

Robert and Linda Burns in conversation with David Clegg

RB. The first painting in the hallway is the last mural I painted... it's my copy of Botticelli's Vision of Ezekiel... it's only a small painting.

DC. You've painted in almost every room... where did you start?

RB. On the stairs... I did the first one... this is by Caravaggio... then I painted my way up the stairs... all the small framed paintings are mine as well... that's by Leonardo De Vinci and this is Giovanni Bellini... his painting of the Doge Loredan of Venice.

DC. When did you start?

RB. 2003... I left school when I was 15 and I didn't start painting until I was 56... and I hadn't done any art in between. I had no classical education and nothing in terms of art. Unfortunately, our school, if you were any good at bookkeeping, they let you take the art course... it doesn't make much sense to me but there it is... but I was rubbish at bookkeeping.

I bought some cheap artist's brushes and a starter pack of acrylic paints... my last art class was at primary school. The first painting was too thinly painted so, after a year or so, I painted over it.

Eventually I seemed to find a way and get the hang of it... I look at some of the early efforts and I know I could have done it better but I decided to leave them as they show the progression.

DC. Every article I've read about your paintings says that you're copying the Sistine Chapel.

RB. No, I'm not... it galls me a bit that they say that. I steer clear of painting anything in the Sistine Chapel because we have a recreation of the Sistine Chapel just down the road... 13 miles away in Worthing. The Sistine Chapel has been painted a good few times.

This used to be my computer room and... if you pull the door to... now, this picture here... as you say, the press says, 'Man recreates the Sistine Chapel'... and of course the reporter asked, 'What is this picture?'... I said it's the Sistine Madonna painted by Raphael for the northern Italian Benedictine monks in Piacenza... it's called the Sistine Madonna because Pope Julius II commissioned the painting and he also commissioned the painting of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo... but this painting wasn't anything to do with the paintings in The Sistine Chapel.

DC. It's a shame that later newspaper articles copied the same incorrect explanation.

RB. Once, a lighting man who came from the Daily Mail, said journalists know nothing... he said, 'Basically, work from that viewpoint'. They pick up a key word and fashion their articles around that.

I was a painter and decorator for a while... if you look on this wall here... I painted the Annunciation by Botticelli... but I did these marbled panels around it. I studied books by, what's her name? Jocasta Innes... Jocasta Innes taught me how to marble... in all the time I was a painter and decorator I only marbled one thing... a fireplace. These swags... I had to teach myself how to do those.

DC. Did you go to Italy to see the real paintings?

RB. I went to the Sistine Chapel when I was 70... my son paid for it for us... he'd trolled the Internet and seen the articles, 'Man paints his house like Sistine Chapel', so he thought I'd like to see it. I hadn't seen any of the original paintings in the flesh, so to speak... it all came from charity shop books and catalogues... and books given to me as gifts at Christmas. I taught myself.

DC. I thought some of the published articles were unkind... the Metro said something along the lines of 'We're glad he likes it because we don't'... and the Daily Mail made fun of it and said you'd made your house difficult to sell.

RB. I stopped reading them. An American journalist said I'd painted my house like a car crash. I think if you've ever fancied doing something like this you should just have a go and not worry what other people might say. The most difficult things is painting the straight lines... well, I was a decorator. The painting was all trial and error... but it was done for next to nothing. This spiral thing behind the beds, I cut out stencils... you know, out of cardboard... but as I said before, painting straight lines is difficult.

DC. I assumed you'd used masking tape.

RB. No, it's freehand... painting along the edge of a straight piece of wood. I'd get a very fine brush and... you can only paint about a metre... I had to fit a weight to the wood because the weight of your hand causes the wood to dip as you paint along the edge... so I had to fit a balance... it's all painted, freehand. My shoulder's stiff now so I do the small paintings in frames... and portraits of celebrities... Jeremy Corbyn, Simon Cowell.

DC. How do you choose the person you're going to paint?

RB. I see them on the telly or on the computer... like this (Russell Brand). I saw a Sunday Times colour supplement feature about Russell Brand when he was being castigated for various things, so I painted him as Christ with the crown of thorns (laughs).

He has a tattoo on his arm here, saying 'Lord make me a channel of thy peace'... it's from that church in Italy that collapsed... in Naples... in the earthquake... that was a line from that church... and all his other tattoos are mystical things. I don't know quite what I feel about him but he's a spiritual person... and I did Nigella Lawson, painted as a Pietro Perugino. I painted that when her people were going through the lawyers... and this is Gok Wan as a Caravaggio. The press seemed to like the footballer, my painting of Gareth Southgate. This one, Jose Mourinho... he was getting a lot of negative press. I painted him as a Leonardo but I had to change the hand... this Leonardo is the most expensive painting in the world... it's just sold for four hundred and fifty million.

DC. So you've painted people vilified by the press... and you've painted them as saints and martyrs?

RB. No, I just see them as faces. These are the three I painted during lockdown... Boris Johnson painted as Roman general (laughs).

This is by Guido Reni... and it's Aurora, the dawn chorus... I'm pleased with this picture... the horses were difficult to paint... but the original of this is a ceiling painting and it's huge... so I shrunk it right down to fit the space behind my office door.

DC. How do you go about doing that?

RB. I have a projector... I can set it up and move it back... I don't paint any picture bigger than A3 now... all the frames are junk shop finds... all British Imperial sizes... 16 by 14 inches.

DC. Do you sell the portraits?

RB. I've sold one or two but I don't set out to sell them. These frames... the portrait frames... they all come from Asda... the little portraits I sold for seventy quid... I was skint at the time and seventy quid was quite handy... all the art books were gifts or from charity shops. Painting all the murals took about 12 years.

DC: I like the way you've managed to fit your murals around the features of the buildings... they're all designed for their particular place.

RB. Every building has its own unique challenges... the Sistine Chapel is 80 foot high whereas the height of the ceiling in my council house is 7 foot... and the other weird anomaly in here are the curved ceilings... quite unusual in a council house... and where they put the light bulb... off-centre... so I need to design my murals to fit some strange features... Michelangelo had to make his figures bigger than life due to the height of the ceiling.

I bought a glossy guide to the Vatican at a car boot sale in Lewes... I was so blown away by it... I'd seen pictures before, of the Sistine Chapel... and probably the Basilica... but I hadn't realized that the Sistine Chapel is painted throughout... this was the book I bought at a car boot sale that triggered off all my paintings... it still has the price on it. Two pounds.

LB. He tends to get books from the children for his birthday.

DC. What do you make of it?

LB. I love it... he did ask me at one point whether it was OTT and I said no, just go for it.

RB. Decorating is a bland occupation... it's just hours of painting white ceilings with a roller... so, to counter that, I started painting these pictures... I would just choose something, like the ceiling painting on here... this round panel was difficult to paint... it would have been much easier if it was flat or on an easel rather than on the ceiling... but I was looking for anything out of the norm and testing myself to see if I could do it.

DC. Did you use a scaffold for the ceiling paintings?

RB. I have a small decorators scaffold. Contrary to popular opinion, Michelangelo, when he painted the Sistine Chapel, he didn't lie down... that was done by 20th Century Fox in the film. Michelangelo wrote to one of his friends saying, 'I live in hell and I paint his pictures'. It took him four years to paint the Sistine Chapel. It took me twelve years to finish this.

DC. You've pretty much decorated every surface other than the kitchen.

RB. Yes, but I just do the smaller portraits now... but because of the murals, I've run out of space of where to hang them. The paintings in the bathroom are by Botticelli and Raphael.

DC. So is the house finished now in terms of the wall paintings?

RB. Yes, the paintings on the walls are finished... there isn't room to add more. The last of the paintings is on the landing. We won a competition and we went to the Canary Islands for a week... and we stayed in a 5 star hotel... such a beautiful place... the bathroom was to die for... but it was just painted in shades of grey... it wasn't until we came home and I opened the door to my council house that I realised why some people might see it as barking mad... there's so much colour! What people want now is very bland.

DC. Your paintings got a certain amount of press attention in 2015/2016. How did that come about?

RB. I contacted them. I've had seven TV crews through this house... the best one was probably ABC America... it wasn't shown over here... they came with a professional sound man, a producer and a director... it was amazing. The people from German TV were very nice.

DC. How did your children react to what you've done?

RB. I have three kids living in the house whilst I was doing it... they'd roll their eyes and 'Oh, don't encourage him'... most houses are all painted white and Ikea now. This Baroque painting is by Francisco de Zurbaran.

DC. Have you taught yourself about Italian Renaissance art or did you go to art history classes?

RB. I taught myself, I didn't even realise I had it in me... the only other art I've made was this little sketch of a boat I made in Newlyn... that was in 1980.

DC. There's a lot of religious subject matter. Are you religious?

RB. No, not at all... I'm not painting them as devotional images... it's because I like the look of the paintings. This is the next painting I'm going to do, Sandro Botticelli, 'Portrait of a young man holding a medallion'... it sold in Christies three months ago for 450 million dollars. Obviously I can never own one of these paintings but I can enjoy my version of it.

I want you to see something, when you come out of the bathroom... I wanted a painting big enough to have an impact when you look through into the bedroom. What struck me is the paintings in the Vatican are on all the walls... everything's painted... every room and corridor is outstandingly beautiful and they're all connected... that was my discovery of the Italian Renaissance.

DC. Have you any thoughts about why UK TV and newspapers treat it as a bit of a joke?

RB. The British press have always been sniffy about it. They said I'd devalued my house but it's a council house so making a profit isn't relevant. I didn't give it a thought. The fact that I don't own the house gave me a lot of freedom.

LB. He was on the One Show and they had a bit about bloomers... you know, pants... old-fashioned pants... and the bloke was a comedian on the couch and he totally spoiled it for me because he said I wouldn't like to see Raphael over my head in bed... he was trying to get a cheap laugh... they all seem to do that... take the Mickey. Lots of people like it... we often have workmen coming in and they're so nice... they all ask to take photos on their cell phones. They think it's like a palace.

RB. I've done the whole tour with the workmen who upgraded our kitchen... the council workmen... the council put the job out to tender so the workmen weren't council people... they'd come down from Manchester... they all had their cell phones out, saying, 'My Missus won't believe this is a council house!' They think it's wonderful.