

One Year On | A conversation between Lily Hall, Flora Bradwell, Archie Franks, Nicholas McLeod, Dominic North and Alex Virgi

42 Theoabald's Road | 26th January 2011

Lily Hall How did One Year On come about?

Nicholas McLeod It came about through a show that I set up in Camden last year. Someone who helped me to put that on suggested that I get in touch with Camden Council who run a pop up scheme, which is basically using derelict shops, or shops that haven't been leased in Camden...

(enter **Archie Franks** with chips)

...the council have set up a scheme to regenerate shops which haven't been leased in the borough, and to give young people an opportunity to showcase their work.

Flora Bradwell It's basically about regenerating empty spaces. Empty spaces look rubbish on the high street so I think their focus is more on filling 42 Theobold's Road with people and opening it up.

NM So we toyed around with a few ideas and submitted a proposal for an exhibition, which was rejected. But Alex Werchoff must have liked us because he gave me a ring and said, 'look if you want the space you need to include this, this and this in your proposal'.

FB We jazzed it up-

NM And I went to see one of the spaces that he suggested. I thought that it would actually be nice to have a residency in the space because we knew we would have to invigilate, and that it would be quite boring to be invigilating for 6 hours a day. We thought maybe if we came in and worked we wouldn't be losing studio time, which we're paying for, and also that it would give people coming to see the show a good insight. You can go and have a look around a show, and speak to the artists involved about their creative process. So that is kind of where it stemmed from. Flora and I knocked up a new proposal over a couple of weeks, sent it off to them, and we got the space.

FB And we got these guys on board because we went to college with them, and then we got Lily on board too.

NM So actually this has been going on for a quite a long time. Because we left City and Guilds in July 2009, and as of September I started to inquire about spaces like The Crypt in Kings Cross. Alex and I had been talking about putting a show on, but it is really difficult. There are loads of great spaces in London, but we found that if you are renting a space for a period of two weeks the average amount you pay is £500. If there were five artists involved then everyone would have to pay £100 each just to get the space, and then you start thinking about flyers and promotion and all the other costs. So this came up and seemed like a really good opportunity.

FB And in the year that Nick and Alex were thinking about putting on a show Lily and I were doing projects that involved empty shops and working with local councils. We were part of the largest empty shops project in Europe in Brixton Village Market in 2009-10. That was a useful experience to learn all the jargon to put into funding applications.

AV What I would say as well here is that having a curator has been really helpful. It allowed us to stand back and get a bit less precious about things, and have that curatorial insight coming from someone else, rather than fine artists trying to put something together and make it work between us.

FB Nick and I had done loads of the admin and initially we weren't sure how involved everyone would be. In the end everyone got really involved, and it was great because everyone was working together. But it would have been a worry if Nick and I had been putting the show on without the other artists' input and had then just decided to put all our own work in all the best places.

NM I think that was the whole point about the show. We decided midway through the negotiations with Camden Council that we would invite someone to curate. I agree that it is really important, especially if you are showing your own work, that you have someone completely impartial to come in. Otherwise it starts to become tinged with personal opinions about where your work should go and whose work it will be seen next to.

AV But there is also something nice about the space having a strong identity. Some of the work needed to go in a specific place, like Nick's woodshed painting going downstairs in that little room made sense, and nothing else would have worked in there.

LH Yes, if we had just had a clean white space we wouldn't have had the character of the building to work with or respond to.

NM When Flora and I came to see the space for the first time we saw the potential of it. Maybe because we had seen some of Alex's work in *The Future Can Wait* in November in the Shoreditch Town Hall, which is a completely derelict space. It's quite grimy and quite rotten. We felt the downstairs rooms here had a similar vibe and would create a good backdrop for our work, because of its bleak undertones.

AV Having that weird kitchen space adds to the way you view the show. There is a tap dripping almost as if it had just been abandoned, and it seems as though it shouldn't have been on view - as if it was the guts of the show, like the inner workings or the lungs of it. And then you go into the last room, under the pavement, which is completely grotty. People really enjoyed that, it was something different. Whereas the other half of the show is more like an archetypal gallery space, if you could say that.

NM As a viewer it's more interesting to have a show that you can explore and investigate.

AV I think that's something that is generally coming to the fore now: the role of a viewer and their interaction with the work. Like the James Terrell at White Cube and *Choreographing You* at the Hayward. People are being cajoled into actively exploring a show, rather than receiving it more passively.

NM I think that my work isn't ever 100% complete when it leaves my studio. When you finish the work and you leave it, it's not quite complete until a viewer has a response to it.

AV I had a lady who came up to me at the private view and talk about the *Abandonment* painting and she said, 'I am feeling a certain way about this, and why is that?' And I thought, 'Well I'm not your therapist, why are you asking me why you feel that?'

Archie Franks But you do have a certain level of control in the studio about what you want the reaction to be.

AV And it's very rare for you to go to a show and for the artist to be there. If someone is in the space with you it gives them a golden ticket to probe you about it. But you don't go to White Cube and Gregory Crewdson is just there chilling out...

FB Yes, I put Alex on the spot when a couple of friends came in and asked what his work was about. I said, 'the artist Alex is just in the corner' and they found his conversation very interesting and also thought he was good looking so bonus all round...

LH It's a year and half since you graduated, and the first time that you have shown together since then. Flora and I were talking about the connections between your work and how they might have shifted in the past year and a half. Have you noticed any changes or continuities within all of your work as a result of bringing it together for the show?

AV Yes Dominic, Nick and I were all in a studio together at college and had very similar ideas about painting and atmosphere. We are not working together any more but when we brought the work here we found that it still has really similar threads running through it. That was interesting to see.

FB I think tonally too - your shared palette. When we were hanging on the first day we brought Alex's *Grey Moon* together with Nick's *Abandonment* and it was scary how many links there were between those two paintings.

AV Paine's Grey...

NM We selected the five of us because we wanted to put a spanner in the works. It would be quite easy for representational artists like Dom and I to hang work together. There are obvious associations between the two. It was always intended to be a show about painting, but it wasn't about presenting works that just sit neatly next to each other, plonk, plonk, plonk. And I think if you interject Flora's clowns with Archie's new work and Dom's street scenes, together they're challenging and jolt the viewer in an exciting way.

FB When Nick and I were talking about this show initially, in the earliest stages, I thought of Archie, Dom and Alex's work as being more figurative. But when all the work came together I felt the figurative element of everyone's work had minimised. Alex's work had become much more about landscape. You felt his pieces talked more to Dom's traffic light on the traffic island. I felt as if the elements that I had initially thought we would be trying to combine had changed. Everyone is still working in a similar vein, but has moved on so much since we graduated. I was really surprised. Despite having seen everyone's work recently, when we brought it all together in the space it seemed different.

LH [To the others] Would you agree? Do you feel that you have generally shifted away from making figurative work?

AV I think a lot of it is to do with the situation of hanging the work together. I think if you viewed a series of works by just one of us you would come away with a different impression. I would agree that my work has shifted away from being overtly figurative and based in the genre of portraiture. But I think there is still a strong figurative element, and I look at a lot of paintings that are figurative. I have a sense that it is still a physical object that is being depicted, but in a far more ephemeral and far less literal way.

FB I think it's your *Droid* that more obviously references a portrait. And then you have the more structural painting there -

AV Yes and within the works on display here there is an evolution away from *Droid* and a point of making paintings based on portraiture. You can chart the progression.

LH Are you wary of putting them in categories [of landscape or figurative work]?

NM I think ultimately it is about paint. I know that is a broad and sweeping thing to say, but it really was and we really did feel that every artist that was invited to show their work uses paint in a unique way. It is interesting in terms of application as much as everything else. When I go to painting shows I am really interested in the surface and how paint is applied...So that gives a sense of what we wanted to achieve. Like with Archie's paintings, if you actually smell them they stink of paint - that that piney, turpsy smell of oil paint. And that is what we wanted to get across - that this is really a love and celebration of the medium.

AV But also, especially with Dom's work, you get a real sense of time spent in front of the object and this kind of bond that is formed with it. Would you agree with that? [to Dom]

Dominic North Definitely. If you are talking about genres of painting in quite a loose sense I feel that the urban landscapes were portraits. It was a certain homage to that bit of the landscape. Weirdly enough, the still lives became more like landscapes in that respect. From my perspective there is something very intimate about the way I paint, and I want to draw something beautiful from something that is very banal.

AV There is also a kind of slowing down when you look at the paintings. Even though some of Archie's work gives an iconic image or a recognisable form, when you look at how it is made you go beyond the formal quality of the composition and you look at the substance of it. You get sucked into it, and as a viewer you sort of slow down. I think that is the case with everybody's work here.

NM [quoting from the press release] "*There is a visceral appreciation of the medium of paint.*" It's a primal thing. It is chemistry and the way I paint in my studio, although I know nothing about chemistry, is about mixing things with oil and mixing things with water - mixing substances. When you squeeze paint out there is something about it that makes you want to....

AF ...paint.

NM And if you go and see a painting, whether it is a an old master or a contemporary work that uses paint in an interesting way, there is something about looking at paint applied to a canvas either with a brush or a finger or a stick or a rag or chucked or flicked or poured - there is just something really interesting about it. You can get really lost in it. You can look at so much work out there, and there are so many paintings that don't have anything to do with that appreciation or that excitement about the medium and the surface.

AV Although, you can forgo a lot of things about a painting and get stuck into its making and I think as makers it is so hard to find a middle ground and put a show on that is coherent. That gets us back to the point of having Lily here, to harness that.

AF It's interesting, City and Guilds is a painting college. I think everyone who went to that college had an interest in paint before they went, so three years of exploring painting made us the kind of artists that we are now. Most other colleges don't have the same emphasis on painting that City and Guilds does.

NM It's also this interest in a medium that is considered to be quite unfashionable, and then there are entrenched hierarchies within the medium. So oil paint is at the top and you have got acrylic paint under that and watercolour under that. Then you have hierarchies of subject matter, so portraiture is probably at

the top and landscape is quite low down, so woe betide you if you paint a landscape in watercolours- you're fucked.

LH Do you think those hierarchies still exist? are they still relevant?

NM Yes

LH Would any of you consider, or have you considered, working in a medium other than paint? Has that ever enticed you or excited you? There is a conversation we could have about being medium specific, or crossing between media...

AV Definitely, I was talking to Dominic the other night about film-making. I am quite interested in the idea of making a film. Dom and I both revel in the substance of paint, and I can imagine revelling in showing how a film is made, turning the camera on itself as it were, showing the skeleton of it. And you can apply a painting discourse to a number of media, like film-making. You can definitely think about making a piece of film or music or sculpture in a painterly way just as you can think about making a painting in a musical way. Terminology like rhythm, composition, tone, colour: you can talk about a piece of music like that.

FB And we found that when we hung Dom's work next to Alex's for this show the circles in Dom's work seemed to be singing to those in Alex's.

AV I think there are specific ideas that would work better in a video or a piece of music...

NM I'm interested in horror films and the way in which cinematography uses different devices to instil a sense of fear in the audience, and how you can try and articulate that in paint. But then you can use certain things like composition, and a slower or faster application of paint to articulate a sense of visual tension. You can do all kinds of things on the surface to make a literal translation from the devices and techniques that are used in cinema into paint. It's definitely plausible, and interesting to think and talk about it.

FB I would love to make work in other media. Lily and I have worked on different projects together in the past. We did this thing called the Museum of Ewetopia where we made a pop-up museum for a fictional history of Caledonian Road, and we made a short documentary as well. So we have approached different media and I would like to carry on doing that. But at the same time, I did crave painting.

NM Flora made two zoetropes for our grad show, and Alex experimented with painterly sculptures when we were at college.

FB That was all about trying new things, and I think that it's good to add a couple more strings to your bow or at least learn about different media. Learning about the process of editing film taught Lily and I so much. It's also fun to play about, we are all still really young and just eighteen months on from college and so the world is our oyster. We have a chance to think and experiment.

AV This is a group of people I would really like to continue working with. And there's a kind of ecstasy about paint.

FB [laughs]

AV There is...

LH Did anything in the show really surprise you? You've said that you were expecting the works to be difficult to hang together. I found it really great collaborating with you during the hang-

AV Yep

LH Having that conversation over a couple of evenings and thinking through how one work could speak to the next. But has there been anything that you really didn't expect from the show? And did that say anything new for you about your work?

AV The process of doing it was surprisingly painless and organic. There were things which happened, as I said Nick's painting in the basement; Archie's work next to mine, with Dom's landscape. It's just connections – making connections – that surprised me in a pleasant way.

FB I was really surprised actually about [Archie's] *Phone* reflecting Dom's traffic lights, because I wasn't there on Tuesday night and was actually getting quite nervous. I came in and we thought 'let's play about with it'. We put it there and Lily arrived and agreed. It was just that realisation-

AV I think it's nice when your work starts operating outside of its own picture plane, and opens a conversation with other pieces in the show. Suddenly it broadens it out.

AF It's nice not to see it on the studio floor.

FB [laughs]

NM That was something that was really exciting. It was also something that was quite daunting at the time, because from Monday we had just three days to install. But it's quite a rare opportunity to experiment with putting your work up, and then put someone else's work next to it and just see how they feed off each other. Either something completely doesn't work, or something shines out and helps to enhance the next. The whole way of showing Dom's tissue next to my painting - there were no real tonal similarities but there was just something that worked...

DN Paine's Grey, and white.

FB I was so shocked that my paintings were so bright in comparison. Because I was working in my studio where everything is really bright, double bright, and I thought 'right, I'm showing with these people, we've been to the space, and none of my work will even fit on the walls. I've got to make really small work for this show.' So I made small, quite subtle –

[Laughter]

FB I thought it was not very colourful. I was playing down the colour so much, and I was so tempted to crack out a bit more neon, put in a bit more colour.

AV I love the way you think 'I'm toning down' and then reach for a tube of fluorescent paint. I think that's a wonderful thing.

NM Compositionally in your other paintings there is a kind of vortex - there are people spinning round with arms and legs and pieces of material flying everywhere and your eye is constantly flicking around, whereas with these ones there's someone sitting stationary so your eyes can rest. But the other thing is that the sides of the canvas are painted neon and reflect onto the white wall. Which is something that I'm interested in in my work, trying to get this sensation of the canvas as a whole environment, the entire landscape –

FB Which works with your *Shed* in the small back room.

AV But I think one of the best positions of a painting in the show is Dom's Fairy Liquid bottle. That works really well. It looked completely lost by the other window, and yet in a bigger wall space it works. It has this classical, subdued elegance which works really well on this wall, with this window.

FB Because initially Lily was talking about reflecting the window. That's where it started.

AV But another thing is that we had to rely on the fact that we could make the spotlight work to even have that there. And that's what putting on things like this with a minimal budget is all about. You have to rely on pure determination, rather than everything already being in place.

NM As artists hanging our own work there is a real concern about putting it in the best possible light. I mean, no-one just wants to put a painting on the wall and say that'll do and see what happens. You've got five artists working together trying to put on the best show that they can. So everyone is really working to try and get the end goal of a really good show and private view.

FB I think we had a brilliant time. I wish I hadn't said 'I'm a clown on a chair' to camera.

LH There's a sense of anticipation in putting together a show and working towards the moment of the opening night, but since then you've had these residencies in the space, and you've been invigilating each day. How have you found the process of spending time with the show, with space to reflect on it since the opening?

FB I've personally felt quietly upbeat. I think two weeks is a really good length of time. I remember when Lily and I applied to do something else and they asked, 'can you do it for longer?' And we said no, because it would have lost its momentum. All of us also need to put time into it to keep the space open. Some members of the public coming in during the day have been bizarre, but you also get people who you know or have come specifically for the show. I had some good days.

NM I came in on the first Friday and Saturday, and I didn't look at anything here and think, 'you know what that should be over there, or that should be downstairs'. There were no changes I wanted to make and I think that's amazing. It's really interesting because when I've done other shows in the past I've thought, 'mmm... maybe that would have been better there' or 'I would have liked to put something else there instead of that one', but I really haven't.

AV It would have been nice to have a bit more of Archie's work.

NM But I think the show really came together. There was a really worrying period around Tuesday night when we wondered whether we had enough work...

FB Then there was a worry that all the clowns were together but to be honest the clowns are quite abrasive compared to all the other paintings and their colour tones.

AV They're in conversation.

FB I have to say I wanted to come here with a little cotton bud and some turps and just clean up that painting because I did not think it was going to get shown at all, and now it's everyone's favourite, because it's looser. That's something I need to work on.

AV It's much more fluid. It reminded me of a kind of Otto Dix.

FB Absolutely I've been looking at his stuff-

AF Have you thought about using watercolour?

FB No. I find it flat and upsetting to use. I find it hard because I'm used to building up from dark to light, and with watercolour the shading is a reverse process.

AV I think that we're coming back to what Lily was saying about a hierarchy with painting media. OK there are rules for watercolours, but fuck that and do what you want. If you get some decent quality watercolours and just sit down with them and have it out - you can do it in an individual way.

AF I think watercolours would really suit your work-

FB I find them hard to play with-

AV Try working from dark to light with watercolours, try it. Try using it in impasto, you never know what will happen. I think that's what's great about being in a show. It's like a forum isn't it? You can have fresh ideas with people because all your work's together in a space. And there's going to be someone else who's there to say, 'actually have you thought about this?' And that's gold dust in terms of what we do, having left college.

FB Yes, leaving college and being outside of that environment – except you [to Archie] have gone straight to the Royal Academy.

AF Well we have so much feedback and so many crits, it means that it becomes part and parcel of what you do. I guess if you're not having so much critical feedback about your work then it's really good to have something like this every now and again. I really like having a lot of feedback.

FB I've found it quite liberating, because at college I wanted a crit at every given opportunity. Going to my studio was like a cold turkey from the crits and then suddenly I said, 'no, I will do what I want to do' and that was actually quite liberating. But then after a little while you do get a bit lonely and you want to ask someone, 'do you like it?'

LH It would be good to talk a bit about what's coming next, after this, and whether you think that you will show together in the future. And if you do, what might you do differently?

DN I think I'd be more than happy to show with you guys again. We'd have to put works together in a way that would be coherent, and the only thing that I'd do differently is make more and better work. I think my work has slowed down over the past year because I was having some problems, the fruits of which I've expressed in these three quite quick paintings that I showed upstairs. But I'd like to express that more in the future. So that would be the only thing that I would change. I'd make more work off the back of the struggle that I've been having.

LH How do you feel about making new work in response or in relation to the show?

DN I'd like to learn from each others' practices when it came to showing, and have feedback then, but when it comes to it I'd rather just make my own work so that it wholly expresses what I want from it, having perhaps drawn from the show.

AF I've got another show coming up, but yeah I'd love to show together again. I'd do work that I thought was better. It's nice to work with people when you like their work. We all have similar interests and enjoy working together.

NM But do you feel that you've gained something from the show?

AF Yeah, it was nice partly because I've got another show and it took the pressure off that, and it was nice to show outside of the normal college environment. A totally different light.

FB I can understand that. Nick?

NM What's coming up next is hopefully more of the same. As an artist you really want to get your work out there but living in London it's really, really difficult to do unless you're signing up for competitions or exhibitions that you have to submit to and pay a fee and those fees keep totting up, which has made me think I want to be a bit more pragmatic and actually do my own thing. So hopefully there'll be more of just getting out there and getting a space with a group of artists who are also really interested in what they're doing. I think we've found a good group of people here and hopefully we can expand from that, and get some other artists involved from different colleges that have the same mentality as us - hard working and willing to put their backs into it. I think as an artist as self promotion goes it's pretty rough and you have to work hard. So hopefully we will move on to another project, another exhibition, with some other people on board, not just City and Guilds. *Two Years On*. Getting people to know about the exhibition, come and have a look at the paintings and engage with the show is the most important thing. And then to branch out from that and move on.

AV I agree with Nick in terms of expanding the roster of artists that we work with. This has given me a buzz for putting on shows and being involved in the process and I think it would be a lovely thing to do, to approach people from degree level who've just graduated. I think that will widen our horizons quite a lot. I'd be really interested to stand back without my work in the exhibition and look at it from a curator's point of view. Maybe talk to Lily about what she's learning. I was talking to Nick about it the other day and I think that would be a lovely thing. Then I think like the other guys it's about making new paintings and showing. Maintaining contacts and making new ones. I've got the opportunity to take my work to Hong Kong, which is exciting.

FB I can't wait to get back to the studio and work on some new ideas. And I'd love to do another show with everyone. Although you forget about all the neuroses and the trips to Robert Dyas, the lights smashing, Nick saying it's going to be awful. I'd love Lily to curate more shows I think she did a bloody good job.

NM I think I felt quite bad about dragging you after a nine hour day at college to curate our show at seven o'clock and making you stay here til about eleven...

LH Well I wanted to say thank you because actually it's such a privilege, you'd organised everything and brought it all together, so for me it's been the nice process of hanging the works. It's been really great for me to work on the show alongside college, with you in this space.

FB I know Lily's a girl and she's the curator but I'm the only female artist so for me it was a bit like a girl among the boys. I'd love to do another show together I think it would be fun but maybe let's be realistic and give ourselves a little holiday.