

“Drawings are like daydreams...” A conversation with artist David Batchelor

Interview by Sophie Partarrieu



David Batchelor's work was on show at VCU Qatar throughout March and April 2015

Why is 'Flatlands Remix' important to you?

It was my first 2D show in a long time – I'm better known for my sculptures and 3D work. It was quite an important shift for me and it was important to register it in the title so that other people would know. 'Flatlands' is the title of a book written in the 1880s by Edward Abbott, it's about a world of geometry where colour enters and is a very disruptive force, it doesn't fit any of the three dimensions in the book. The 'Remix' part is because the Doha exhibition is a condensed version of the show.

Why do you take such a strong interest in colour colour?

I was taught by a generation of conceptual artists that had very little interest in colour. Later in life I sort of stumbled into colour. Living in the city you realize that city colours are very different to nature's colours. In the city colours are at their best at night, whereas in nature, day time is obviously the best time to get the full range of colours. When I started to think about colour, I realised that there is a clear narrative in Western culture. For example, in British Art the predominant colour is grey (although there are many fabulous exceptions, like William Turner) but generally speaking we tend to trivialize colour as feminine, oriental, primitive, kitsch or childish. In many ways, in Western tradition colour is thrown over to the East as part of its problem and its concern.

You've said that drawings are like daydreaming, why is that?

At first I thought drawing was like dreaming but then I realized it wasn't, it's more like day dreaming - it's less



Batchelor showing guests and students around his exhibition

surrealist than dreaming. In your daydreams actual consequences don't apply, you develop an ideal version of yourself and your actions. My drawings show the kinds of sculptures I dream of making: objects that are not bound by the laws of nature. With real sculptures you have to worry about their size and weight; in my drawings I can be free.

A lot of your work features found materials and makes use of its colour, why is that?

Well, it didn't start out like that. At first I made some pieces, like the *Three Graces* which were monochrome sculptures of sorts, and I didn't feel that these were very successful (and neither did my gallerist – they didn't sell!) Once I started using found objects, I enjoyed it and I took pleasure in working with the existing colours on them. I think that was because I couldn't control the art that way and I had to learn to let go of the process a bit.

People have often compared your work to that of Brazilian artists, why?

I was invited to show in the 2003 Sao Paulo Biennale, which has been running since the 50s. It's actually the second oldest after Venice... it was great and in many ways my work fits in with that of Brazilian artists very well. We have three main shared interests: the relationships between Colours, Abstraction and The City. These three themes are at play in a lot of post war Brazilian.

You've been living in London for 30 years, how has it changed?

London has changed a lot and I've changed a lot as well: it's always a relationship between the two. There is a great deal more art in London now and more attention is paid to it, which is great. In the 'old days', art was not something that many people did and you didn't expect anybody to take any notice. You certainly didn't expect media recognition or to become rich and famous. That's changed dramatically since the 1990s, now art is fashionable and artists sometimes become famous. In some respects there is a downside to it and in some it's better, but by and large London is a much nicer place to live now as an artist, but also as someone who likes to eat food! There is much more variety than there was in the 70s and 80s.



For these new paintings, you use a pot of painting and tilt the paper to move it around - never touching a paint brush. What made you start working like this?

I'm not sure that I remember exactly when I started. I remember doing the first of those drawings with bases underneath them and with some coloured tape, fluorescent gaffa tape to be exact. Shortly after I did them I started making this sort of amorphous blob. Then I tried some gloss paint and I realised that as the paint dried it crinkled and it was a nice organic, fluid shape. So the first one was in 96 or 97 but it wasn't until 13 or 14 years later that I scaled them up into paintings.

I sometimes carry ideas around for years... I file it away and then something happens that makes me revisit it.

Equally, you look at it again and think 'nah, it wasn't worth it'.

What did you enjoy during your visit to the Museum of Islamic Art?

I'm familiar with aspects of Islamic art as there are great examples at the British Museum, the Metropolitan and the V&A, so it wasn't new to me. However, seeing that range of quality in one place as the sole focus of the museum enabled me to dwell on it and look at it more closely. I enjoyed it all, from the Persian miniatures through to the ceramics and the calligraphy; some of it is so modern! The patterns and the abstraction are also amazing. I'm not so interested in the ornate and complicated designs, I preferred the simpler patterns. The best art is as fresh now as it was then, although maybe in different ways. I noticed that the colours are really intense and are probably the same colour now as they were 1200 years ago. It humbles you a bit and I have a deep, deep respect for what these objects represent. I'll go home and I know I will think about that in the studio. Something will come through and maybe and no one else will see it apart from me, but it will be there.

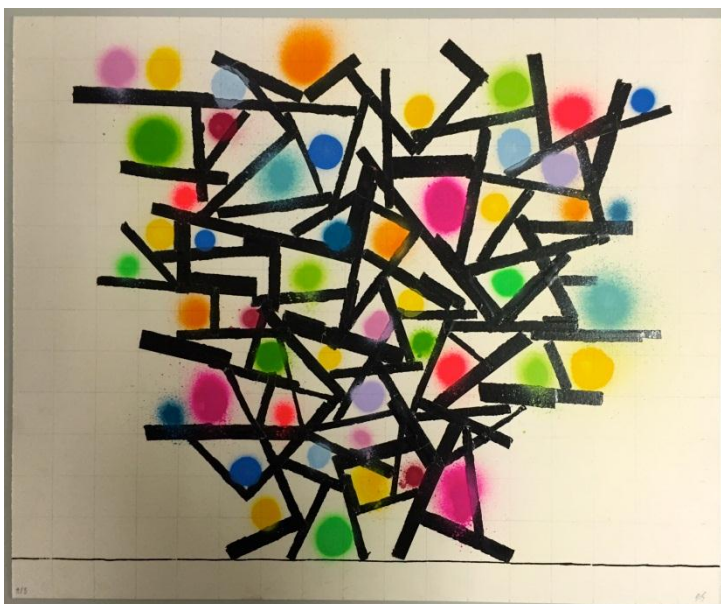


The Qatari Minister for Culture, HE Dr Hamad bin Abdulaziz Al Kuwari enjoying an exhibition tour with Her Majesty's Ambassador to Qatar Nicholas Hopton

What colours have you noticed in Qatar already?

Well as soon as I walked out of the airport I noticed the white cars, everyone seems to have white cars, and then of course the sandy colour of the buildings. It's quite astonishing and I'm sure that if I stayed any longer I would pick up on more things. When it comes to the architecture around the city, you see Islamic patterns that are being taken and adapted to modern architecture: when that is done well, it is absolutely amazing!

What are the best and worst things about being an artist?



Being paid to go to the studio and do what you love is fantastic: it doesn't get better than that. However, when you're making ambitious things like public projects there are endless meetings which are never about the art! Engineering restrictions can mean the work doesn't look quite like you want it to: it can look much heavier and inert than you originally planned and lightness is very important to my work. When you find good people to work with though, the results can be brilliant. Still, the perfect sculpture for me would be disembodied, and have no support – it would defy gravity!