

Angel and People

Purchased 2009 by Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales, Cardiff, with the assistance of the Derek Williams Trust

I painted Angel and People thirty years ago. Along with most of my paintings from that time, it was made flat on the floor, on unprimed canvas stretched across a solid board, and only later put onto a stretcher.

There were many reasons for this way of painting. I wanted very fluid paint to stain large shapes directly into the fabric. I had by now changed to acrylic paint, as thinning down oil paint dilutes colour saturation. Working flat meant that the flow of paint could be controlled more easily.

I'm not exactly sure how the shapes came about. One or two because of something seen in the world, and others because I must have decided I needed a certain red, for example - which in turn would mean deciding how much of it there should be, how transparent or opaque, what kind of edges, where it should sit, how it might touch or cover other colours. I was fascinated - and still am - by how colour constructs light, which opens up the space in a painting. It's as if another world is being formed, and the way in which it happens, as the painting evolves, becomes almost a subject in itself.

Working on the floor is physically different from working on a vertical canvas. The muscles of the whole body seem to do the drawing, and this animates the painting in unpredictable ways. There were always surprises when the painting was lifted upright, - good and bad ones. I spent more time figuring out what I'd got so far, planning the next moves, than actually painting. I remember that the time spent looking seemed to pass slowly, whereas painting-time went quickly; - I hope that both those rhythms are somehow still visible.

Painting flat on a board meant that the canvas could take more pressure than if it were already on a stretcher - and I could, if necessary, walk right into the painting. The golden ground-colour was stained into the canvas first, and then left to dry. Everything else was painted on top of that, in two or three further stages. I started in the middle, moving out towards the edges, feeling my way visually across the expanding composition. The edges were the final thing I decided on, wanting two of them to be clear, with the other two, top and left, slicing into the thin black and yellow, just a little. The space in the painting seemed to need those two anchors.

The three main forms are countered by the seven smaller ones, which act in varying ways as links, bridges, veils or appendages. The eye is moved about, across the shapes, and in and out of the painting's space, from colour to colour, and through colour. These rhythms swing and shift, and the relationships between the colours create a particular light. That is what fascinates me in painting - how such a flat, still thing can be luminous, how it can keep the eye moving and noticing all the tiny details, but all the time returning to the whole image.

I title the paintings after they are finished, and try to find words to echo the ideas and sensations of the painting. The titles don't describe anything in a literal way, but are like clues. The idea for this one came from a friend who saw the painting in the studio. He

described the left-hand form as having 'wings like an angel'. I liked the different sounds made by the words 'angel' and 'people', almost a rhyme, and the pairing of the words proposed the idea of a conversation, or an appearance.

Looking back, I can remember my painter-heroes of that time - Matisse, always returned to, lessons learned from him lasting a life-time, and Miro, whose work is serious and carefree in equal measure. The American painters I had been excited by as a student were Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland. Closer to home, in the UK, I admired Roger Hilton, Gillian Ayres, Prunella Clough, Ian Stephenson, - and painters who had become friends, Jennifer Durrant, John McLean, and Geoff Rigden. I was to discover the work of Thomas Nozkowski, Mary Heilmann, Bernard Frize, and many others, - but that would be later on.

There have been changes in how I work, since 1979, but seeing this painting again makes me realize what has been constant. It's difficult to put into words, because it is to do with what is peculiar to painting - how it seems a never-ending involvement, to make something appear and then to find out as you go along what it means to you, what has become familiar, what to discard, what to keep searching for. It's an on-going fascination with painting as visual language and expression, its evolution, its possibilities, its difficulties and its pleasures.

Angel and People 1979 acrylic on canvas 180 x 171 cm
Mali Morris December 2009