

INTERVIEW WITH MIKE NICHOLSON, ARTIST AND 'ZINE' CREATOR

First published in *Cassone the International Online Magazine of Art and Art Books*, December 2011
<http://www.cassone-art.com/magazine/article/2011/12/mike-nicholson-making-statements-about-our-society/?psrc=interviews>

Mike Nicholson is an artist, illustrator, lecturer and successful self-publisher of 'zines'; mini-magazines that are created by artists, graphic designers and illustrators in limited editions. The list of patrons for his series of zines, published since 2000, is impressive, including the Tate, the V&A, and All Saint's Library Special Collection at Manchester Metropolitan University, Leeds School of Art Library and Smith College Rare Book Room, Massachusetts, USA.

As a newcomer to 'zine world' to me it sounded like a word-of-mouth activity, channelled through publishing book fairs, such as the London Art Books Fair, held at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, where I met Mike Nicholson in September. The stature of the museum, university and gallery collectors' of his work confirms that it is obviously much more than that. It made me want to find out more about his career, his motivation, and why zines are his chosen form of art expression. He admitted that zines can be seen as a 'low rent' form of art. 'Certainly it has long been associated with cheaply-made, multiple-copy material of a sensitive or 'underground' nature, with content that might challenge the status quo. It's commonly linked to movements like the 'punk' music scene either side of the Atlantic, but also forms a strong part of the tradition of, for instance, late 20th Century feminism. Smith College, in Massachusetts hold an archive of Feminist zines'.

Since 1997 Mike has been teaching at degree level, specialising in graphic design and illustration, at the University of Creative Arts in Epsom, Surrey. In common with many freelance illustrators, artists and designers, this is a supplemental income. Mike's profile as an illustrator has leant itself to working on such courses, while his other career as a storyboard artist has proven useful on Animation and Media courses, some at MA level. His recent self-publishing and storytelling has informed lecturing for various design courses, at both BA and MA level, where a revival of interest in books and narrative is underway.

I wanted to know the background to Mike Nicholson's choice of profession and how it came to be. Born and brought up in the Lake District he attended a state comprehensive school that encouraged an active involvement in the arts. This led from a Foundation course to St Martin's School of Art in the early 1980s. Mike recalls it as a heyday: 'It was a robust, creatively invigorating experience. My natural ability to draw from – or reflect – life in representational ways evolved into an illustrative style that was sympathetic to material reflecting modern society. A mainstay of my income was work for magazines like *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, and *Time Out*. Later, the interpretive act of taking a film director's ideas to create a set of drawn storyboards was merely a variation of how to use my skills.'

The publication of Mike's first zine came about as a result of working in these commercial spheres, 'both (illustration and storyboarding) of which are to varying degrees collaborative endeavours', he explains.

It spurred him on to create visual work that was more personal, and as he says, more than that, 'to align my visuals to written words that were also mine'. He had aspired to write since childhood, in fact.

Now living in North London – the postcode is embedded in his publications 'Ensixteen editions' - he first exhibited in collaboration with the noted Danish book artist Mette Ambeck, at The London Artists Book Fair (LAB) in 2000, held at the Barbican. While zine publishing was then a minor distraction from his work as illustrator, storyboard artist and art school lecturer it became in his words, 'the most satisfying thing I've ever done'.

The question in my head was why Mike preferred the zine, to creating paintings, drawings or etchings? His response was candid, 'I suppose it reveals a preference, though, more truthfully, print studio processes and painting failed to engage me, or more truthfully still, I simply wasn't that good at them. My strengths really lay elsewhere . . . the bite of ink into virgin paper.'

The visual look of his autobiographical editions - he calls them '*bio auto graphic*' and they form the core of his self-published 'zine' work - is entirely absorbed with the use of his drawing skills, even down to the detail of hand-written text. He explained his working process:

'The fact that I have used a stripped-down black line – as opposed to the full-colour pencils which I used for my early professional illustration career – results from the secondary career of storyboarding, where images tended to be demanded as simple, bold line work. No colours. Storyboards are created to simply communicate the director's vision of the script (their planned shot composition and angle, details of character and location etc.).

It took me back to my default setting of line-work – the way I worked since childhood, inspired by a love of American comic books - greats of that world like Will Eisner and, book illustration masters like Arthur Rackham'. Using simple line forces you to make exhilarating choices as to what you put down and what you leave out. It also lends itself to the cheap printed format – the 'zine aesthetic' if you will - though that's a designation of the work that others have applied to it, but which I didn't particularly seek out. The quality of reproduction even in basic copy shops is amazingly good nowadays'.

Mike does not have a specific target audience in mind but perhaps surprisingly there are less younger buyers than one would imagine; he explains that 'some passing youngsters at fairs [suggest] that 'there's too many words' – comments that he does not dignify with a response. 'I think that there's a significant proportion of those who buy that are surprised they're buying it and aren't necessarily people who've ever read that sort of material. I just want people to think more about what I think are important matters; society's lack of morality, the media's poisonous values, the divisiveness of commerce. Though there *are* occasional laughs, too'.

I was curious to find out if all the publications are limited editions, and they are, but Mike is particular, ‘I tend not to produce more than 100 copies at initial printing, mostly for financial reasons. Several titles have gone to a second printing once they’ve sold out. A couple I have kept to very limited editions, but I don’t tend to get too precious about it. If people seem to want more of a certain title, I make more.

During fairs there’s a simple hierarchy of how I exhibit or place the editions on the table – emphasizing the newer material.’

He continues to work in partnership with Mette Ambeck at book fairs, and clarifies the relationship, ‘Mette and I are partners in book fairs as well as life. At first the choice to exhibit alongside one another was a pragmatic, cost-cutting one. It has now simply become the way we feel comfortable doing it, though we have on occasion exhibited separately. We complement each other’s approach and work; hers tied to a fine level of skill and execution, a subtle choice of materials; mine driven by simple levels of production but complex and passionate in other ways. Currently the book fairs are Mike’s main exhibiting platform because they are spaced across the year and fit in with his lecturing work. But he points out that – theoretically – his blog www.ensixteeneditions.blogspot.com brings an audience of thousands more, directly to him.

I wanted to know more about the subject matter in his zine publications. It is clear that they are a personal comment on ‘life’ in the 21st century, as he explains, ‘My editions reflect where I live, how I live, the things I see around me and what I think about them – how it *all connects*. At my age (49) I think they are a kind of ongoing collective statement on our society, both locally and globally; the corrosive values that are hammered into our children, the venality and pervasive greed – masked as aspiration – that leaves so many people apparently so unhappy; the wilful ignorance of fundamentalist religion.’

He considers that personal responsibility has taken a back-seat and people don’t try and understand each other often enough, or think through the consequences of what they do. He targets business, the government, and the church and media hierarchies. ‘It’s a rich buffet to choose from and we continue to live in interesting times.’ However, he is quick to point out that humour is an important factor and an incisive tool in his editions.

Mike’s latest project steps away from the zine format as he works with renowned letterpress guru and typographer David Jury on a volume that will meditate, as he explains, ‘on the chasm that lies between what is perceived to be ‘art’ and what is seen to be ‘craft’ – producing two strands of material that will be combined in one edition. Jury’s production is closely aligned to values of considered material and robust standards of print process, so this exciting territory for me. It will be a large, tastefully-made and limited edition’.

Inspiration for this project came from a variety of sources including Grayson Perry’s current exhibition at The British Museum and email interviews with creators - from jazz musicians to ceramicists – which Mike has instigated and collected. Future editions in the ‘bio auto graphic’ series are also planned.

And what more is there for the future? They are, as one might expect, both varied and explorative, in line with the intensity of his subject matter, ‘I intend to gather together certain

of the past material – along thematic lines, probably – into an edition possibly printed via the ‘p.o.d’ route [print on demand].

‘This would conform more to the notion of a traditional ‘book’, a softback running to 100 pages plus, which would sell for a higher cover price than the usual ‘zine’ format. It would allow me to revisit certain sequences, in a kind of ‘director’s cut’ way, perhaps enhance or alter the images or writing in ways that have niggled me since initial (self-) publication’. He adds that he sees it as: ‘Nothing major, just a finessing of detail’, a statement that could sum up Mike Nicholson’s coolly appraised view of life, succinctly drawn upon for his zine publications.

Ends

Rosalind Ormiston

Independent Art Historian, London

November 2011

Note on Mike Nicholson

His work can be viewed at www.enxteeneditions.blogspot.com

Mette Ambeck’s work can be seen at www.ambeckdesign.blogspot.com