

## STUART PEARSON WRIGHT by DEBORAH WARNER

He picks me up at Bethnal Green in a new, bright red transit van. Everything about him seems new. He's engaged to be married, he's talking excitedly about his discovery of Country and Western music, and behind the vibrant yellow roller door of his new studio, gleaming white walls are loaded with recent paintings.

Stuart Pearson Wright has been on a road trip to the States. Works with titles from the world of Country and Western – *"I'll Never Stop Lovin' You," "Rose Marie," "Teardrops in my Heart," "If we make it through December,"* sing and dance from the walls. In the centre of it all, dominating this musical scene is a landscape of colossal size. At first you think you recognize the place, then you start to look closely, to really look. Is this the Grand Canyon? Is this a fantastical invention? Is this Breughel? Dali...? Is there an Escher-like trick in here? And the backgrounds to the portraits, where the artist and his muse pose as characters in Country and Western settings, who are they by? Stuart? No. Others? Amateurs? Just who painted these cliché-ridden backgrounds, these theatrical backdrops that audaciously co-exist with Stuart's customary exquisite painting of face and hand? Where are we? Is this serious? Is this a joke? And just hold on, in the middle of it all there's a film installation with Keira Knightley starring – no, not quite starring – "playing alongside" Stuart in a twelve-minute period drama short. What's going on here?

Welcome to the world of Stuart Pearson Wright, New paintings, new departures, new frontiers and a new audacity to excite the mind. Everywhere tricks are being played with reality. He's been here before, but he's pushing frontiers like mad and it's head turningly exciting.

In the same way as the playwright Samuel Beckett is doing something in the theatre with painting (in *"Happy Days"* the entrapped Winnie is embedded in a real landscape of earth and rock, whilst a vast trompe d'oeil landscape hanging behind her head seems to entomb her further), so Stuart Pearson Wright is doing something in painting with the theatre. He has long been fascinated by the theatre and by actors and acting. Now, in this new series, he puts himself as actor into the paintings and audaciously – I think brilliantly – borrows other painters' landscapes as his frame. Many of the background works were found in junk shops and car boot sales. The canvasses have been meticulously cleaned, prepared and added to. Cliché-ridden backgrounds have become glorious springboards for invention. The naff is turned on its head, the poor landscape turned into a precious object. Even the original imperfections have been retained. Gloriously, in *"Teardrops in your Heart,"* the painting boasts an old canvas tear. In *"Home on the Range"* a space has been cleared for the "missing" ducks to swim on a patch of grey paint – a real/unreal pond to delight them through eternity. The mind turns, flips, and delights in the complex of reality on reality. Stuart exalts in these echoes. There is fun and there is great seriousness here, all combined. Beckett would have very much approved. So do I.

## **COWBOY AFTERNOONS** by ADAM FOULDS

Dismounted from their horses they stand as stiff as pitchforks and speak just as stiffly, in short phrases. They walk with a slow, swinging gait towards the camera and all of this says: Like this (like you), I'm out of my element which is wordless action on horseback under these enormous skies, amid gunfire, in the din of horses galloping through a canyon. Of course it makes them boring to listen to. Squinting out of their sunburn make-up they emit words reluctantly while doing other things, smoking, drinking, stirring beans, spitting with great precision, saddling horses, fighting in a bar, dragging a corpse by its heels.

Unless they're in love. Love makes them garrulous (relatively speaking), makes them sing. They fall in love – or rather one of them does; they're never all in love – with one of three women: a fair American who is spirited or delicate, a Mexican girl who is spirited, or an "Indian" who is probably spirited and certainly mysterious with a quiet inwardness that entices him. In reality they are all the same woman in different make-up and outfits, appearing in different films. Eventually the cowboy and the woman kiss, dryly, their faces pressed together with firmly closed mouths. The sexuality here has been – as my girlfriend once described the sexuality of Pre-Raphaelite art – pasteurised, raised to a terrible temperature in a tightly closed container and rendered safe. Nevertheless the kissing is a special thing as far as the film is concerned. Often it puts the sky in a different mood, of sunset or starlight.

The kisses are only ever an interlude or occur at the very end. To me they seem a kind of unnecessary garnish but as they pretty much always happen, they must be important.

All of it happens in a corner of the room on long, disagreeable afternoons, particularly when I'm off school ill, and only because there's nothing better on and anything's better than having the telly off. It happens while I'm lying on our sofa or sitting on the wilderness of fitted carpet. Outside the sky is drab with unbroken cloud that shifts slowly behind suburban aerials.

I don't like these films. I don't like the jammy colours of fifties Technicolor or the music, swooning strings, moseying guitars or lonely harmonicas. Horses are not interesting, certainly not compared to motorbikes. I don't like the old-fashioned wood and leather world, agricultural at its edges, the historicalness. (I like the future, spaceships, holograms, cars that can talk). And, finally, I do not like the men who are the obsession of these films. The films stare at the men for hours, follow them as they gallop, crouch beside them as they shoot from behind a rock, listen to them singing a complete song from beginning to end, watch them as they briefly kiss. The films insist this is manhood in its best form and to be aspired to. But these men are like no men I know. These men almost never laugh. They kill people. They grimace constantly, experiencing little pleasure. They think by wiping sweat from their foreheads. They're allowed to feel sad only when staring into the top of a tiny whisky glass. They're always outdoors. They live in that vast, corny, implausible landscape. I'm pleased I'm not trapped out there, having to be one of them, so stiff and unreal, so manly. I can't imagine what it must be like.



**I'LL NEVER STOP LOVING YOU, Oil on canvas, 610mm x 610mm, 2010**  
**Overleaf: YELLOW ROSE OF TEXAS, Oil on found panel, 400mm x 330mm, 2008**





**BALD EAGLES** Oil on canvas, 255mm x 200mm 2010

### **ONLY ELEPHANTS HAVE FOUR KNEES (Part One)**

DAVID THEWLIS talks to STUART PEARSON WRIGHT

S: Hello? ah you're here. I'll come and let you in

[Sound of Roller shutter] Good to see you

D: I've had a bit of a journey... Fuck! What's going on there? [points to *Long Time Gone*] That's different for you. Oh wow, these are brilliant...

S: All the pictures in the exhibition are named after Country and Western songs. Some wine?

D: Yes please Stu. So tell me what this is all about. It's for the catalogue?  
S: Yes. Did you see the catalogue for *Most People are Other People*? [a previous exhibition] I did a similar thing with Timothy Spall.

D: ...who lives beneath me. He's got a leak and I think it's my dishwasher that's causing it. About five days ago he called: "Ello mate, it's Tim here. I know I didn't meet you for that Christmas drink but I got a leak and it seems to be coming from your apartment. I hate to be that kind of neighbour but I'm complaining that I've got a leak."

S: you think it might come from the dishwasher?

D: Yeah, he said: "it was really vibrating yesterday and leaking water" and I said "I didn't put the dishwasher on yesterday"

S: Nothing was vibrating in the flat?

D: No nothing was vibrating... apart from my head at one point. But then I pulled out the dishwasher, crawled behind the dishwasher to have a look and indeed there is a big sort of damp patch and all kinds of stuff there.

S: I know a good plumber.

D: so I was wedged in and my back gave way. Couldn't get out. I was in there like, "This would be a terrible death."

S: you couldn't move backwards?

D: No.

S: Don't horses have that problem? They can't move backwards.

D: Of course they can. I've been on a horse when they go backwards.

S: Oh really?

D: Yeah, they quite often go backwards.

S: Maybe I was thinking of...

D: I think you're confusing horses with cows. Cows can go upstairs but they can't go downstairs. I'd hate to be the man who found that out the hard way.

S: Something can't go backwards.

D: I suspect geckos... actually I think anything with legs can go backwards. Maybe not elephants though. They're the only creature with four knees.

S: intriguing

D: I think that's right. And only pigs can sunburn. Anyway, what about Art? [laughter]

D: It's Arizona isn't it? [with reference to *Long Time Gone*]

S: Well kind of. It's partly Arizona and partly Utah...

D: Monument Valley's the closest thing I would think to that. You ever been to Monument Valley?

S: I have yeah, it played a large part in inspiring this series of paintings.

D: Yeah. But it's not quite as alien looking as that, it's like you've taken poetic license with Monument Valley.

S: I have. I've turned it into a kind of Nob Land. Have you been to Bryce Canyon though?  
 D: where's that?  
 S: That's in Utah. Bryce does look as alien as this. Not that this looks specifically like Bryce but the nob-shapes are reminiscent of the place. There's a person in it as well.  
 D: Is that easy to spot?  
 S: No, it's like 'Where's Wally?'  
 D: Oh it's that small is it?  
 S: It's 'Where's Stuart?'  
 D: Ok. Well that'll give me something to do for the next half hour.  
 S: Yeah. Let me know when you see him. I just finished it very recently, it took about 4 or 5 months.  
 D: Why have you started painting on circular canvasses?  
 S: I enjoy their kitsch value.  
 D: So what's the deal with cowboys? Why've you gone down the cowboy route?  
 S: it comes from an interest in heroes and those male archetypes that we're all supposed to emulate. Take James Bond: an archetypal male who, since he is played by different actors and has different scriptwriters and directors, subtly changes as a character through time. I'm interested in that process: the constantly shifting male ideal. Because I was born by artificial insemination and don't know who my father is, I struggled at times to create a sexual identity for myself. I didn't have a blueprint to follow. That process of trying to work out how you're supposed to function as a bloke in society, was very a very self-conscious one, adopting different personas, trying to create an identity...

S: I've landed on an aesthetic with these pictures, stuck somewhere around 1957 I think...  
 D: Right. I think it's also quite an American aesthetic and an American kind of masculinity. I've noticed on American film crews you do tend to get much more hirsute guys, outdoor types, strong, masculine figures, whereas in Britain, they're urban people. You get the idea that when the film finishes the American crew man will be out ranching cattle.  
 S: I wonder if it's anything to do with the size of the country and the fact that most of the country, by virtue of it's size, is rural  
 D: it is, and they're descended from those pioneers who did ranch cattle. There's a theory that since the Americans were the people who got on the Mayflower and emigrated, they were optimistic, adventurous and had great pioneering spirit, all the people who were left behind were like: "that's never gonna work is it" [laughter] "what do you wanna do that for?" so your English are more genetically disposed to cynicism: more damning of new enterprise. If there is a gene for enterprise and for ambition then that's passed down into the American people. Americans are much prouder of their country. It's an incredible land, and there's nowhere comparable in England... "oh, but Cornwall's quite nice. It's quite rugged" [laughter] so we've got Cornwall and the Lake District, but there's nowhere like that [points to *Long Time Gone*] there's nowhere that's other-planetary. I think that's why Americans overuse the word awesome, because their land *is* awesome whereas Cornwall's not.

S: Cornwall's very nice...  
 D: It's lovely. I'm not knocking Cornwall  
 S: but it's not awesome  
 D: St Agnes is delightful  
 S: So I took a road trip around Nevada and Utah and then went into Colorado and Arizona and New Mexico. It was only two weeks but I've been painting pictures ever since then, which are in some way set there. This one with the woman and a dog is called *Rose Marie*...  
 D: I love that one  
 S: thank you. I actually bought that painting in a thrift store in Arizona  
 D: What do you mean, you bought it?  
 S: Well I bought that landscape without the woman and the dog and then...  
 D: So only the woman's yours?  
 S: Yeah, and the same with *Home on the Range*, the yellow-shirted fellow up there. I bought those two canvases in a thrift store and then brought them home and painted the figures into them. When I saw the original painting without the figure it made me think of the theatre, which I love. I thought of it as a bare stage: a backdrop or empty space waiting for some sort of melodramatic moment to happen. The landscape wasn't enough by itself. It needed to be inhabited by a character...  
 D: do you have a story for what's going on in *Rose Marie*?  
 S: No. I found a picture on the internet of a woman in that pose, but with a Labrador. I couldn't work out if she was screaming or laughing... I liked the ambiguity of the pose and the fact that the woman was holding the dog. That was the starting point for the painting.  
 D: It looks as though she's in despair. If there was a house on fire behind her you'd understand it more. Maybe her house has collapsed under the snow.  
 S: well that's the kind of narrative I get from it, but there isn't a specific narrative that I've intended and that's what I like about it. It's open to interpretation.  
 D: And what have you done to this? [with reference to some thick impastoed lumps on *Long Time Gone* which he is viewing from one side] I've just noticed this in relief. There's things stuck on that. What is that? like Chris Offili, mouse dung or something...  
 S: er no, but my house is full of mice at the moment. I could have sculpted a big cactus out of the mouse shit that I've got in my house and installed it in the gallery.  
 D: Do you mind me saying something about *Long Time Gone*? There's something in that section that doesn't look finished... [He is referring to a bare patch that resembles a crater] because the rest of it is so textured and detailed.  
 S: before I painted any of the details I got big buckets full of paint and poured them all over the canvas, and then squished it all about and poured white spirit on top of it and threw things at it and had a lot of fun  
 D: So this is not based in any way on a specific photograph? It's not like that's a crater or something?  
 S: That came about because when I left the white spirit on the canvas, if you imagine the painting flat on the floor, the weight of the canvas sagging created a kind of pool of white spirit there, and these lines leading into

the pool are where the white spirit drained down and ate away the paint underneath. I liked the parallel with geological processes. It wasn't something that I had made with my hand. It was like a mechanical or glacial process that I had no control over. But then I always end up getting my little brushes out, that's the problem.

D: the more I look at it... you joked about the nob element... actually there are fucking loads of nobs there. [laughter]

S: There are

D: ...It's a cross between turds and nobs. In fact you've got a title there. [laughter] not *Where's Wally?* but *Where's Willy?*

S: Some of them are disgusting. My dog Enid produces these stalagmite turds on occasion and every time she has, I've thought I must photograph them. I could've actually used those photographs as source material for this picture. A vertical turd would bear a close resemblance to one of these rock formations. Sadly I never had my camera on me at the right moment. I've never seen another dog or person do turds like that.

D: they'd remain standing up?

S: Yeah, [laughter] just coming out of the ground.

D: Maybe if we shat squatting that would happen to us.

S: Possibly

D: If you were on a bad diet: Turkey Twizzlers

S: Are you suggesting my dog has a bad diet?

D: I'm still looking for you in this painting. It's a good picture to sit in front of to talk about because it becomes abstract: One of those images where you just start to see things. Now I'm starting to see people in there. This looks a bit like Richard Griffiths, a naked Richard Griffiths.

S: Is that what he looks like in the flesh? Or are you speculating?

D: I've never seen him naked but I would imagine so.

S: I'll give you a little clue, the little self-portrait is wearing a red shirt.

D: We'll find 'im before the end of the night. Now I can see Rodin's thinker here.

S: I never saw that.

D: I think it's my favourite picture you've made.

S: Do you know that Caspar David Friedrich painting of a bloke looking down across a mountainous landscape? I was picking up on that idea of man encountering the landscape in all its vastness and strangeness. That might be a clue as to where the figure is. Rather than being *in* the landscape he's regarding it from a vantage point.

[long pause]

D: I've just seen him! I've got him, ok. [laughter] I believe his horse is walking backwards.

S: Yes it is!

D: He's exiting the painting.

S: He's had enough. He's heading back to Cornwall.

D: that's wonderful. I wouldn't have seen it from here.

S: Well hopefully it's a painting that invites you to come quite close

D: I really love it the more I look at it.

S: Thank you. Did you see this one on the end? I've just finished this. [he refers to *Teardrops in my Heart*] I bought this landscape in a junk shop in Oslo and then painted the figures in.

D: How do you do it? Do you take a photograph? How do arrive at the pose?

They're all very anatomically correct. I mean down to the tiniest curl of the thumb and finger.

S: I've been collecting images from books on films, Western films, and 1950s, '60s films

D: But you're in the picture so how do you...?

S: I got a friend to take the photograph, but the pose was lifted from a film still, in this case from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (below), but something funny happened in the photo-shoot. In the original reference Vera Miles is holding James Stewart's head and looking very sympathetic, and so in all the other photographs from the session Polly [Stuart's fiancée and model] looks very sympathetic, but in this one she's doing some strange sort of throwing her head back, ecstasy pose and... and so I chose this one as the one to work with, so it's become something rather different from the original source. I thought it was wonderful that there's something so incongruous about their expressions. It's like he's got toothache or erectile dysfunction.... [laughter] It's not very clear what she is doing but it looks like she is enjoying something, which makes the

picture quite perverse. Here's the photograph that the painting was based on. [he shows David a photograph]

D: It's pretty much to the absolute shadow.

S: I think his left arm is a little bit too green. I've got to put in a little bit of red. I'll glaze over bits just to tie the colours together.

D: And how do you do that?

S: Just put transparent paint over it

D: That's what I never understood about oil painting, oil glazes and ...

S: this particular paint is transparent so the light reflects on the white of the canvas underneath and comes through.

D: And is that done by thinning?

S: Partly. Some pigments are naturally opaque and some are transparent. A glaze is just one transparent colour painted over another colour. In the pre-digital age you would have taken a photograph using a colour filter, glazing has the same effect, it just colours that part without obscuring the information underneath... I've got an etching as well. This is called, *The Redskins is a Comin'* (left, *Drypoint on Hahnemule paper, 390mm x 280mm, 2009*).

D: Oh I've seen this before. That was the first time I realised you were going down the cowboy route. I love that, that's fantastic.

S: But not all the paintings in this exhibition are

going to be specifically about cowboys. I've got this book called America's Parklands, a National Geographic book printed in the early '60s and it's got these wonderful images. In the books from that period, you've got this beautiful quality to the printing, with those vivid colours. They are images that are somehow quintessentially American. There's something so optimistic about them all. And because the book is about America's







**LONG TIME GONE**, Oil and mixed media on linen, 1400mm x 3000mm, 2009/2010

Previous page: **ROSE MARIE**, Oil on found canvas, 510mm x 610mm, 2008

Overleaf: **HOME ON THE RANGE**, Oil on found canvas, 390mm x 280mm, 2008



parklands it's all about tourists, and people experiencing the natural world. I guess that's the link with Caspar David Friedrich and the Romantic tradition: the subtle shift from man experiencing a feeling of *the sublime* through nature, to man experiencing nature as a feelgood family experience from the back of his Station wagon.

D: You say you have recently been to America?

S: Yeah

D: Is it because you went to America you've decided to paint about America?

S: Yeah, I guess so. That's what led me into the landscape, and the landscape led me into the music and the music led me into the movies and that's sort of how it came about.

D: When artists travel: Gaugin in Polynesia or recently Chris Offili's in Trinidad, where you have a change of scenery: artists are inspired by, not just the light, but the tradition and the culture of a place. I always think that's a healthier thing for a painter to do than for a writer to do...

S: Why's that?

D: P.G.Wodehouse said that writers should never let their books become a travel document just because the writer happened to have to go to a place. But I think for artists to do that is much more valid. When I was living in Los Angeles I was trying to write another book and suddenly all of my ideas were set in Los Angeles or were ideas about the American Dream or, be it, an Englishman living abroad.

S: I think that's quite an important point: the idea of the Englishman in America. It's significant that these pictures are painted by an Englishman, not by an American. It means that they are very much a received idea of America, as seen through a number of different filters. I have taken one person's 'ideal America', (in the form of a landscape painting from a thrift store) and then, in a sense, vandalised it, or colonised it with my own likeness: a lot of these are self-portraits. So I'm adopting personas or archetypes from American movies and inserting them in junk shops paintings.

D: You've taken a landscape and created something dramatic, by putting yourself in it.

S: Stanley Spencer said that a landscape doesn't really make much sense without a figure in it, and that a figure doesn't make much sense without being in a landscape. Well from the point of view of a human, a landscape *does* make sense when there is a person in it because the person gives scale to the landscape.

D: I've been looking at a lot of Elizabethan paintings recently cos of what I'm doing next, where the figure is against a blank backdrop, a character without a landscape...

S: Are you going to be in an Elizabethan film?

D: Yeah, I'm going to play Lord Burley, That's my first ruff [They laugh]

S: I should show you *Maze* and that might give you some inspiration. That's set in the Elizabethan period.

D: In *Mary Queen of Scots* Burley was played by Trevor Howard

S: there's Trevor Howard (*top right*), up on the wall there. [Pointing at a drawing]

D: a very young version. When I saw him in *Mary Queen of Scots* he was just rather old and decrepit.

S: Well, we all have to get that way eventually.

D: Yeah, well with my back I feel like I'm there today. Psychosomatically it's preparing me for my next role: I have to play him like he's 75

S: Will you have to grow a big beard?

D: No, they'll stick one on. I could never grow one as fine as your Shackleton's... You grow the finest beard.

S: I think it's because I cycle [They laugh] and it gets cold...

D: I've been on a bike

D: so how many paintings are you doing?

S: as many as I can, and I'm recording some Country and Western songs as a limited edition vinyl. They are going to be playing in the gallery space. A lot of them are Slim Whitman songs.

D: Ah,

S: Do you like him?

D: He's my Dad's favourite. I think he had the entire collection of Slim Whitman, so growing up I was raised listening to Slim Whitman. Like *Rose Marie*, *Indian Lovecall*...

S: That painting is called *Rose Marie*. It's named after the song.

D: No way! My Dad would play them all the time. So Slim Whitman was the soundtrack to my youth.

S: Well, I'll have to make sure you get one of these records.

D: Yeah.

S: Do you want to watch the film?

D: Yeah. That'll be great.



Above: Stuart recording *GAMBLIN' BAR ROOM BLUES*, March 2010

If one idea persists in my thoughts after making this series of work: the paintings, drawings, the songs I've recorded and the film installation *Maze*, it is principally the necessity to laugh at oneself: at one's vanity, follies and fears. I realized, in contemplating the reasons for making this work, the importance of being able to examine one's own identity without taking oneself too seriously. Artists do take themselves seriously, the whole time. They are so bloody earnest. However I think that's its possible to delve deeply into the pits of one's worst existential anxieties and dig up a great deal of mirth. It's something I think that Samuel Beckett did very successfully. In a round about way I believe that's what I am trying to do, in everything that I make.

There is light at the end of the proverbial tunnel if one can only take a step back from one's anxieties and see the comedy that lies within one's own morbid feelings.

STUART PEARSON WRIGHT



***I REMEMBER YOU*** Oil on Aluminium, 255mm x 200mm, 2010  
**Opposite: *BUDDIES IN THE SADDLE***, Oil on panel, 540mm x 540mm, 2010





**TOGETHER WE CAN FACE ANYTHING, Oil on linen, 510mm x 410mm, 2009**  
 Previous page: **IF WE MAKE IT 'TIL DECEMBER, Oil on found panel, 290mm x 475mm**

**MAZE CREDITS**

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 Director

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D: I'd love to. The one idea I had in my book that I'd love to do is for a convicted murderer to be in the middle of the room untheatred, with access to guns and knives. He's just sat there and you go and look at him. That's my favourite idea from the book.

S: That would be interesting

D: Well, it's risky. There's another one where there are thousands of hot baked beans hanging from a net in the room and at some point in the exhibition they will drop the beans. That was called "You pay your money you takes your chances." The murderer idea came later. It has to be a psychotic killer. You go and look at him because that's the daring thing to do, but any minute he could fucking kill you. You'd have to get an unpredictable killer, a random shooter. That's what my novel's about. I've always been fascinated by that crime. When I was writing the book serendipitously I found that quote by Brughel... not by him... by B.

S: ... Bob Monkhouse?

D: No, by B...

S: Bono? Bob Hope?

D: the famous surrealist...

S: Breton?

D: Yeah, Breton. He said that the ultimate surrealist act is to walk into a crowded street with a loaded revolver and open fire at random. There were some people, Damien Hirst among them, who thought 9/11 was a great piece of installationist art. Which I'm sure he said to be shocking. But to be shocking is...

S: the currency of the day is it not? But I feel very honoured to have been a seed in the making of your novel.

D: You were the first one, the dog pissing on the painting

S: I don't know

D: Was it Damien Hirst?

S: No it was an Italian bloke I think. On that note, I need to go for a piss...

D: I directed one feature film. The executives are over your shoulder going "I think that's all wrong." No ones looking over your shoulder while your painting going: "Stuart I think you need a bit of blue there"

S: No, I'd stab them in the eye with my brush if they did. Other people and their opinions dilute your vision. That's why I don't think I've got the patience to be a feature director. Not that anyone's offering me the opportunity to, it's just not something I want to pursue.

D: I wouldn't imagine you're suited to it really. I would imagine that you are suited to acting though.

S: I enjoy acting.

D: Well just from *Maze*, there's something... interesting about you

S: well it's a very similar process to painting a self-portrait. Even just posing for a photograph for something: when I paint myself, sometimes it's from a mirror and sometimes it's from photographs. Either way you have to become the character, to an extent.

D: Who was the DP on *Maze*? [Director of Photography]

S: Rob Hardy, He shot one of the *Fed Riding* trilogy?

D: Jesus! Fantastic. Did you direct it?

S: Yes. The only previous experience of directing I had though, was on *Knight's Tale*: an ex-girlfriend and I went into the woods. I had a suit of armour. She had a camera and off we went. That was it. But suddenly this was me on a film set with fifteen professionals and Keira Knightley! [they laugh] All of a sudden I had to direct a crew and a Hollywood actress and perform as well. Obviously I didn't have a clue what I was doing and hoped no one noticed. But I knew what I was trying to make. That was the thing. I realised I could get by, utilising the skills of the people who were there, who knew what they were doing. As long as I could communicate to them what I wanted to achieve, it would happen. And it did.

D: Well, that's what film directing is

S: That's what I realised.

D: But you can have one bad apple in the production team, [they laugh] and it can all go pear-shaped. My film was supposed to be genuinely Bunuellesque, and it came out looking like a comedic *Coronation Street*. All the surrealistic qualities that I wanted to put into the film just got red pencils through them, because of budget restrictions. I got asked the other day to direct something again and I was like "no, it's a mug's game." That's why I wrote a book because when you write a book you can have Venus fuckin' crashing into Pluto and that doesn't cost you a penny.

D: I once rang up Tracey Emin to say that in my novel I describe a fictitious private view. I said "Tracey is it alright that in my story I mention you were at this thing?" Tracey took it very badly: "you can't write a fucking book about me", I'm going: "no it's not a book about you it's just a book about an artist," she's like: "you don't fucking know me" I went: "I don't even have to make this call Tracy, I'm only being courteous, and she's like: "oh, fuck off" and I'm like: "you fuck off, you're not being in the fucking book then"

S: I saw her in the street a long time ago. From a distance I just saw a brunette in a red dress. So I steered my bike in her direction for a closer look and realized it was Tracey Emin. At this time I was single and frivolous and so I said to her "I was wondering if I could do a portrait of you..."

And you know what she said to me?: "I don't wanna be anyone's muse"; You had some very good ideas in your book for conceptual artworks.

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S: I made another film called *Knights Tale* (below). Still from *Knights Tale*, 2003. That was definitely a self portrait. It was me exasperated and dealing with the futility of my situation. That's how it felt at the time. Perhaps it was more a portrait of a relationship [with an ex-girlfriend] or *Knights Tale* left off, but this time with two characters, still portraying the same relationship. It literally was as though we were both lost in the same maze and couldn't get to each other. There was always a bloody hedge in between, so to speak.

D: Why did you choose to set them in history? Why Elizabethan?  
S: It comes back to the idea of heroes: taking an archetypal hero, such as a knight or a cowboy or an Elizabethan courtier. It could equally have been a couple from ancient Greece... I was drawn to the genre of the Period Drama. Using a steady cam at the beginning of *Maze*, was a way of referencing that genre. There are certain expectations associated with period dramas, that the viewer will have of the characters and of the style of the film. They'll expect the film to be shot in a certain way: to be very beautiful, the camerawork to be elegant, and a degree of reverence afforded to the subject and the period.  
D: A decorum about how the characters move?  
S: Yeah, exactly, characters from the Elizabethan period dramas are expected to perform in a particular way. The male has got to be heroic, if he's wearing a cod piece he's got to get his sword out, win the maiden and save the day.



D: Yeah  
S: So I wanted to take all of those references and expectations and piss them up the wall: explode the myth of the hero. The male protagonist of *Maze* is far from Heroic. He is ineffective. His situation isn't even particularly grave. It is more absurd than grave, and yet he fails to resolve it. His woman literally walks out of the picture. Failure is possible. Real people fail, sometimes... relationships fail.  
D: And how important was investigating your relationship to acting because I know that you used to act didn't you?  
S: I used to act in amateur dramatics as a youth, and I was in a play at the Edinburgh festival a few years ago.  
D: When I last saw you, you were talking about giving up painting and pursuing acting  
S: Was I?

D: Yeah and I said why? because your such a fuckin' great painter and you said "well it's a mugs game"  
S: Did I? [laughs]  
D: Yeah I was like "Start you can't stop painting" you should do both.  
S: Well the funny thing about making *Maze* is that it made me realize that I didn't want to be a feature film director.  
D: Why?  
S: Because I realized I could make a small project like *Maze* and then be done with it and move on to a painting. Whereas, if I made a feature I'd be stuck in a project for five years or more. I wouldn't have the patience for that frankly.

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**ONLY ELEPHANTS HAVE FOUR KNEES (Part Two)**  
DAVID THEWLIS talks to STUART PEARSON WRIGHT

D: I don't know why it's so funny, it's supposed to be funny right?  
S: Well, and tragic and...  
D: My reaction is comedic, because of the tragedy... It may be because I know you both that I find it funnier...  
S: That cut on my cheek... I'd said to the make up lady "I would like a scratch here." But because we were running so short on time I didn't even have time to look at the scratch she had made. I had to wait until the super 16 film had been processed before I saw the scratch, and it's like someone's sliced my face open with a machete [they laugh]  
D: I think it's quite good. Often you can be too subtle on film with things like that [both laugh]  
S: At the end of the Incredible Hulk, the original TV programme, after every episode Hulk reverts to his human self and they play that sad song. He is walking along a road. You see him from the back, his clothes all shredded...  
D: Yeah yeah yeah  
S: As a kid of four or five, I would cry my eyes out every time that happened. It was as though through watching it I learnt an essential human truth: everything I needed to know about existentialism [both laugh]. It really cut me up. I was the kind of kid that used to collect leaves in the playground because I felt sorry for them. It really distressed me me. My Mum would say to me "why are your pockets full of leaves?" and I'd say "well they just looked so lonely" [both laugh loudly]  
D: It rings a bell about something my daughter said recently. She's now four and a half, and she's begun to understand death. About two months ago it struck her that we would die. You don't know what to say at first. You lie. You go "well yeah, but not for a long time" and then you find yourself inventing Heaven because death is going to be really shit. One day I'm going to get old and sick. I could just pass out now quite honestly [both laugh] she's like: "so do humans die?" You don't know what to say. It's very strange.  
S: Maybe you should read her your novel [The Late Hector Kipling]  
S: That'll tell her everything she needs to know about death. It's a great book by the way, I've just finished reading it.  
D: You're a big part of that book; you were a big inspiration for it.  
S: Well, I did the cover.  
D: but you were telling me when you were at the Slade, about someone who dressed up as a dog and went round pissing on paintings. I remember you saying "obviously I had a problem with that." The first cell for my novel was that idea: a painter who's pissed off with a conceptual artist. That was the genesis of the whole book.  
S: you were in my thoughts a lot while I was reading the book. I was entering your head. It's strange: reading a novel by someone you know. D: Yeah, I think it's also hard to see someone you know acting. My reaction to *Maze* was comedic because I know you well. Your work is very autobiographical.



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