

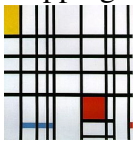
How to understand my work

People who come to my exhibitions and events are often bemused. Although they love the flamboyant colours and bold images, folk often make this comment: “Lovely colours, Jon, but I really don’t understand your work”.

There’s not a great deal to understand, and I hope these three pages will help you to look at my paintings in the spirit in which they were created. I hope you will find this to be an open-hearted and down to earth spirit.

There are as many different approaches to art as there are artists, but here are a few examples:

- Depicting something to look as exactly as possible like the real thing. This is called “trompe l’oeil” (French for ‘trick of the eye’). Here is a well-known example by Pere Borrell del Caso.
- Drawing attention to the intrinsic beauty of a particular material, by presenting the material “unworked”, as plainly as possible, so the viewer is forced to notice the properties of the material. Known as “minimalist” art, Carl Andre’s “Equivalent VIII” (a.k.a. “Pile of Bricks”) is one of the most well known examples of such work.
- Depicting a scene in a true-to-life style, but idealised, made to look “extra-beautiful”. Portraits and landscapes are often treated this way. Such landscape paintings are often referred to as “picturesque”, and Claude Lorrain is acknowledged as one of the founders of this style.
- Stripping away the “superficial” reality of a subject, in an attempt to reveal a deeper spiritual truth, or a magical “parallel universe” which accompanies us unseen. This is an approach known as “abstract expressionism”, and the well known artist Piet Mondrian painted in this way.
- Other artists follow a technique known as “expressionism”, in which the “reality” of the world is overlaid with a raw emotion, or passion. Vincent Van Gogh is widely acknowledged to have been one of the founders, and masters, of this methodology.



My own approach to painting has more in common with the expressionists than any other movement: I simply try to paint “how I feel”. I’m not particularly concerned with whether the outcome has any “classical beauty”, or whether it would look good over someone’s mantel-piece. I’m more concerned as to whether it is a genuine expression of my state of mind as I paint. For example, here is an angry painting:

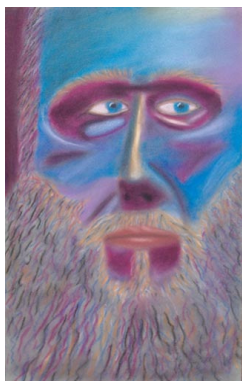


Note how I have used angry colours, and aggressive gestures and weapons, to put the emotion across.

See also how I’ve also used a scary imagined demonic creature, rather than painting anything real: something from a story rather than from reality.

I use stories, or bits of stories, quite often.

And here is a sad painting:



Note how I have used sad colours, and have distorted the features to emphasise the feeling. Small scared eyes hiding away beneath heavy, brooding brows.

See also how I've used the beard to add movement to the picture. Is it the life draining away from the face, or is it dark fragments emerging from an underworld to persecute a victim?

Here's something happy:



This is about the emotions inspired by watching my baby son grow. It looks very abstract. On the left a positive light energy seems to be pushing up, but on the top right a heavy darker red energy seems to be pushing the light down.

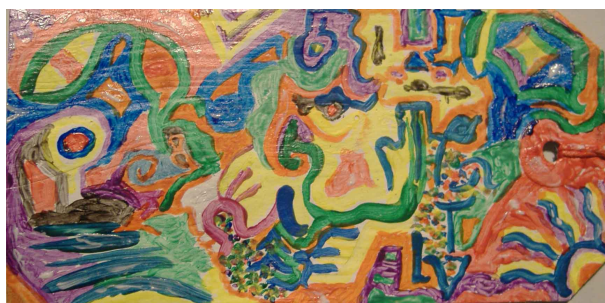
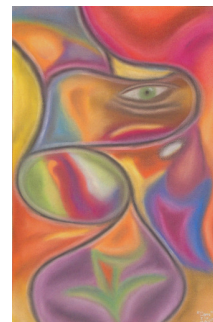
The form of this painting is taken from several sketches of my son learning to crawl, his arms pushing up, fighting against the gravity which is keeping his feet on the ground. This is something I use quite often in my work: shapes and lines and directions drawn from real life, but simplified or

re-arranged to help to tell the emotional story.

And here's something painful:



Mostly, my emotional reactions to things are more complicated. This is a portrait of a friend. A complex man with whom I have a complex friendship.



This is my reaction to a friend's wedding. Lots of emotions going on here. Joy, sadness, celebration, hope, concern, the building of new things, the demolishing of old things. All thrown together in a turbulent hotch-potch.

I do other things as well as paint. I play music, write poetry, organise events. I like things that involve and include other people, and I try to make and do things that children enjoy, as children are so often disregarded in cultural events. But whatever I do, however complicated, grandiose and obscure a project may seem, it will always be rooted in the immediacy of emotional expression.

I like to be playful with my work. I think art should be fun, not all serious analysis and painstaking attention to detail.

On a recent visit to Australia, my daughter clambered onto a sculpture in the centre of Canberra. I was busy telling her off when an Australian friend intervened: “Hey, she’s OK on there. We’re not too precious about our art here. We just see it as glorified playground equipment”. I like that attitude.

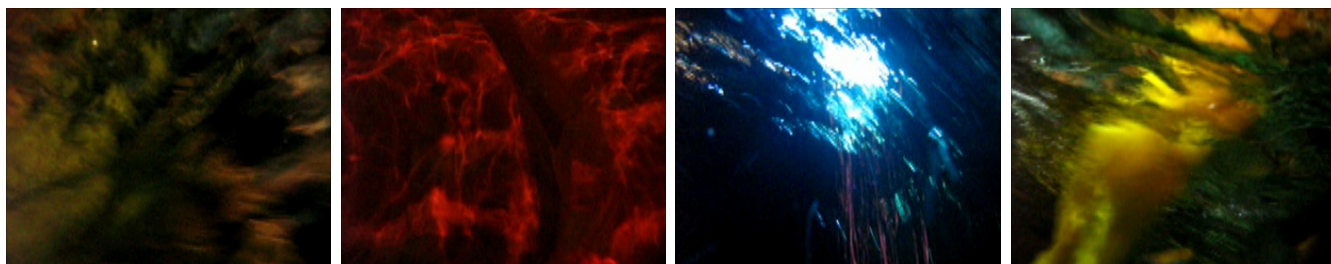


I enjoy experimenting, especially trying to find new ways of combining music, text, dance and image. It’s fun! Here’s a couple of digital text-paintings. I like the way that modern “digital darkroom” software can be used in unexpected and unconventional ways. I’ll probably make some more of these, I like them.



What comes out of my experiments is sometimes dreadful, often mediocre, but occasionally sublime.

Here are some images from a project entitled “Aquaphonics”, a collaboration with Helen JS Edwards and the Oxford Improvisers Orchestra. These images are photographs taken underwater by Alfie Bowen:



What I like about these images is that they are so full of colour and expression, all the many and complex emotions that went into, and came out of, aquaphonics ... yet the technique of producing these pictures seems to have been completely random. There’s something almost supernatural about the way the photographs emerged from the project, and about the images themselves.

Here’s a story-painting, not exactly illustration, not exactly a painting that stands on its own. Packed full of emotion, it expresses my reaction to various challenging life events.



And here’s an image from an event that tells another story.

I try to paint quickly, to capture the moment before it passes. With music I improvise, striving to capture the immediacy of my experience. Because of this, my works will never be grand masterpieces, but I don’t care, because I’m not trying to create grand masterpieces. I’m trying to paint, write, perform, record my raw experience of life as I go through it. Maybe, at the end of my life, the whole story in paintings, music, rituals, sculptures and poems might add up to one small masterpiece. That would be nice!