



bernini_theresa_face_front.jpg (JPEG Image, 446x482 pixels)

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Rupert Shrive

After St. Theresa

3rd March - 6th April 2010

MORTON METROPOLIS



'Every act of creation
is first an act of destruction'

- Pablo Picasso

A Conversation with Rupert Shrive by Michael Peppiatt

The following conversation took place in Rupert Shrive's studio beside the Canal Saint-Martin, an area of placid waterways and footbridges where Paris momentarily turns into a mini-Amsterdam. Every morning by first light Shrive shuts himself away in his functional, glass-roofed room to juggle fragmented memories into images, testing the possibilities of painting anew.

Shrive has lived and worked in many of the places I know best, from Soho to Spain, Venice to Paris. Our talk began as if we had all the time in the world, continuing over lunch in a funky, canalside restaurant and touching amiably on everything from mornings-after at the 'Coach and Horses' to fireworks in Valencia until all of sudden - like a photographer who knows he will only get his picture if he releases the shutter now - I snapped the tape-recorder on.

MP: Rupert, I feel a strong sense of mortality in the works you're showing in London. They come across as frozen and full of fragility.

RS: Well, I try to capture fleeting moments, fleeting presences, like the faces you see flickering up in a fire. So the impermanence of things is certainly there, but for me they're like people you glimpse for a moment, people who suddenly rise up out of the dark - as they do in a nightclub, for instance - then fade away. So it's also about the mysterious way appearance blurs. That fascinates me, and it's very difficult to capture in a painting.

M: So they're more to do with taking portraits into a different dimension. You said that seeing a Rauschenberg show at the last Venice Biennale kick-started a new series.

R: Absolutely. I call that series 'configurations'. They're collages made from pieces of paintings that I failed to turn into one of the crushed paintings.

I've got lots of these things lying around the studio, and I was going to throw them out. But then I started playing around and reassembling them, and that came out of Rauschenberg's 'Glut' series. Rauschenberg picked things up from the junkyard and composed them into structures which he then stuck on the wall, and I found them very moving.

M: So are yours a junkyard of faces, would you say? (Laughter). I see them as very tender, sensitive things, as if you're peeling back the skin of appearance to show the strangeness of a human face and the head beneath.

R: Well, I myself sometimes wonder if they don't look as if they'd been to too many plastic surgeons.... But what I'm always after is some kind of connection between the various elements, whether it's the eyes being aligned in a certain way or other features being connected by a colour. Something has to tally, so you push these things around until you get a harmony between the parts, where they lock together.

M: The collages form one part of the exhibition, and then you have the 'crushed' paintings.

R: Yes. I've always been interested in trying to extend the normal life of a two-dimensional painting. One of my great interests is portraiture and I did very classic portraits at one point. But since then I've wanted

to take portraiture to another place, another level - to find an extra lease for it. I tried doing this first years ago when I was working in Soho. I ripped up some drawings in a rage and when they were on the floor I realised that if you shuffled five or six pieces around you could turn them into what I then termed 'visual anagrams'. The variety was extraordinary.

M: I suppose you have an extra freedom in the sense that you've already done the hard work of actually trying to capture a likeness or whatever it is when you're painting a portrait classically, and then you have these discarded images which you can shuffle into a new pack of cards.

R: Exactly. That's what it felt like, that's where things began and I realised that having explored the visual anagrams I was lucky enough to come across another method - of screwing things up, crushing them, and that seemed a more violent and dynamic way of recreating things.

M: Is it a pleasurable process? You don't feel any pain in the way that you're maltreating your own work. Is it sadistic - or masochistic?

R: No, no, it's not pleasurable. Generally if I'm working on a series I prevaricate on the day when I'm going to start crushing. Because I know I've got, say, six paintings ready, flat paintings, and I know I've painted them as well as I possibly can...

M: And you're fond of them...

R: Yes, you've put a lot of feeling and thought into them. So I prevaricate, I lie to myself about when I'm going to deal with them.

M: But you know you're going to do it?

R: Well, I want to do it. Because I've discovered this way of working, and I know for example if I've got a crushed painting on the wall next to a flat one, when I look at the flat one there's something missing. The extra dimension the crushed one has got is asking me to pop it out into that multi-faceted thing. So I know I want to do it, and yes, as you say, it is painful and I'm always very scared when I start crushing them and it's very risky because you only have so many movements you can make before you've lost the big dynamic crush that you're going for. I want it to look as if it's been crushed in one strong movement, one bold movement, not fussily...

M: Do you think you've become an expert crusher now?

R: (Laughter) Well, you know things go wrong sometimes, and then they're irretrievable, they're completely doomed... but there again they end up in the pile which might be recycled into the configurations.

M: So you have to gauge very carefully the moment when you stop crushing.

R: Yes, it's very tricky, very hazardous, because at the beginning it sort of feels alright, and then as you're doing it you become increasingly aware that the more you move it around the less dynamic it's going to look, the more fussy it's going to look, so the tension mounts and it's not an agreeable feeling. You feel very anxious.

M: You worry you could take it over the top yet at the same time you've got to be bold.

R: Exactly, and that's the real pleasure. If it works it's a very sharp

surprise. It suddenly jumps out at you. It's a very precise, tangible thing. It is quite fragile but it's also a physical thing, You're wrestling with it on the floor, with a corner of it under one foot... I do a preliminary sort of large crush and then I attach it at the back and put it on the wall and shuffle it around a bit further if I can.

M: How long does this process take?

R: Well the first main crush might take ten, fifteen minutes. But I might then leave it on the wall for a little bit, then tinker with it every now and again.

M: And by definition you've no idea of what you're going to get or what you want. You just want some kind of image coming out that you feel is right...

R: Yes, the image just seems to assert itself. I mean there are things you look out for. I always try to preserve the features, I want to be able to see the eyes, and obviously crushing can blot out the eyes. What I'm looking for is an image that the spectator has to walk round. I think El Greco, who's a painter I particularly admire, wanted that too. El Greco didn't believe in the static spectator. You know how with Piero della Francesca, with the 'Baptism' in the National Gallery say, there really is a particular point where you have to stand and then this glorious geometric harmony falls into place. Well, you don't get that with El Greco, his compositions catch your eye as you walk past, they're flickering flames of composition that take your eye up, largely heavenwards, and I like that very much, and it's something I particularly want to explore.

M: I suppose that was a change in the history of art, I mean you've

got the Baroque age where movement comes into play. It's a change of faith, a change of man's position in the world even, that God rather than being in one fixed place with a fixed harmony is everywhere. It's a kind of dissolution of fixed values... But in the show there are some collages, the crushed paintings...

R: And some photographs. They're compositions I make on the studio floor with objects, but it's all largely related, if anything they're more like fetishes or 'primitive' art. You're looking out for images by shifting around bits of fur and plastic bags, twine and leaves, bits of food and string, anything that you happen to find.

M: Do you feel a bit like a child at play? Nietzsche said that as adult writers or artists or philosophers we have to find the seriousness that we had as children at play. A kind of total engagement. But to come to something a bit different, am I right in thinking that you do almost exclusively women?

R: There are a few self-portraits in the show.

M: Just you and the women...

R: That's how we like it (Laughter). I have painted men but less successfully, I just haven't been very pleased with them. The reason I've used quite a lot of geishas is that they already have a mask - a very perfect mask of red, black and white. And of course white is very good for crushing because it creates very strong cast shadows. And also just the immaculateness of it, the purity, creates a dynamic tension when one actually despoils or abuses it as it were.

M: So your primary sources are geishas as well as St Theresa.

R: Yes, the St Theresa of Bernini's sculpture in Rome - the ecstasy of Santa Teresa.

M: Are all the women ecstatic in some way?

R: There is an element of that.

M: Do you think they're erotic?

R: I hope so, I want the girls to look strong and... what do I want... (Laughter)... I was going to say I want them to look challenging but no, I want them to catch your eye, I want them to look at you.

M: Do women react sometimes in a negative fashion to your crushed portraits?

R: Not as much as I feared.

M: They don't think you're attacking them?

R: I certainly don't like to think I've got anything particular to say like that.

M: You don't feel aggressive towards them?

R: No, Lord no, quite the opposite. There is an element of idealism in them, but as I say I want them to look fleeting, almost like spirits ...

M: Are they heroines? Or saints?

R: They're distributed about the wall in a way that seems like a constellation...

M: So they are goddesses to an extent, you're putting them in the heavens as it were.

R: I quite like them fairly high on the wall, yes.

M: And are they destroying themselves in their ecstasy? I mean I wonder if this is their last moment. You've disfigured them as far as you can ...

R: Well no, I think they're enhanced.

M: You're their admirer.

R: To an extent. I'm trying to listen to them, they talk to me in their own way. It's difficult to talk about it because I don't have many benchmarks, I can't look at many other artists for clues, so sometimes I really don't know which way they're going and that's why I say they do talk to me themselves. I feel that there are moments when something happens and it seems to have come from nowhere really. Again it's all about listening to chance and accident and responding accordingly. You know all about that.

M: But you create your own chance and accident.

R: You set the scene... I don't know if it happens to you as a writer, but it happens to me all the time. I discover something in the studio, some way of working, some shape, some combination of something, and I promise you within half an hour of leaving the studio I see the same thing there on the street that I'd never noticed before.

M: That is a state of grace and it's very exciting.

R: Exactly, you're trying to set a scene where these things can happen.

M: And then they do happen.

R: If you're lucky. They don't happen every day .

M: Do you mean that you see something that you can incorporate in your work? Life gives you the clue... Have you ever done any commissioned crushed portraits?

R: No, I haven't. People have asked me but I'm very reluctant to do that. You get caught up in the situation where people want to look good, and although I like to think that they do look good, if I was expected to do this it would be strangulating. You'd be worried about preserving particular features, you wouldn't want to make their nose too big or too small or whatever.

M: And you want to create the excitement of a portrait that changes as you move around it, you see different angles and different shadows being formed. And you use a paint that catches the light as much as possible...

R: I sometimes use metallic paints, but I certainly use lots of varnishes, thick acrylic gels which catch the light wonderfully and combine with the works' three-dimensionality. And if in the end they don't quite work I know I can then recycle them into configurations.

M: Well, Rupert, I think that brings us full circle.

St. Theresa of Avila (1515 - 1582)

“I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron’s point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it, nor is one’s soul content with anything but God. This is not a physical but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it - even a considerable share.”

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Sculptures



Tricorn, 2009

Acrylic and varnish on brown paper, polyurethane,
122 x 65 x 56 cm





Congregation (after Bernini), 2010

7 elements, acrylic and varnish on brown paper, polyurethane

Dimensions variable







Wallpaper diptych, 2008

Acrylic and varnish on brown paper and wallpaper

210 x 310 x 12cm (framed)





Hemisphere, 2009

Acrylic and varnish on brown paper, polyurethane

30 (diameter) x 15 cm





Blonde diptych, 2009

Acrylic and varnish on brown paper

154 x 230 x 18 cm (framed)



Congregation (after Bernini), 2010

5 elements, acrylic and varnish on brown paper, polyurethane

Dimensions variable



St. Theresa study (after Bernini), 2009
Acrylic and varnish on brown paper, polyurethane
96 x 58 x 28 cm





Couple, 2009

Acrylic and varnish on brown paper, polyurethane

33 x 33 x 8 cm





Small St. Theresa study, 2009

Acrylic and varnish on brown paper, polyurethane

25 x 16 x 9 cm





Triptych, 2009

Acrylic and varnish on paper,
45 x 128 x 7 cm (framed)

Veiled study, 2009

Acrylic and varnish on brown paper, polyurethane, plastic bag

33 x 14 x 7 cm



Venus in furs, 2008
Acrylic on brown paper, fake fur
43 x 30 x 25 cm





East wind, 2010
Acrylic and varnish on paper, polyurethane
53 x 28 x 15 cm



West wind, 2010
Acrylic and varnish on paper, polyurethane
51 x 25 x 18 cm



Configurations

Vermillion blonde configuration
Acrylic on brown paper
132 x 108 cm



Mercury blonde configuration
Acrylic on brown paper & pvc
149 x 102 cm



Monocular configuration
Acrylic on brown paper
153 x 74 cm



Noisy blonde configuration
Acrylic on brown paper and pvc
145 x 87 cm



S.P. configuration
Acrylic on brown paper
109 x 84 cm



Girl on phone configuration
Acrylic on brown paper
107 x 90 cm



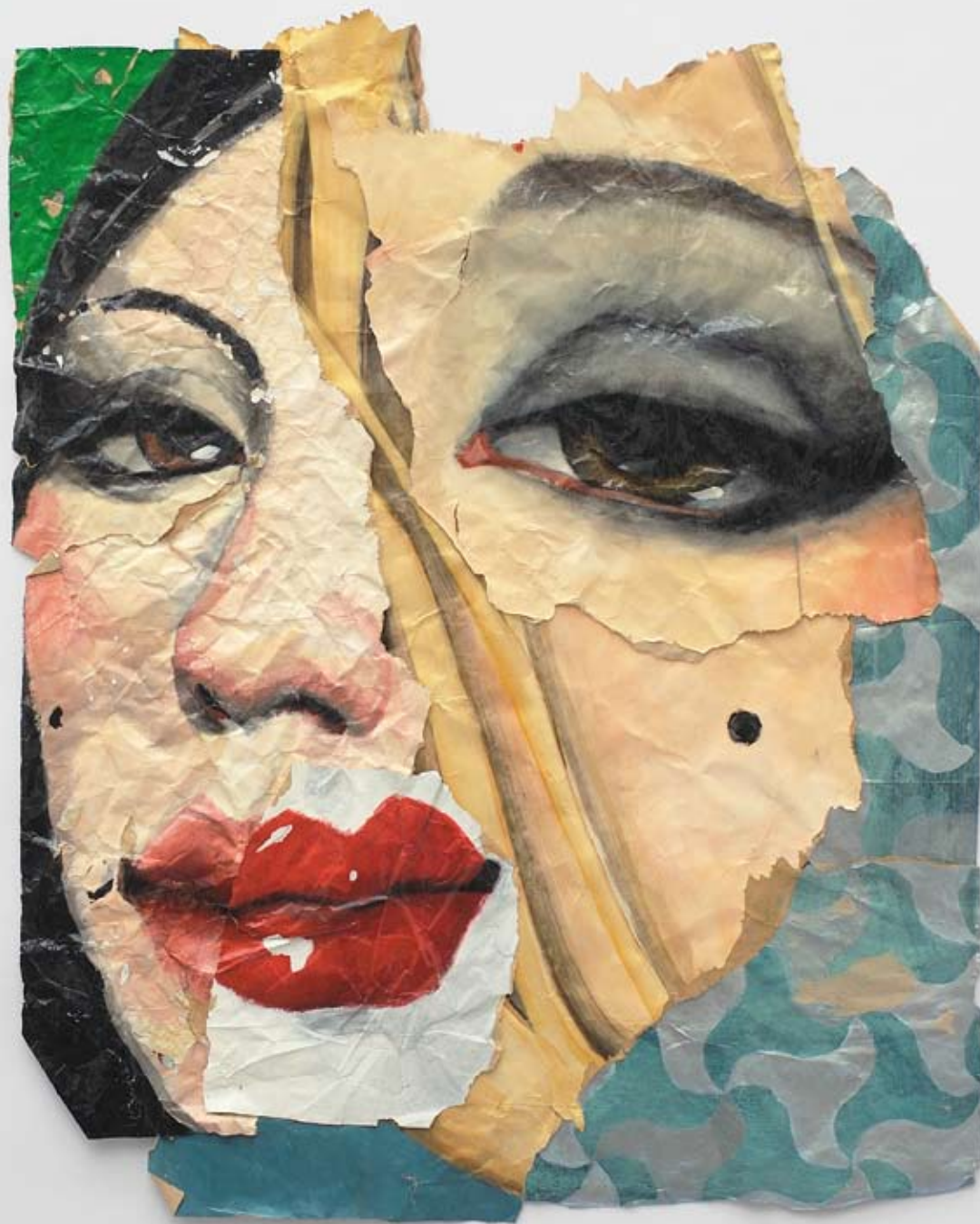
Tattoo configuration
Acrylic on brown paper
147 x 117cm



Red favourite configuration
Acrylic on brown paper and pvc
138 x 110 cm



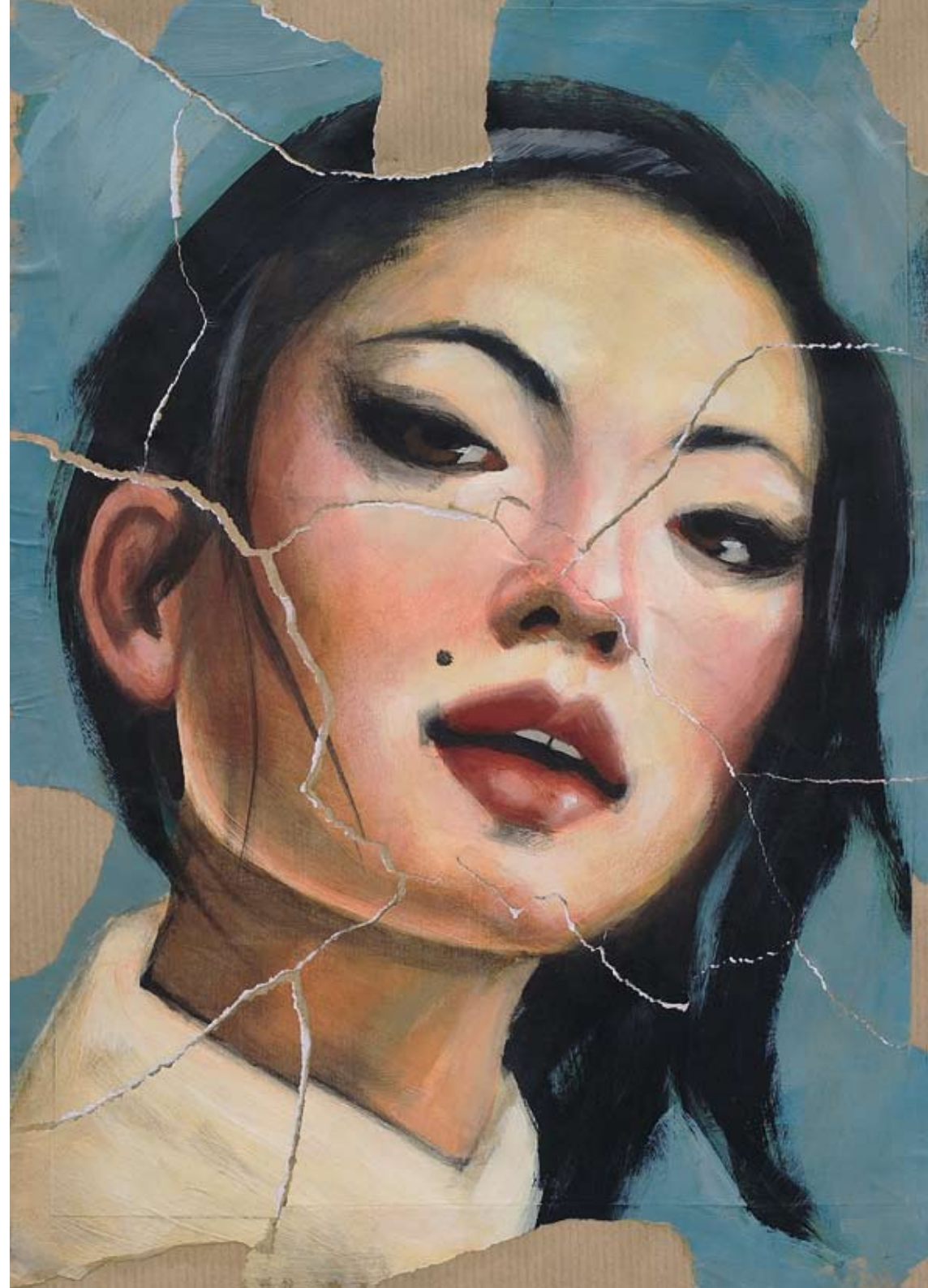
Spanish configuration
Acrylic on brown paper
117 x 93 cm



Fragmented study, 2010
Acrylic on brown paper
167 x 119 cm



Small fragmented study, 2010
Acrylic on brown paper
33.5 x 23.5 cm





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DEF GHI

Love Songs

Heads, Feet, and Faces

Somewhere beyond the sea, 2009
Giclee print, edition of 12
35.5 x 23.5 cm



Fly me to the moon, 2009
Giclee print, edition of 12
35.5 x 23.5 cm



Besame mucho, 2009
Giclee print, edition of 12
35.5 x 23.5 cm





(You make me feel like) a natural woman, 2009
Giclee print, edition of 12
50 x 33 cm



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