

## Pearly White

An interview with Clive Head  
by Rosalyn Best

This interview took place in Clive Head's studio in rural North Yorkshire in August 2018. On the painting wall of the studio hangs a large canvas, *Pearly White*. Head is deciding if it is finished. On the surrounding walls are large works on paper. In one corner are several recently completed paintings.



*Pearly White*, oil on canvas 80" x 78"

RB. I'm sure most people who know your work would be surprised to see these painterly studies and even more painterly canvases. I didn't know that you could paint like that!

CH. I have always made studies like this, but they don't leave the studio. I suppose the canvas is an attempt to bring this aspect of my practice to the fore, to make an unequivocal statement that I am a painter. The world that I make on the canvas is rooted in the activity of painting, pushing the paint around and seeing where it goes and what it reveals.



RB. So this is a new development?

CH. Yes, well a development and not a departure. It's building on where I got to in the last painting. But that's how it always is with me. It's always about searching for the optimum solution. Style doesn't interest me that much. The idea that you arrive at making a certain kind of painting, a kind of product and then just keep churning it out seems to miss the point of being a painter in the first place. Painting is an extraordinary flexible way of thinking and making. You experience the world, you grow and then you end up in the studio and attempt to make something that resonates, that is truthful and connects with all that you are.

RB. So in your case, that at times might be a photorealist painting, or a cubist painting?

CH. Yes and no. I don't think so, because those are narrow labels. I was never interested in copying photographs or making some comment about the nature of photography. That would be very limiting, and just parcelling up my activities in the studio within a narrow art agenda. But, in searching for that optimum painting I might have travelled in the direction of a very exacting and demanding way of working, and now I am moving away from that. But actually, this is way more demanding.

RB. Why?

CH. Because it is in free-fall. THE problem that artists have to face is the trap of illustration, and the trap of just re-iterating all that is known and handed down. You know when I was a student we were warned about the problem of just being an illustrator, of not being uniquely creative, but then the teaching in the art colleges changed and students were told that that was all there was. All you could do is re-iterate something that is already known. So you might as well just trace a photograph because being an original painter was just a bourgeois myth. Art was just about saying something with the languages that culture handed to you.

RB. That sounds familiar. But you were always against this?

CH. I was always reluctant to accept it in its entirety. Partly because of my training. I was taught by a modernist who believed in the creativity of the individual.....the very, very rare individual....

When I was making those urban landscapes like the ones I showed at the National Gallery, I was inventing the space. I wasn't using the rules of perspective. My reality had to be underpinned by a system of my invention....not a system that we all use like the perspective of the camera lens.

RB. I'm not sure people believed you but I remember a lecture that you gave at the Mathematical Society in London where you explained some of the workings behind your paintings. It was very complicated.

CH. That's right, though I don't know if I really understood what I was doing myself. It was a bit like being a mad professor with reams of calculations. But it worked. That was part of the problem because the paintings sort of denied that complexity. They were quite serene I think.

RB. But this painting (*Pearly White*) is incredibly complex in its own way. Maybe we are getting a bit more of your personality.



CH. Wearing it more on my sleeve. Maybe. But these paintings aren't built on mathematical calculations. Well they are, but those that we make intuitively, it's all intuitive, the way one thing relates to another. It's all me just pacing up and down in front of the canvas.

RB. But you still make very complex drawings?



*Drawing for Pablo's Mares, pencil on tracing paper 6" x 6"*

CH. I do. It all begins with me drawing, just a pencil and a small scrap of paper. But this painting differs from a painting like *Wonder Woman* (2018), in that, having made the drawing and transferred it roughly to the canvas, I didn't look at it again, and I never looked again at any of the reference material that I used to help make the drawing. Once I started the painting, I never looked at anything directly. It was just me, and the paint, and the existing state of the painting.

RB. So most of this is just made up! We were always taught that artists don't make things up that are this believable. That was one of those art historical fables. There was always a model, or a drawing or a photo.

CH. Well, I am glad that you think it is believable but I'm not trying to make it overtly realistic. I just want to coax the painting into giving up what it has to offer. There are a lot of figures and animals that are half suggested in this that I just allowed to happen.

I think if I had gone back to the original drawings and photos that I took in New York, some of those inventions would have been playing second fiddle to the "real" people and events. I think that has been an issue for me in previous paintings so I wanted to level the playing field. By the time I have got to this point in the painting, it's all pretty much an invention, and some of the best bits are those that have come from within.

RB. Such as?



CH. Well, some of those horses. I had an idea early on that I would do something with Picasso's horses. Someone suggested that I make a painting that referred to my love of Picasso and this stuck as a sort of beginning. Not that I wanted to illustrate this, but you can't unthink an idea once the seed is sown. It's there along with every other thought that you have. But I have never drawn a horse from life or photographed one. These images come from somewhere else which I don't really understand. I *have* come to understand that I don't need the subject or a pre-existing image of a subject, like a horse on which to base a representation of it. If I can see it in my mind's eye...if I can imagine it, if I can dream it, I can paint it. That's a great freedom isn't it?

RB. And you are free from the conventions in which a pre-existing image is couched. Like the means in which a photograph depicts something?

CH. Yes. Exactly. There is always a danger that the language of a photo gets carried into the painting which compromises its integrity, no matter how careful you are to separate what is being shown with how it is being shown. So I am happy now to be painting without crutches that normalise the work. You know it's been moving in that direction for a while now. Knowing the problems is one thing, but being able to do something about it is an entirely different question.

RB. I suppose there is a much greater risk of failure?

CH. Huge. Or just descending into some kind of faux naïf style. I think the other problem that I faced in this painting in particular was it becoming too slick. There are a lot of palette knife paintings that I have seen which are just too showy and inconsequential. I wanted the painting to be painterly but not decoratively so or just seem flashy. As it turns out, it has a certain grittiness that I am ok with.



RB. Some of those blacks are really loaded and uncompromising. It's not pretty!

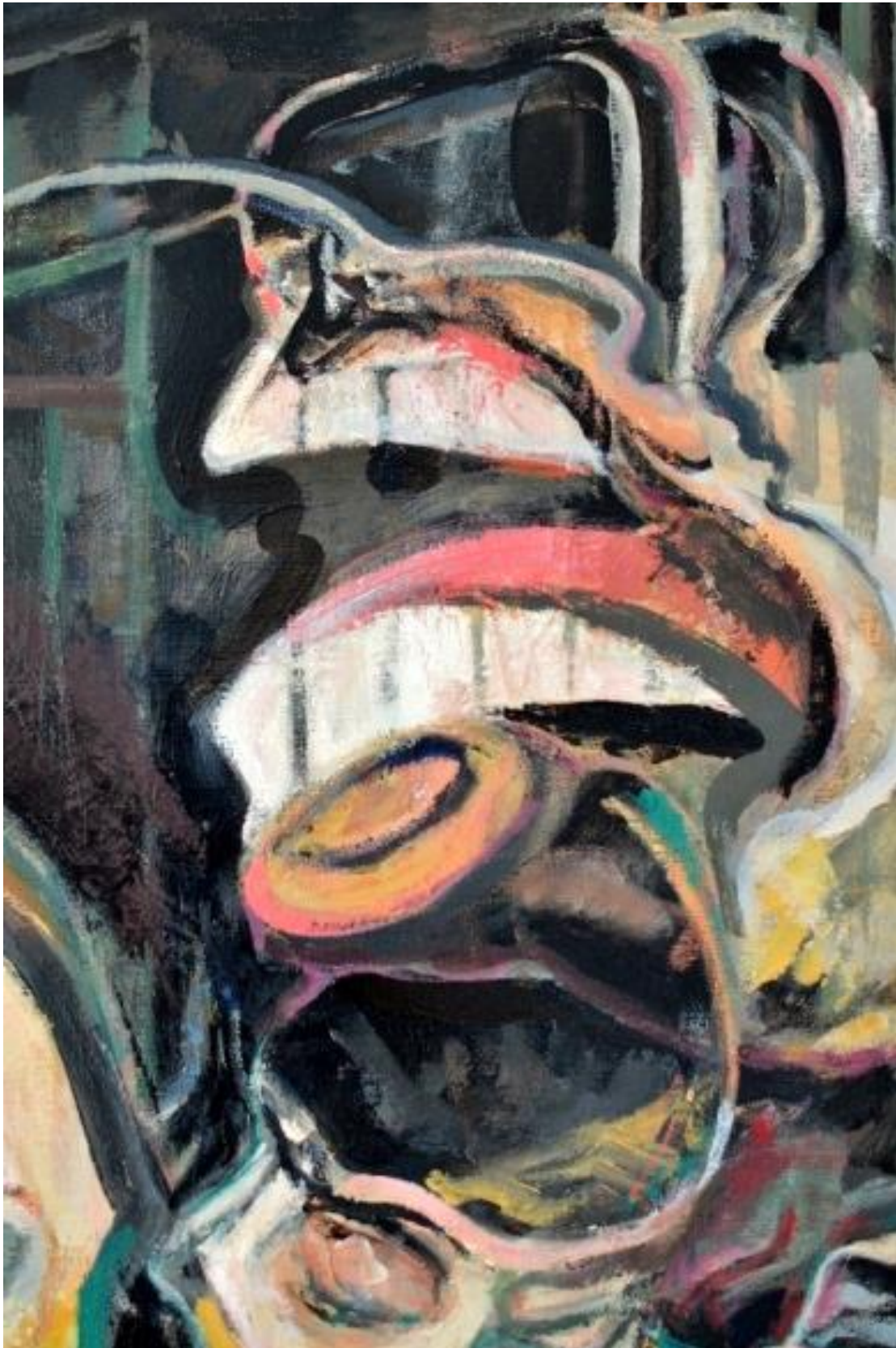
CH. Actually, I began this painting thinking it might be a grisaille, like the previous painting (*The King is Dead, Long Live the King*, 2018). So for a while it had very little colour in it at all, just the subtle cool and warm greys

from a very limited palette. I didn't really have a notion about colour for this, but I brought it in more, made it more intense, but the palette is still quite limited.

RB. You mentioned using a knife.

CH. Yes, and other things. Bigger brushes, my fingers, and lot of newspaper, just to try and free up the surface and not always rely on a certain facility that I have.

RB. Why is it called *Pearly White*? I thought it was called *Pablo's Mares*.



CH. As the painting develops, its narrative changes. I'm not trying to tell stories, but make a painting that generates all kinds of narratives. When every part of the painting can be read in a multiplicity of ways, after all, there are always multiple images; the possibility for different meanings becomes infinite. But the painting warrants a title, and in this case, I settled on one particular narrative that suggested itself to me. There are those haunting white teeth at the top of the painting. People are not always what they first seem. The painting is not what it first seems. I don't need to say much more, but the paintings are always tied to everything that is going on in my life, and other thoughts beyond.

RB. So it's a very inclusive kind of realism?

CH. It has to be. It can't be abstract, and it can't be me just obsessing over some minutiae. It has to be in parallel with who I am, and it has to be the best painting that I can make.

RB. Can we talk about artists who have influenced you? You said these new works are not cubist?





CH. Cubism changed everything. Without Cubism we wouldn't have had much of the art of the Twentieth Century. But I don't set out to make Cubist paintings, or Futurist paintings. I *am* interested in time and space and what that can mean in relation to painting, and that's a very long and complex history that reaches right back.

I am also interested in finding ways to escape from all that is culturally normal and mundane. If you bring two images together, overlay them, you get way more. You might find 3 or 4 new images, it might reveal all kinds of possibilities that taps into somewhere in your brain that you hadn't accessed. I guess that has more to do with Surrealism but it's as well not to use these labels.

RB. This painting has a very Spanish feel.

CH. Yes, they're all different but I think this is a bit Spanish, and not just because of the Picasso reference. It's probably got more to do with all that black. Reminds me more of Goya.

RB. What about more recent artists.

CH. Well, I have been looking a lot at De Kooning, which I guess isn't that recent! But I think he was able to draw upon so much of the invention from the earlier part of the Modernist period and find an incredibly strong and mysterious way of painting. More contemporary artists, like Cecily Brown, are really looking back to De Kooning. Not that I'm trying to make a De Kooning, obviously, but I think his strategy and belief in painting is very important to me.

RB. You showed with Cecily Brown a few years ago in that Reality Show at the Sainsbury Centre?

CH. Yes, alongside many other British painters past and present. It was the first time that I showed this kind of work and it proved to be very popular which I was pleased about. More recently I have been showing more alongside the Modern greats, like Picasso, because I did a number of shows with Robert Landau who has an astonishing collection.

You know I saw Cecily Brown's show in New York last year. I liked its scale, but for me, it doesn't go deep enough. I often look at my contemporaries and think that it's great but I wouldn't be satisfied, so I tend to dig in and try to push it just that bit further. And it all comes down to the certainty of the painting itself. That you really mean it and that is felt through the twist and turn of every brush mark. It's so difficult.





It's been a long journey and it's on-going. In fact I think I am making more work now, and working harder than I have ever done before and I don't know where that will take me.

RB. But do you see these current paintings as opening something new?

CH. Definitely. I am very excited to take on the challenge that they are opening. There's a lot of painting to be done.

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