

B: Both my father and mother were artists so it's in my blood. They encouraged me and my brothers and sisters to make art and take risks. I'd made huge clay pots at home since I was three. I'd used blocks of clay up to my waist. I loved the excitement of the activity... the life of it, pull it apart, put that bit on... see what happened. Then I got to school and they gave us a little bit of clay and said, 'This is how you make a coil pot'. From that day at school I was at odds with the education system, though I liked the social interaction in school, I didn't like the way people had to conform.

D: Why did you decide to go to art school?

B: It seemed a nice thing to do and it was just up the road! Barnet is the centre of my universe. I started a foundation course but soon started making art next door in the grounds of the old theological college ... it had a beautiful pond and a wild area... an old arboretum... that feeling of being in another time. Using materials I could find in the woods I built an art environment... a huge wooden chair, a tower, a giant male figure and a table about ten feet high. It was a whole sculptural environment with a walkway connecting the various parts. No one knew I was doing it... I was trying to let the work evolve out of the place. The head caretaker found me one weekend and there was mayhem ... the whole thing got stopped, there were loads of meetings ... they said I wasn't allowed to go through a hole in the fence any more so I built myself an artwork doorway in the fence with wooden figures so I could go in and out. Eventually the college decided enough was enough... and it was fine... I'd been there creating art and doing my own thing for a year and a half. Part of the reason my work survived there so long was that it was hidden, though people discovered it and enjoyed it, children played on it. Over time some people vandalised and burned it, though some of the work lasted for years. I planted some new trees and it became a natural environment once more.

I wanted to make art that had a social function... something for and about people that was accessible and understandable without lots of heavy theory. I liked that people discover the work but it wasn't up to me to say what they should make out of it. The next space I worked was in Hadley Woods in Barnet. Hadley Woods is common ground so I didn't have to get permission to work there. I could make sculptures and environments in the wood that people could just come across.

D: How important was it for you to work with the materials that you find on the site?

B: If a sculpture had nails in it I'd dismantle it at the end and put the pieces of wood back in the undergrowth where it had come from and I'd take the nails away... you wouldn't know it had been there. For me it's about respecting a place. If you spend enough time in a place it starts to tell you what to do. The chewing gum is already part of the environment in the sense that I haven't brought it in.

The nature of a chewing gum picture is that it's something that's spat out and discarded on the pavement. When I started I was upset by the lack of respect or awareness that people show in spitting it out. They don't care about the space. But I care. All my life I've picked up rubbish and used it. I've made paintings on discarded cigarette butts and tin cans.

I made a considered choice to work outside the system. I had friends who were into punk rock and I understood that ... the anarchy movement... punk fanzines... that was a big movement and I identified with it. Direct action is part of that, and I just wanted to make art. I don't feel comfortable with the idea of creating art as a product, although of course that can create financial problems.

I had the idea of painting on the mass-produced advertising on billboards. Eventually I got caught, charged with criminal damage and bound over and that was when the possibilities of painting on chewing gum dawned on me. Obviously it was a risk, but with the gum, it's not part of the pavement and so it's not criminal damage ... local authorities have no jurisdiction over the space... they can't control it. So I started experimenting and developing a technique. I liked that the chewing gum was hidden and small enough not to be intrusive.

Straight off it was amazing how many passers by wanted a picture, 'Do one for me, it's my birthday'. That was interesting because I was working with the person and the place and it was spontaneous. Through the art I would connect with the people, and get ideas of what to paint on the gum. When I first started I'd get graffiti gangs who would check me out... and school kids... but soon, throughout the day, it would be all kinds of people. I found that people enjoyed the paintings and it made them really happy.

D: Articles tend to present your gum-pics as individual things but you've also made trails where they act as markers or stepping stones.

B: I've worked around North London for 16 years so there are thousands of pictures on pavements, on walls, on pathways ... scattered everywhere. I've also worked throughout Europe. I was invited to work on a trail of pictures in Norway, beyond the arctic circle ... chewing gum pictures by the side of a fjord. I've been commissioned to do one now along a disused railway line which is a natural reserve. I always have my painting gear with me and I'll work anywhere if I feel inspired. Then straight away someone will come up and ask for a picture. That's been the way from day one, as soon as I first lay down on the street and begin to paint people started making requests, so I might have several paintings in a group. Sometimes they ask for a painting in a place that has meaning for them. So I get taken off in a new direction.

D: It's always a delight to find one. A tattooist told me that he finds tattooing to be meditative. I think working on the paintings must be similar.

B: It is... it's a bit like a tea ceremony or something like that... a ritual... opening the paint-box... setting out the paints...finding a place to work where people don't trip over me... then I heat the gum with a burner. I push myself to make things as perfectly as I can. The problem is that I work through the winter... sometimes in freezing cold weather and when I'm focussed on the picture I don't feel the cold. As soon as the picture is done... and it can take hours, I feel unbelievable pain. I have to try to find somewhere to go to the loo and warm up. In a sense I lose a bit of the awareness of time passing but then again I have to be totally aware of my surroundings... I've been attacked many times over the years. I've had to deal with everything... gangs, and police brutality. I've been questioned by thousands of police officers ... and I did have a court case... they tried to get me on a criminal damage charge and obstruction... I was mistreated in a cell and dragged across the floor by the police... that wasn't good.

D: How long do the paintings last?

B: So long as they're not scraped off they can last a long time. I go back and retouch them. I did some gum paintings on rock faces in Portugal... deep in cracks in the rocks. People might discover those paintings in a thousand years. I've been working on pictures on the Millennium Bridge for about eight years. This has been an amazingly popular project, very rewarding for me, and for all the people from all over the world who know the pictures. The first trail I made, that covered about half the bridge, was removed, but when more gum was dropped on the bridge, I went on painting, creating a trail right across the bridge and into Tate Modern. There are now hundreds of pictures on the bridge. A book about my work on the Millennium Bridge was published at the end of last year.

D: 'Common ground' is the term you used to describe the area of woodland where you made the giant figures. Is the interest in common ground what connects the chewing gum paintings to the wooden sculptures?

B: They're both spaces I can work in that aren't under local authority or government control. The gum-pics are provocative because they're in public view. They reveal how much is controlled in regard to spaces. My art by its nature is anti-consumerist and I've been asked to make anti-MacDonald's paintings outside MacDonald's, which I enjoyed doing. If I'm working outside a company headquarters or a government building, even a museum, they'll sometimes call the security guards or the police and ask me to move on, then they realise I'm the Chewing Gum Man they've heard about or seen on TV and they think the work I'm doing is OK and they let me finish my painting. I've known people take up paving stones to get one. I worked outside the Economist building and the staff came out to meet me and I did one for them. Their picture got stolen and ended up on eBay!

D: I'm interested in the photographs you've taken of the people that asked for paintings. It's unusual to see street photography where everyone looks happy.

B: I've taken thousands... school kids, families, graffiti writers, people of all ages from all over the world. A lot of people in North London and beyond know I have a request book for paintings and they'll come over while I'm on lying the ground working and ask if I'll do a painting for them. People in the street seem to open up to me because I'm able to give them time and I listen and there isn't a hidden agenda... and then word gets around about me... and they look out for me.

I did a picture for a couple who were visiting the country for the first time... right in the middle I put a little white horse and the girl said, 'How on earth did you know to do a picture of my dog'... so I reworked the tail and made it into a proper dog... but for her that was almost a miracle and I was like some kind of soothsayer.

D: Do people come back to visit their pictures?

B: Yes, very much so. I've made lots of memorials. I'll only refuse to do a painting if someone requests something that goes against the positive aspects of the work. For example I refused when someone wanted a picture of knives and machetes. I was invited to Brussels to make some gum paintings after the terrorist attack... the organisers knew I worked in communities and with people... linking people together. Celebrating different ways of living. There was a huge media buzz and I had a lot of people in Brussels thanking me for their pictures, I felt my art was celebrated and I was supported financially, and then I came back to London ...

D: Have you ever done a picture for a policeman?

B: Yeah, lots! I started working in Barnet... that was really good because I won the police over... but in the city of London they didn't want me to be working there at all. I was arrested and taken to court and the case was thrown out. The Barnet police made a witness statement on my behalf because they knew the work I did. It's all power and politics in the financial centre so they didn't want me there, but mostly now the police there know me and they're fine.

People will come to me and tell me about a chewing gum painting that has meaning for them... and sometimes their interpretation isn't the story that I was illustrating. I can't tell them the real story because it might be personal to someone else. I did a painting containing a whole load of elements relating to someone who'd died of cancer... the person who wanted the painting gave me a list of things symbolic of that person... I can never divulge that information.

I'm trying to make work about connectivity, embracement, love. Ideally people will slow down, stop and look. With the speed of everything in the city getting someone to slow down and have a conversation or notice their environment is important. Sometimes I'll end up with a huddle of people round me and it starts a chain reaction down the Millennium Bridge.

D: Could we talk about your tile paintings?

The tile paintings are a diary... the very first picture was done on the 1st of March 2014... they're on small ceramic tiles. I do them most of time, but I have phases when I stop for a while. This one is from when I thought I was going to be thrown out of my flat... this is my meeting with my girlfriend... being excited and being in love... there are images that are to do with my children and a run of paintings about my mum's illness and death. I thought I'd place them in London underground stations in the spaces between the advertising posters. I started to place them, but then it was as if pages were missing from my diary, so I began doing two of each, one for the underground and one for me. There's a painting stuck in each station on the Northern Line and a big section of the Central Line... so between the advertising is this personal world and if you're observant, if you slow down and take a look, then you find it.