change the landscape, good and bad, was a good time to be around.

I went to art school late in life at 35 years old. It was good for me. It gave me much to draw on and put me in touch with a feeling of liberation from oneself which, prior to making art, only seemed possible through drugs. Inner London life taught me to hide my sensitivity, art school

taught me to embrace it. For that, I'm forever grateful. Graduation from Chelsea has given me the means to process my life in a way which seems natural, through the medium of paint and the language I'm very much still developing in accordance with it. Long may it continue.

RP: You previously said that your creative process consists in “losing and finding a painting” over and over again, putting it in between an abstract and figurative painting. Could you talk about this approach and why you specifically look for this quality in your works?

NH: Like life, painting is about control: knowing when to use it and when to let go. An old saying springs to mind... life is what happens when you're making plans. The same applies, it seems, with painting. We start with a plan – “start” being the operative word – we move forward, we get somewhere, we find certain comforts and we try to maintain this sense of order.

I find that, for me, the painting can become a victim of my desire to control the outcome without a fight - or a point when one feels lost and unsure. It's always the case that when I bring myself and the painting to a point of loss that I find something completely outside of my original plan. This holds my attention and shows me the direction in which I might take the work. These areas in the painting can occupy space alongside periods of calm and confidence; again, an indication that painting is never separated from oneself. Anything goes within this space, as long as you can find a way that allows the two opposing qualities to exist together.

Painting as a metaphor for life. Sticking with it and learning through mistakes are par for the course. Good things come to those who wait. I love painting! The myriad of forms it creates. I also love images. I hope the visual language developing in me is one which will continue to juxtapose both.

RP: Like Degas with his ballerinas, and Monet with the Rouen Cathedral, you clearly have preferred figures, landscapes and patterns that repeat themselves throughout your practice. Can you talk about this approach and in which direction you think it will evolve?

NH: I often try to eliminate certain subjects and motifs from my practice, for some reason or another I'm drawn back. If so, I try to go with it and to consider the possibilities of a force driving me towards these subjects which I'm not quite ready to leave yet. There is of course the fact that some of these patterns or figures I am using in my pictures are constantly reappearing in a desire to do them justice. Certain images I am using and have used have been clearly chosen for the challenging nature they propose. It's good and bad to be driven by these images. They can trap you, but they can also lead you into territory unknown and this in itself can be extremely rewarding. Over the years, experience has shown me that these portholes exist in ways that you would never imagine. Therefore, I understand the power of the image, and what it represents to me and my life.

RP: Historical black and white photographs of boxers fighting on the ring and their audience are clearly a source of great inspiration for you. Where do you source these images? And why do they fascinate you to the point you have to translate them into paintings?

NH: These images you speak of are very special to me. They take me right back to my youth. They remind me not only of my Dad, my uncles, their friends, and the lovely characters around, but also the characters to be avoided, the darker, more menacing aspects of my youth and the environment. In a way, I'm reminding myself of how lucky I have been to experience these things, the good and the bad, and managed to escape what could have been. I could have easily taken the path which would have led me on a course that's very difficult to get off. I clearly remember the energy surrounding those places and the characters within them. I need to go back there sometimes in order to experience my current situation as comfortably as possible. There is no better way to unearth certain hidden truths than painting. The images used in these particular paintings stem from a photograph I found in an east end flea market. It hit me like the boxer in the painting.

RP: *The Party* is probably your most recurrent subject, one that almost comes alive in your work. You have been painting it repeatedly over the years, each time adjusting the palette, cropping the image, focusing on different subjects of this mundane scene, but always using the same photograph as a reference. How did you come across this image and what is your relationship with it?

NH: I came across this image at home. It belongs to my partner. It's a photo taken by a professional photographer, employed by her parents to document a party set up for her older brother. She comes from a very different background to mine; her parents were keen to catalogue so many aspects of family life. They left many beautiful photo albums of beautiful photos. An incredible source of imagery, there for me to use when the time is right.

RP: Paintings like *Island* feel more autobiographical, memories of a hot summer on a remote Greek island. Do these works portray scenes from your childhood or are they inspired by photographs you took? What is your connection with these places?

NH: They certainly are autobiographical. They are based on more recent memories of time spent with my own children. Greece is a place very close to my heart. I discovered its magical qualities as a young man travelling on my own, islands hopping. No place offers the peace I feel when I'm there. I'm sure my children feel the same, and certainly my partner, she comes from Greek heritage and spent the most incredible youth there. She has never lost contact with it and never will. She is very much aware of its impact in her life and is keen to ensure that she gives our own children that experience. For all those reasons, aside from the obvious beauty of the sky, sea and space, the *Island* has a very clear connection to me.

RP: The tennis court is the most abstract amongst the motifs you present in *Spring without End*. Can you tell us how you encountered it for the first time and why you once said this image chose you more than the other way around?

NH: I've always been fascinated by the works of Raoul De Keyser. In particular, the paintings he made using lines. I always admired how he could move me so much using such simplicity. Of course, I have since learned that as a language in painting it's an extremely difficult one to master. That was partly the reason for attempting the painting. I also had a show coming up in the gallery and it was mentioned that we should include the bag pieces I was using at the time. I was very much caught up in the messy, aged qualities of those bags, and by chance I came across an image in a newspaper of a beautiful pristine tennis court.

It hit me immediately, so much that it could be a perfect complement to the bags. The freshness of the lines and the space and tranquil quality the green paint offered would give me what I needed for the show. Like boxing, tennis was very much part of growing up. Again, very closely linked to my father and time spent with him, quality time. I think that for him, as well as me, it allowed him a glimpse at something other than the east end. He loved Wimbledon and Queens club; he made great efforts to show me the best players in the world on the best courts. If I can connect with the joys of youth, then those summers spent at Wimbledon and Queens exemplify it. I count myself lucky for those experiences, there were many. The image came to me at the right time, it was perfect for the show.

RP: In these body of work, it feels there is a transition from the nocturnal, sombre atmospheres of your earlier works, such as the ones of the butches working at night in the meat district, to more luminous and vivid scenes and palette, and if yes why?

NH: I think it's a combination of things. Confidence of course plays a big part in this, confidence and experience. As I move forward in my life, aided by the practice that runs alongside it, I feel that anything is possible. This idea feels me with a sense of hope, hope in turn triggers a more positive slant on things, and I feel this can alter one's mood, or one's outlook on life. As I process things through my work, it allows me to practise the skills needed to move forward in my work. I am continuously developing my abilities to see things more clearly. It's good to see it working.