

Ron Gittins: interview with Jan Williams and Chris Teasdale.

The interview begins and ends with a recording of Ron, dressed as a troubadour, busking inside a key-cutting shop in Birkenhead.

Did you know what your uncle was doing?

JW: Well we knew that he painted... when I was growing up I used to visit my nan and granddad's house when Ron still lived there... and he was always creating things... he used to make these tiny, little plasticine soldiers... and he would destroy their brushes and brooms so he could use the bristles to make centurions helmets... and my parents raised in the eulogy to him after he died... about how he used to recite Shakespeare in the backyard in the outside toilet... in this really grand voice. None of us really knew where it came from... I know part of the Roman obsession... I think he'd been on a holiday somewhere like Pompei so that obviously would have fed his fascination but he was always into like dressing up and dramatics... he spent a bit of time doing a drama course...

But he dropped out?

JW: I think he dropped out of most things because he couldn't be told what to do, he was just him and he'd do things in his own way. He was always really interested in power... he always loved the royal family... the Queen... he kept trying to get my mum to pose as the Queen... she was never that keen. He was the only person ever in the history of our family who voted Conservative... I think, just to be rebellious... so the less said about that the better... but he was always very impressed by grandeur... the idea of creating a world of nobility... he was always quite flamboyant in his manner... he used to love dressing up in different costumes... he loved Shakespeare, he loved emperors, ancient Rome... films like Ben Hur. There's a florist's shop on the corner and they used to save flower boxes for him... and he used to make emperors and all sorts with those... he'd make these helmets - look at this... there was an awful lot about costumes. I mean we hadn't seen much of him for a while because he didn't really invite people in... I think it was because he was so obsessed with making his art he didn't care about it all being tidy and organised... he was just driven to do his thing... he obviously didn't want the owners coming in because they might tell him he couldn't do things... he didn't have gas put in because that would risk disrupting the artwork... wouldn't it? The environment he'd made... I suppose this was his domain and he could do what he wanted in here so anyone who would threaten it in any way he just didn't want them in here... and he had a protected rent... I think he was paying £120 a month for years on end... maybe less at some stage.

So he was in a situation where, because of his rent, and because the accommodation was secure he could do what he wanted.

JW: Well he wouldn't let the owners in... I think there was some kind of contract drawn up where he said he wanted permission to make these columns... these pillars that used to be at either side of his front door. Some stuff has been thrown out when we thought it had to be cleared... but we've tried to save as much as we could... it was when I saw the lion fireplace I just couldn't sleep... and said well we have to see if we can save this.... so contacted... we found out who the owners were and spoke to them and made an agreement to have a licence to occupy... so for us now there's all these questions like what do we do with it? What do we keep? Are we really authentic and say this is what Ron did and just leave it...

How do you keep it? It's not fantastically well made... and the flat isn't warm and it's probably not dry and things will probably decay... I can see with the paintings some of them are falling apart now. Is it that you want to preserve the house itself or do you want to preserve... I don't know. Do you want to somehow document the house in full... because I'm not even sure it would be physically possible to preserve everything.

JW: Well, I think I want to keep as much as it is as is possible. As his niece I feel a direct link here... almost a responsibility... thinking, well, how would I feel if this was my artwork... the thought of it all being his obsession... he just didn't want to leave the place even towards the end to go to hospital but I know he was massively proud of his artwork... I know for a fact that he was trying to get his work into galleries... he wanted to be recognised and appreciated... he obviously wasn't part of the contemporary art world in a market sense but it was a calling for him... it was who he was... this is what he did. Down here there's a carrier bag full of tins... He used to have loads and loads of bags... tin lids... tins... he would have been saving them to make something with... I think he was going to make a chariot...

I think that is amazing that there are bags of things everywhere...

JW: Yeah... just loads and loads and loads... I don't know if he would have felt ashamed or embarrassed but he probably didn't want people to see that he was living in a great big, huge mess. What do you keep private? What's personal? That box there, lots of things have been chucked in... letters and papers... because he was a spy as well of course... he always had secret code words for the day. These are paintings rolled up that we've found of quite epic or ancient world scenes... and I love the way... see this? It was a bathmat and he's painted some kind of scarab thing on it... and this shield... and this... can you reach that musket?

The musket I did notice...

JW: It's incredible...

Is it paper?

JW: Yeah, I think so... paper maybe card... my nan, Alice... she had to go into various nursing homes when her health deteriorated... and Ron was always having arguments with the people that ran the homes... telling them how to do their job... that was Ron for you... but he got banned from three nursing homes for causing trouble... so one time he dressed up in a long red coat... we've got a similar one in the wardrobe there... and he was patrolling in front of one of the homes with this musket... protesting. He could cause a lot of problems in the family just because, well, you kind of gather the sort of person he was... he wasn't necessarily the easiest person to get along with... because even though we all loved him he could cause some terrible scenes and upsets... it was just a really extreme example of someone who lived in their work... it was his home... it was his studio... it was his world. There might have been a time towards the end of his life when his health was failing... but he didn't tell people... he didn't want people to know... partly because he didn't want to worry them... but he was terrified that if he had to leave here to go to hospital... he would never be able to get back into his Roman villa. Someone who was getting bread and milk for him... and was just calling in to say hello... came in to see him... and they said about calling an ambulance... and he just flatly refused because he just would not leave here... so, yeah, that's sad but it was his choice... he knew what he was doing. He was just like a really obsessive person... he was just very extreme... he literally couldn't get into bed sometimes because... there's photos of life-size papier mâché figures of Roman soldiers lying on the bed drying off next to some heater...

We're in Ron's kitchen now.

JW: Yeah... this is a bit less ornate than most of the rooms... you'll see the floor... he's painted this diamond effect on here... I must have come in about 2 or 3 weeks after Ron had died... and you just couldn't... there was a table in the middle and just stuff almost up to the ceiling...

Chris, what was your impression when you first came in?

CT: It was quite strange because it was literally just full of bags and things up to the picture rail... in every room including the hall... it was solid. The far room... the bull room... three of us cleared most of that in 4 or 5 hours... it was literally grabbing a bag, checking what's in it and chucking it... and luckily, because of that we saved Alexander the Great, who was in one of the carrier bags.

JW: A lot of it was bags of bags that he might have used for stuffing his models... his centurions... lots of bags of papers... loads of phone directories, Argos catalogues that he might have used for papier mâché.

CT: Unfortunately we were a bit late on the scene, not realising we could do anything at all... and someone else had decided what was saveable and what wasn't...

JW: I dread to think what they might have thrown away...

CT: It's almost like Ron gave up eventually... he just thought, 'I can't do any more now' ... so that was it.

Is this his writing?

JW: Yes, there's tons of it... there's lots of stuff in code... he was obsessed with code.

It looks very much like a theatre set... do you think he dressed up in here?

JW: He was very much an actor but not for this performance or that performance... that was his life and this was the stage set for his life, as was the town of Birkenhead.

CT: It's about two miles down into town and as a protest about the Iraq war he tied his legs together and shuffled all the way down there and all the way back.

JW: And it was a private thing... because someone asked him what he was doing and he explained it... but he wasn't carrying banners or placards... so in a strange way it was a private understated thing.

What a bizarre thing! To do a protest without telling anyone what the protest is about... and presumably at the end of it if no one had asked him he would have just gone home.

JW: And no one would have known... but like this he did it for himself because he felt he had to... maybe it was the same kind of thing... this drive... this compulsion... he just knew he was right as far as he was concerned... he was right and anyone that disagreed with him they were just wrong or they just didn't get it... he didn't do anything in half measures.

CT: When he discovered that the Romans lived on gruel he lived on it for years.

So it wasn't just theatre... he lived it? He becomes the artwork.

CT: Yeah... he lived it... it meant everything to him.

