

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

Stevie Dix: The title reads optimistic to me initially, but as my mindset predicts, it also fills me with a little bit of dread. Because spring does always end, as does everything, and then we exchange it once again for shorter days. I never used to get affected by time passing or the changing of the seasons. But during the latter years of my twenties, I've started longing for light during this time of year; because of my pessimistic and slightly nervous nature, when it eventually comes, I already fear the end before it begins. From a poetic viewpoint, I don't mind dark sentiments though. I allow my own work to absorb a lot of sadness. So, I feel the title resonates.

RP: In your paintings you often refer to and get inspired by symbolism and aesthetics of rebellious youth, escapism, nightlife, desire. Could we describe this as your idea of 'spring without end'?

SD: I think so. There are themes in my work for which I reference the intensity and chaos of youth. This idea of time being endless enough to waste or count down is something that's so prevalent when you're growing up. And it's such an important time, coming-of-age. I've always been drawn to that theme for its rawness and naivety, and I think the title can be interpreted like that too.

RP: The exhibition presents your work alongside paintings by Danny Fox and Norman Hyams. Each artist in the exhibition can be described as self-taught. What is your background and how did you start approaching painting?

SD: I was introduced to art when I was really young because my mum is a sculptor and painter, and my dad is a cartoonist. I used to sit in my mum's atelier for hours playing with her materials. I was probably fourteen when my mum took me to a museum for the first time and we went to see the paintings of Belgian artists James Ensor. My parents did not go out of their way to educate me about art, but it was just such a normal and also vital part of their lives that throughout my life it impressed on me the idea that it was very important. It's not a formal education, but I would definitely say that the door to start painting felt wide open.

RP: You always mix oil paint with beeswax in your works. I am curious to know the reason behind this choice and how you prepare the materials in the studio.

SD: One is to add body and volume to the paint which I love, but also in other sections it gives a sort of resist that reacts a particular way to the paint even when applied thinly. Maybe one part of not having had a formal education in painting is that I do have these particular rules about pigments, ratios of additives and preparing the surface, but it's all stored in my head, and I find it hard to explain. I try to take notes, but I forget, and even to my detriment I sometimes forget how to repeat something. But that part is just something I really, really enjoy about painting. The materials are just so satisfying and the constant experimentation, reacting in the moment and learning of it gives me so much satisfaction.

RP: In this body of work, you experiment with new shapes and assemblage of multiple canvases to create fragmented geometries. You mentioned this approach is inspired by Belgian cartoon culture and comic strips. Can you talk a bit about this and how you found this new source of inspiration?

SD: It's maybe not directly from comic strips. I wanted the work as a whole to tell a story both about the surroundings of the central figure as well as the inner feelings. I've been looking back into the works of Pierre Alechinsky, who was one of my first art-crushes when I was younger and found that, in a way, he's almost like an extension of Belgian cartoon culture. Some of his work very much reads like comic strips without adhering to that strict form and it's a very painterly interpretation of it. So, I wanted to work in a shape that felt it has chronology, and shows multiple sides, without it really having to make sense.

RP: A recurrent figure appears in your works: pointy nose, high cheeks, long hair, and lined red lips. Who is this female character, and which are the figures who inspire you to paint her so often?

SD: I've painted a character for the last few years, but they've shifted in shape a little here and there. There are elements of myself and my mum mostly... They are always a slight embodiment of certain people in my life. I wanted to have a protagonist and ideally one that felt somewhat neutral. Knowing the work will always have different audiences, I found the best way to achieve neutrality was to stay close to myself. I feel like choosing a character outside of myself would become about the character whereas one that was close to myself just felt like the carrier of my digestion of feelings and things happening around me.

RP: We can spot in your paintings some clear references to the realm of fashion, such as the Margiela Tabi Toe boots. What does fashion mean to you personally and do these symbols of fashion cultures address any particular thematic in your work?

SD: Fashion for me embodies the act of escapism and self-expression, but it also allows for quiet rebellion and provocation. It was growing up, and still is, a very defining part of my being. Not only does dressing up allow escapism in the purest form, but it has become a therapy for me to collect vintage and I am a seamstress, so I try to make and alter stuff. Martin Margiela grew up just a few doors down from me - he's my favourite designer - and in some ways in my paintings the Tabi Toe boot has become symbolic of my hometown. I remember finding out Margiela was from my town when I was young, and it sounds odd now because I enjoy the solitude of this place for productivity, but it was a big revelation for me. At the time I felt angsty about living in a small place but knowing someone grew up there and it didn't stop them making a huge mark on culture gave me comfort.

RP: Do you get inspiration from any youth subcultures, such as mod, glam, punk, ravers, or like to refer to a specific fashion era in your work?

SD: Personally, I think fashion reached its peak in the 70s and never got better. Punk, post-punk, or also early 70s... That rainbow, disco, glitter. Cher in the 70s is my ultimate vision. It's just the way I dress, so I think that's why it's present in my work.

RP: The titles of your paintings always evoke what could be defined as a dark and emotional atmosphere.

SD: I don't enjoy titling my work. I feel kind of insecure about words. Maybe it's because I am trilingual, and I often feel like a fraud in all of them. My Flemish has gotten worse by marrying an English speaker. My English has gotten worse by moving back to Belgium. And my French never seems to improve. I try hard to write down notes in my phone of pieces of text that I hear or read or come to me that could suit as titles. And then when a work is finished, or a show is coming up I sit there in agony trying to find something that adds value to the work. But I'm not an artist of words so it never feels completely right. That's the truth... It's never something I do early on in the process.

RP: You live and work in Genk, an industrialised area of Belgium, but you spent last winter living in Paris. How did this change of scenario influence this new body of work?

SD: My day-to-days are spent in quite a remote and uneventful setting, and I do really enjoy the quiet for work. But that time in Paris was a necessary and momentary change. I think primarily it was useful for me to immerse myself in my work in a different way. I think a lot about how as an artist enjoying an outsider's perspective helps inspire work, which is why moving around has always felt like a good idea. Especially because my home life, being a part time carer for a family member, is heavy at times. I felt like a lot of the older themes in my work of nightlife, urban scenes and streetscapes took a new form: Brussels being swapped for Paris.

RP: In your most recent projects, you surprised us with latex installations, tiles, lithographs, and hand-painted motifs printed on the flowy garments by Maison Cléo. Is this multidisciplinary direction one you would like to explore more in your practice? And shall we expect more exciting collaborations in the future? Maybe an animation project?

SD: I think most of the multidisciplinary elements have been as extensions of the work or scene-setting, but I'd like to see if it can take on a life of its own. And I'd love to do more collaborations with fashion brands. I feel like my work inevitably lends itself to being interpreted onto physical bodies because fashion is one of my primary sources of inspiration. I've also started the very early beginnings of an animation, to make a short film this year. I've been looking back into 70s surrealist animation. You know, René Laloux being one of the most well-known, but there's Suzan Pitt who's been a big influence and others in the genre. There's a crossover into sexploitation, potentially cause some of the gory and raciness of that genre was more palatable in drawn form. I've always loved them but did not feel like I could merge that into my practice, but I don't know why I felt like that. I've always felt like making work is this journey into deep

self-awareness and self-discovery, and I strive to be totally honest. But sometimes I surprise myself still of having kept a part of myself away from my painting as if I felt like it wouldn't be allowed. But I'm diving in.