

Joan Hillier in conversation with David Clegg

Tony was born in Birmingham... and his father was very practical... he could do all sorts of things... and this is where Tony's practicality comes from. He'd got a great sense of humour and he got this from his mother... he was very theatrical and so was she... and of course this helped him a lot when he came to Cambridge and he became a university lecturer because he could throw himself into it... he would show them slides of the two of us when we were on cycling tours on the Continent when he was talking about muscle... and if you look at all the metal sculptures out there, there's something humorous in each of them.

When did he start making his artworks?

When he was teaching he was painting... it was pictures... and when he got early retirement... first of all he made things with or papier mâché?... quite big things because he'd made the bases of them with wire... and then he'd put the paper round the wire... so they were recognisable people... and then he moved into bamboo-work... and he did all sorts of things with bamboo... and after that he went onto ceramics... the metal was the last thing he got on to... and he'd been retired some time by then.

What did he tell you about what he was doing? Did he tell you about it?

Never... I would come home and find them done... he never sought permission and he never brought me into what he was doing...

Really?

No... so long as he was happy that was all I cared about. When he was doing his metal sculptures it would be like a full day at work... he'd be working on it all day.

And he didn't work from drawings?

Just very brief sketches... nothing of any detail.

Did you ever have a front wall to your garden because it's completely open? Anyone can walk in.

No, we never did... we did have a small hedge at one time but we took it down because frankly I think it's safer if it's open.

And this decision to open your own private space to the public is something I don't think many people would have done or wanted... but it was obviously something he was very keen on and that you share as well.

I do... since he died... he died actually on November the 5th 2014... and it couldn't have been a better more appropriate day for him to die... when you think of all the welding and the flames... it was the perfect day... and since then the garden has stayed open.

So what happened to Tony? I believe he was a very fit man.

Yes, he was and then he had a stroke... he was 72 when he died but he'd had a stroke and it changed his personality a bit... I mean previously I could argue with him without him getting upset... but after that first stroke I couldn't... he'd get very upset. He got over that one and

then six months later he had a really severe one... he couldn't do anything after that... he spent a year in bed... but he could hardly move really... it got worse as time went on... I think he may have had little ones afterwards that made things worse... he lay in bed and wished he'd got cancer rather than how he was. It was very difficult.

So after he came back from the hospital was the garden still open to the public?

Yes, and the kids wanted to see him and talk to him... but he didn't want to see them because he didn't want them to see him as he then was... and since then the garden has still been open for people and I still have his notice up saying, 'The garden is open throughout the year' and 'Please feel free to walk around. We like that'.

What do you get from that? What do you like about having it open?

I just like to see kids enjoying themselves sitting on the dog and the pig... and adults having their photographs taken on the horse... it's all part of relating to the sculptures. Some of them want to buy but Tony's attitude was he never sold anything... you see, if they're in somebody's private garden they don't get seen by anyone other than people who are relatives of that person or the people who visit the garden. That's what bothered him, he wouldn't do commissions because of that... he just wanted to give them away.

But he must have thought they had value...

Yes, he gave the Emmaus community one or two to auction off... and they made some money for the community and he was happy with that.

Part 2.

You mentioned as we were coming in that there are more upstairs.

Pictures.

Could we take a look?

Sure... you'll be most interested in the bigger ones I think... his black and white ones were rather unusual actually. This is the bondage period.

Wow!

I think in some ways his pictures were even more amazing than...

Have these ever been exhibited?

No, they haven't... and they're not known about.

There are hundreds of them!

The trouble is that when you're married to somebody who does all these things you get quite blasé about it... you're coming new to it but it was happening all the time.

They're not cartoony, like his sculptures... there's something else to them.

There's something dark behind them...

The little bit that is online about Tony talks about the pieces in the garden... I don't think anyone's mentioned the ceramics or the bamboo or the paintings... and what little is there, they tend to be written about as big cartoons... but not all of this stuff is particularly cartoony... they're quite surrealist... but there's also a slightly macabre side.

Yes, there is...

Do you see that as well?

The funny thing is he wasn't like that at all himself... he was witty and humorous and you didn't get the impression there was any black side at all...

But do you see it in the work?

Yes, but it didn't worry me because I never saw it in any other way...

But it wouldn't be wrong to say that behind some of this work there is something that isn't fun and and lightweight... there is another level.

Exactly... there is... I knew there was. The things in the garden represent the things that they are much more closely than what you saw upstairs... I think that if he'd sought publicity he'd have got the recognition but he didn't.

But it didn't come knocking either.

But you wouldn't have been here if he hadn't put those things in the garden... and all the while he's doing this other stuff that nobody knows about.

Interview 2. (David Clegg, Joan Hillier and Jenny Beverley)

DC: *Did Tony think of himself as an artist?*

JH: No, I don't think he did. I'm certain he didn't. He just did this because he had drive in him to do it... it was fun. Even when he was working... he was teaching medical students and those people who read physiology at Cambridge... but even when he was working he did the paintings.

JB: He didn't do any more paintings over the last 12, 13 years... he was out there.

JH: He could only do one thing at one time.

JB: The paintings were a long time ago.

DC: *But the paintings are very different.*

JB: Oh my god, aren't they just! Deep, deep sexuality... all the barbed wire and the chains and everything are all bondage.

JH: And the eyeless bits. Now there's a lot of people who come to this house who only like the cartoons... they don't want to know about the stuff upstairs because it worries them.

DC: *What interests me is you've got a clear distinction between the public face in the garden and... well... it's not straight forward.*

JH: Nothing's straight forward about it, nothing is...

DC: *Where do you think the imagery he was using came from?*

JH: From his head... he never ever copied anything... but those upstairs he did very privately.

JB: His public person was very conservative... with Tony there were two people there.

DC: *Did you ever have complaints about the pieces in the garden?*

JH: Someone knocked on my door... and it was someone from the council... and he said a neighbour had objected to the sculptures in the garden... so we went out and looked at them... and the chap said to Tony, 'How tall would you say that giraffe is? Would it be more than 21 feet?' Tony said, 'No, I don't think so'... he said, 'Right'... and then he said, 'Have you got it in concrete or anything?' 'No,' Tony said, 'I could move it at any time'... 'Oh', he said, 'That totally alters the whole thing. If it's movable you don't need planning permission.'

DC: *So it's a non-permanent structure.*

JH: It's not permanent... and we got the impression that the man didn't want to tell him that we'd got to take the thing down.

DC: *Well it's a shame then that they disappear from the garden because it sounds like they were part of the place.*

JB: We couldn't have them all here! To be fair a lot of people don't like them... a lot of people say they devalue their property... I've had people say that to me.

DC: *It'll be a sad day when they're gone...*

JB: God, we'll cry... but they're going to a safe home.

JH: You've no idea how many there were... and we don't know either... and we don't know where they went. There was a tremendous number... when he retired he started off with papier mâché... he'd build something in wire and then use paper and glue to make something.

DC: *What would he do with them?*

JH: I don't know what happened to them.

JB: He'd give them away or bash them up and burn them.

JH: He burned an awful lot of stuff.

DC: *So he would do them for the fun of making them and then destroy them?*

JH: Absolutely, yeah.

DC: *And how long would a piece take him to make... one of the bigger pieces in the garden?*

JB: Weeks, months some of them.

JH: That camel out there must have taken months. The giraffe was easier because of the patterns on the giraffe... there are bits where it's not solid... and that makes it much easier when there's a wind... because the camel's been down in the garden... but fortunately no one was in the garden at the time as far as we know.

JB: We walked past it twice and didn't even notice it was down...

DC: *But nobody was hurt.*

JB: No harm was done... apart from the lady's head.

JH: The lady's head came off.

DC: *Was there any concern about liability if someone hurt themselves on one of the sculptures?*

JB: He did put up a notice so it's up to them. There's a notice out there. It's up to them.

JH: He actually didn't want to put that notice out there... but he did it for protection for us... because obviously if one of those fell on... or even if someone got minor injuries they might claim heavily from us... and it is their wish to sit on the sculptures... we don't ask them to.

DC: *One of the words that keeps coming up in regard to this form of art is 'obsessional'... was Tony an obsessive?*

JH: Absolutely! I'm sure he was. It was morning, noon and night.

DC: So what would you like to happen to these pieces?

JH: Well, this is the problem... I'm not getting any younger and I would like them to be placed somewhere... the one thing I'm worried about is that I should die and they would be destroyed... and I hope not because they're works of art... all of them... I would like them to be known about... I would like them to be placed somewhere... but I don't know how to do it... I've tried with the sculptures but I think it's the metal that puts people off... I have been in touch with people... for maybe schools to have them... but there's a problem with health and safety... and I know you would think I was mad when I say this but he never wanted to sell anything... so I wouldn't want to sell... I'd just want to give them to someone who would enjoy them... yeah... they're something he's left behind... yeah... I feel happy about them but I just want somebody else to feel happy about them when I'm not here.

