

1. From school to university



1. The Dice Throwers (1965 and 2009)

I've drawn and painted for as long as I can remember but have also been fascinated by history. From the age of eleven onwards I fell in love with Ancient Egypt and for several years expressed my ideas chiefly in the distinctive style of that great civilisation. Taken under the wing of Stan Simmonds, art master at Chislehurst & Sidcup Grammar School I discovered the wider world of European Art for the first time as I entered the Sixth Form. Amongst my early favourites were El Greco, Caravaggio and Velasquez but I also admired the brilliant colouring and detail of Early Netherlandish art, especially Hans Memlinc. At the same time I came to know the poetry and art of William Blake whose work combined the narrative appeal of medieval illuminated manuscripts with a radical agenda aimed at restoring the unity of body and soul.

The 'Dice Throwers' (1) is an exercise in Baroque *chiaroscuro* inspired by Caravaggio but the 'Crucifixion of the Minotaur' (2) was a more original idea. The cross with a calf's head nailed to it is simultaneously the figure of the legendary half-man, half-bull *and* a symbol of the suffering of a creature torn between two natures – as all human beings who aspire to a life of the spirit are. The tower of Magdalen College symbolises the period of mental imprisonment I felt that I was entering as I began university whilst the tower of the Shell Centre stands for the other life I led at

this time as a temporary messenger in the Shell Oil company's headquarters on the South Bank of the River Thames in London. Both towers symbolise a kind of power.



2. The Crucifixion of the Minotaur (1966 and 2009)

The 'Split in Man' (3) was both a 'message picture' and a response to the experience of adolescence. The clown is alive but debased, the statue beautiful but dead, the fatal separation of ideal and real being the result of an attempt to exalt the spiritual or intellectual at the expense of the biological. The green figure represents an Establishment that rules by dividing mankind from itself, a magic trick that is performed on each generation as it reaches maturity. Like Blake I wanted to see the

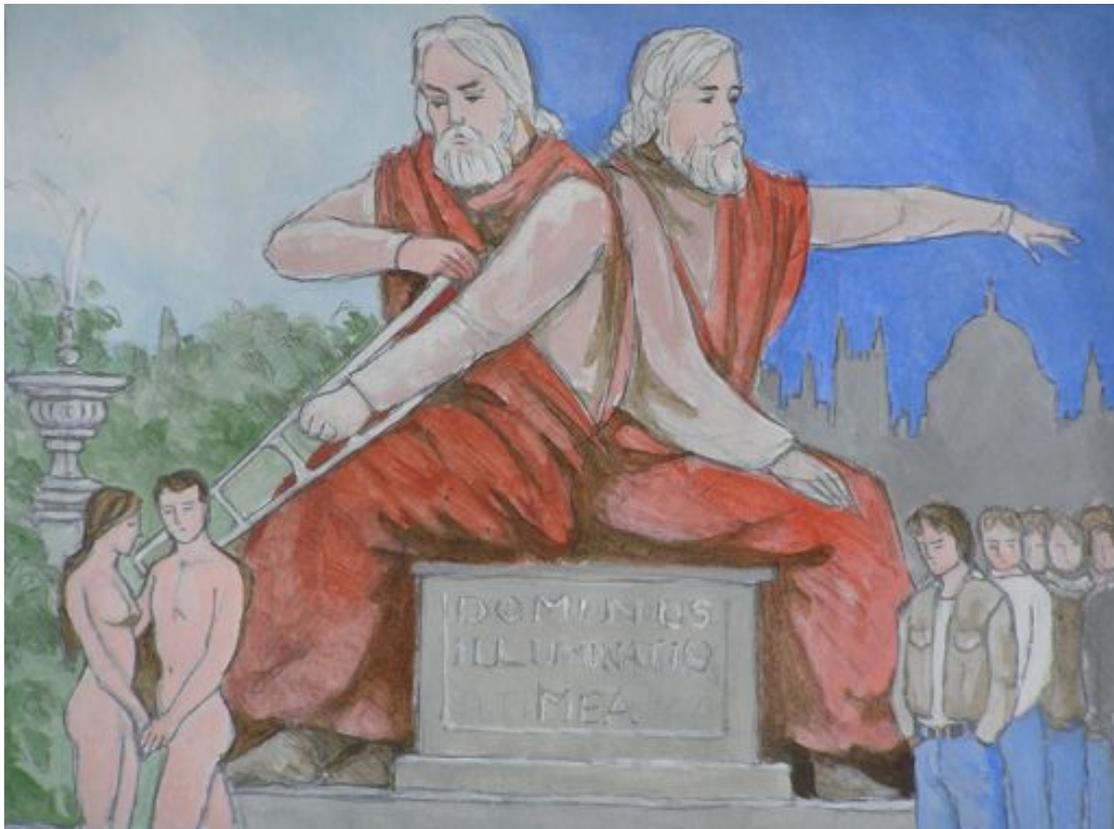
split reversed and the controls exercised by society relaxed. I didn't recognise the dangers inherent in such relaxation, nor the way in which lack of social discipline could be exploited by a greedy and selfish media. 'Creativity, what crimes are committed in your name...'



3. The Split in Man (1966 and 2009)

My first year at Oxford was a difficult one. First there was the problem of making new friends. The historians at Magdalen ought to have been my natural 'set' but they were a mixed lot, shy and reserved like me or possessing that superficial self-confidence typical of the public school. Looking back I can see how awkward and opinionated I must have seemed; hence none of the initial contacts I made bore fruit and I was increasingly forced to rely on former school friends for company. Nevertheless I was entering – like British society in general – into a period of transformation whose most visual sign was the adoption of Western-style jeans as the universal emblem of youth (Malcolm Bradley describes the process in his novel 'The History Man'). It's no accident therefore that the paintings I completed in those same twelve months were concerned with rejection and exclusion. One in particular, a very large work, showed an angry Jehovah casting Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, in revenge it seemed to me for their discovery of the joy of sex. Jehovah was equipped with a large crutch which seemed to me to be an entirely appropriate symbol for the tyranny of the emotionally crippled over the primally innocent. He was also accompanied by a twin who, Janus-like – looked back at the cruel world that had

resulted from his action where, in the original, a group of students – myself amongst them – stood imprisoned by his power. In my reconstruction (4) I've modified what was a clumsy and unbalanced composition. In the new version Jehovah's 'twin' lords it over Oxford whilst Jehovah himself prepares to exclude Adam and Eve from their 'earthly Paradise'. They are seated on a plinth which bears the University motto 'God is my illumination.' Irony indeed.



4: The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden (1967 and 2010)

The theme of exclusion was continued in my next major work. The two weeks I spent in Italy in the summer of 1967 had more than ever convinced me that I wanted to be an artist and had left me searching for subjects which would allow me to celebrate the beautiful world I saw about me whilst setting out an all-embracing philosophy of the kind I'd found in Blake. The original version of 'The Sleeping Beauty' (5) substituted a hideous monster for the Jehovah of the earlier painting; the monster represented physical and sexual repression against a background based on the Doge's Palace which I'd recently visited. In my diary I wrote the following description of the painting, 'Two lovers...are standing in a beautiful garden. They are pure innocence, unaware that sex can be a sin for sin is a concept unknown to them. No guilt mars their happiness for they are lost in each other and in Nature... In a gothic window can be seen a female, asleep... our one-time nature, once alive, now sleeping (in some, dead). Life has caused her to slumber, as life of a new kind will wake her...'

In the new version it is the lovers who are within the castle, surrounded by a forest that both conceals and protects them, whilst at the same time standing for the undergrowth of history from which they must emerge to redeem a 'fallen' world. The

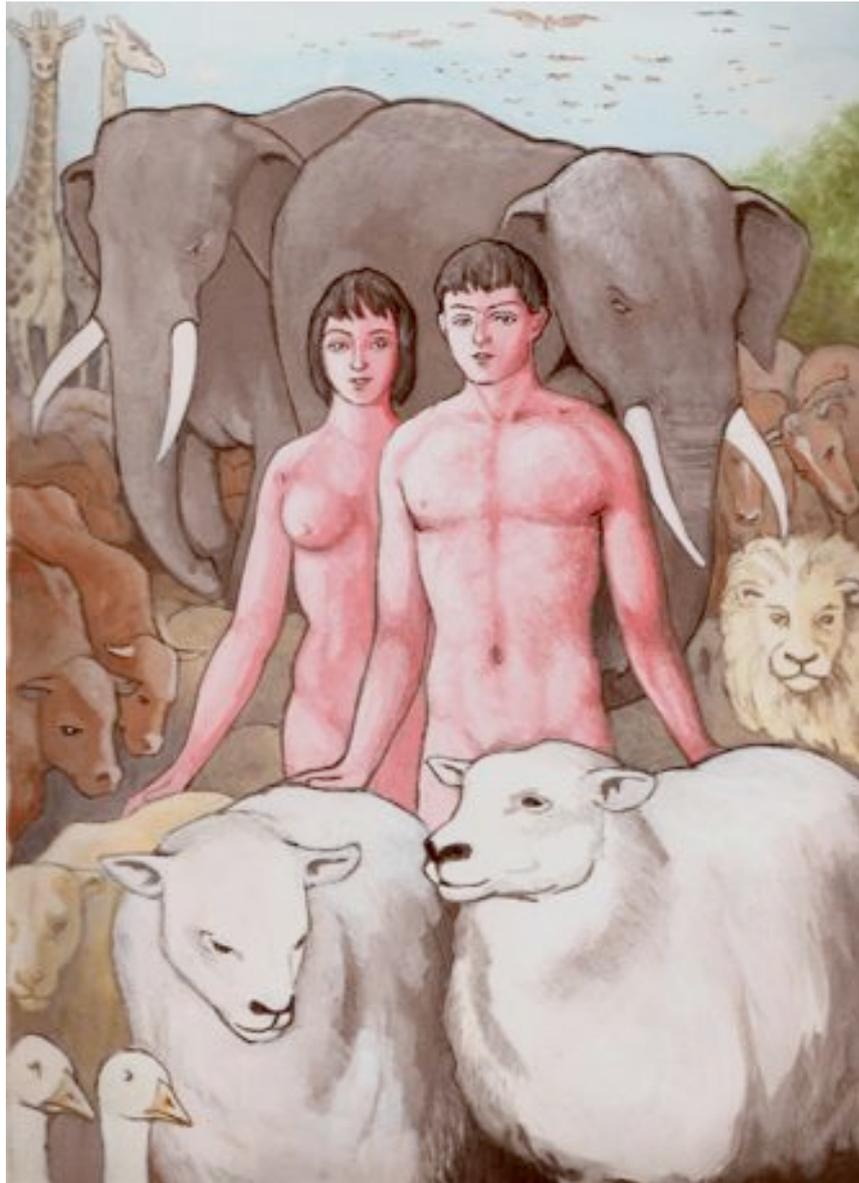
original monster stood for anger and oppression. Now, perhaps, he stands for greed and selfishness and the ignorance that sustains them.



5. The Sleeping Beauty (1967 and 2009)

At the end of 1967 I summed up what I thought had been my artistic achievement that year and the artists and thinkers who had inspired me: after Blake, there were the educationalist A.S.Neill, St Francis of Assisi, the zoologist Desmond Morris, Dante, William Golding and the medieval churchman Abbot Suger of St Denis. Suger's belief in the power of beauty to inspire faith coincided with the serious purpose to which I wanted to dedicate my artistic life. There was no doubt about my ambition: I wanted to convert the world to love through art. First I needed a text.

'The Book of Aten' was to be my 'Bible', my answer to what I saw as negative in the original. Its opening page expressed my vision of Nature in harmony, with Man and Woman taking their place alongside the rest of Creation in a primal state of joy and tranquillity. In the work of the American psychologist Wilhelm Reich I'd found what appeared to be a scientific basis for my belief that sexual love would liberate Mankind from the inner conflicts that repression created and the external conflicts that were their product. Like William Blake Reich saw the politicians and generals of his day as representatives of a fallen state, sick men and women trying to create a world in their own image.



6. The Book of Aten: frontispiece (1967 and 2009)

But ‘Aten’ wasn’t just the fulfilment of sexual desire, it was a spiritual state too – one that could only be achieved by beings at ease with themselves and with the natural world of which they were a part, the exact opposite of the Judaeo-Christian tradition which made denial of the flesh a pre-requisite for participation in a spiritual life.

Subsequent pages of *The Book of Aten* were intended to portray the obstacles to the achievement of spiritual liberation. The only one that was completed showed a tortured soul tied to a giant abacus (7) – an instrument of calculation that represented the precise yet sterile academic world to whose demands I was having to subordinate my creative life. It was not that I hated facts as such – I was after all a lover of ‘truth’. It was the way that we were forced to follow in the footsteps of others whilst acquiring them when, in common with many of my generation, I wanted to find my own way. ‘I must needs invent my own system,’ said William Blake, or else be the prisoner of another’s.’



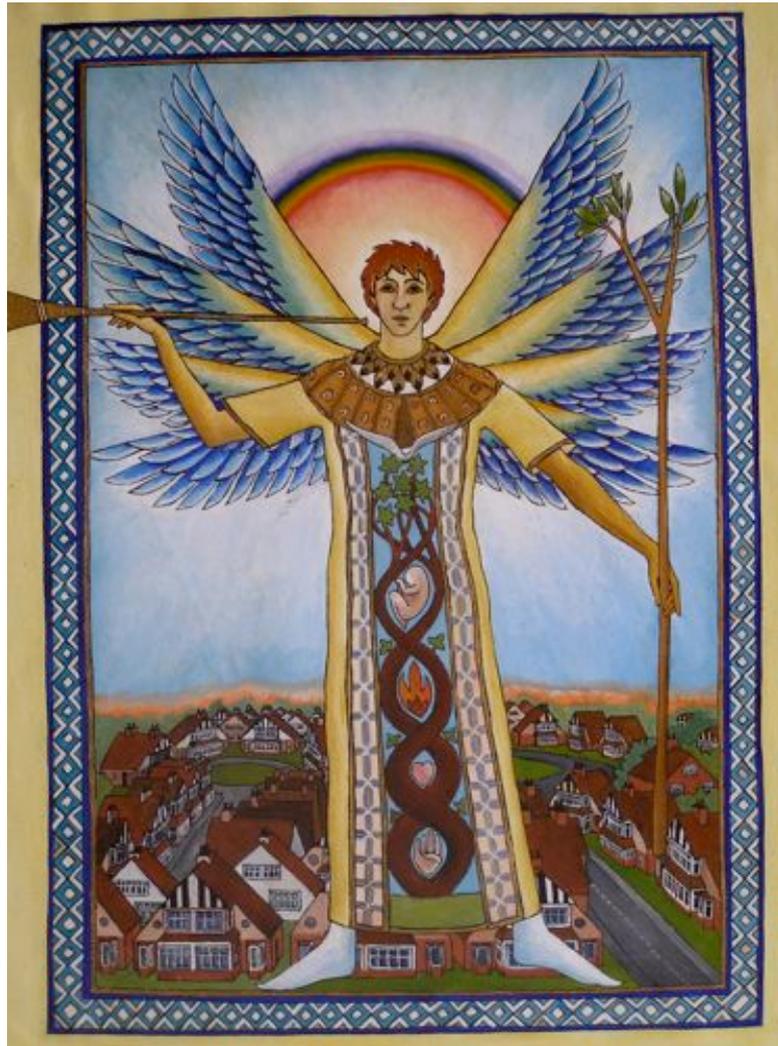
7. The Abacus (1968)

In so far as there was a story to the Book of Aten it was, like *The Divine Comedy*, a journey. The journey in question is a journey within, an exploration of the mind in search of that self-knowledge which alone gives self-control. It requires the traveller to face up to those aspects of his being that are far from ideal and which may lead him to do things of which he is ashamed. Above all it requires him to face up to the fact of non-existence (8). Such is the beginning of wisdom in the Catholic tradition but for me it meant the opposite of a rejection of worldly things. On the contrary it reinforced my belief that we have but one life and must make the best of it. As I expressed it in a letter to my friend David Probert, 'life is a diamond in a great dark space, or rather molten gold to be forged into a jewel...' It was an image I'd turn to several years later when I tried once again to encompass all my ideas in a single illuminated narrative.



8. The Fear Within (1967 and 2009)

Besides Oxford there were other obstacles to the achievement of self-knowledge. Some were internal: the contrary strands that went into my own make-up, part nature and part nurture. These had to be faced honestly, amongst them my lack of sexual experience and in my own eyes, strength of character. I was too inclined to compromise, to adapt myself to the company I kept, to go along with the majority. Was there, I kept asking myself, a *real* me, against which to measure the worth of my actions – the self that Thomas More refers back to in Robert Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons*? Would I, faced with More’s situation, prove to be a moral and physical coward? Faced with such doubts how is the ‘self’ to be saved? Only by a glimpse of the world as it might be, revealed by a winged messenger who carries a flowering staff as a symbol of rebirth and whose robe bears a design that echoes Proverbs Chapter 1, verse 7: ‘the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord.’ The *Book of Aten* was intended to end with the triumphant recovery of innocence – the achievement of self-mastery through love of Nature and love of another. This, I felt sure, would help me to withstand any ‘sea of troubles’ I might encounter – as indeed it has.



9. The Messenger (1967)

I should add that, despite my initial hostility to Oxford, I had the good fortune to be taught by men who were surprisingly sympathetic to my artistic pretensions. Karl Leyser generously described me as one who could ‘share creative experiences with the medieval past much more than is given to a historian...’ Gerald Harris once spent a whole hour sharing his love of *King Rene’s Book of Tournaments* with me, whilst Angus Macintyre paid tribute to my ability ‘to make splendid bricks with very little straw.’

Over the years I came to realise that these men were also guardians of truth, the truth that came from the kind of knowledge that defied superficial conclusions and provided a standard for all other judgements of fact. It was summed up in Bruce MacFarlane’s insistence that a historian must ‘know his society’ if he were to offer any kind of explanation for what people did in the past. This applies as much to art as to any other kind of human activity. As an artist inspired by the past I could not ignore its lessons. I did not fully achieve this reconciliation with Oxford however, until I myself became a lecturer.



10. Dante's Wolf (1968 and 2009)

During the summer of 1968 I spent most of my time at Shell in the Medical Division. Here, with little to do except my hourly deliveries, I read the whole of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, sketching as I went. As well as being a good story full of tremendous images Dante's theme of redemption through love seemed to echo that of *The Book of Aten*.

The *Divine Comedy* opens with Dante lost in a wood that symbolises his sinful self. Here he is met by the poet Vergil who has been sent by Beatrice, Dante's 'immortal beloved', who stands for all that is good in himself. Vergil offers to be his guide through the circles of Hell and takes him to its entrance with its famous inscription 'abandon hope all ye who enter here.' (10)

Of the many scenes I planned to turn into paintings only a few were completed. One depicted Dante's famous encounter with the lovers Piero and Francesca (11) in the upper reaches of Hell which I was to feature again on the Marriage Box begun in 1973 (see below). Working on it I was reminded of Browning's poem 'My Last Duchess' with its chilling line 'I gave commands, then all smiles stopped together...' Love is destroyed by jealousy, an all too frequent occurrence in real life.



11. The lovers Piero and Francesca (2010)

Other scenes showed Charon ferrying Dante and Vergil across the Styx and Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the inner reaches of the Pit. Of course Hell is for those whose sins were 'mortal'; they will be punished for ever. As he climbs Mount Purgatory Dante meets the souls of those who managed to repent in time and whose sins will ultimately be forgiven. Near the top he is met by Beatrice in a triumphal car and carried upwards into the heavens. As he mounts higher and higher towards the

central mystery ‘that moves the Sun and other stars’, he is gradually stripped of worldly concerns and obligations. ‘Crowned and mitred’ by self-knowledge he is finally free to embrace the love of God. As in *The Book of Aten* liberation is achieved by revelation: it cannot come about through reason alone.

And what is the fate of those who are liberated yet still have to live in an un-liberated society? Reich gave his answer in *The Murder of Christ* and suffered his own version of martyrdom. Blake wrote of the doors of perception being ‘cleansed’ so that the ‘world of generation’ with all its roles and hierarchies would cease to hold any meaning yet he felt the force of that world and was an outsider all his life: the moral high ground can be a lonely place! By my third year as an undergraduate I was at last beginning to enjoy Oxford. A philosophy that separated me from my many friends would split me in two. My answer was to picture friendship itself as a form of liberation, with the liberated sitting down to feast together whilst the gates through which they have passed stand open behind them (12).



12. The Love Feast (1969 and 1975)

We are not in ‘cloud cuckoo land’. The first version of this picture showed the love feast taking place against a background that was Brueghelesque in its depiction of horrors. In the second version (above) we are reminded of the ‘fallen state’ of the world by a grey figure in the foreground. He or she is poisoning the pure water that flows from the fountain symbolising the gift of life.

If asked at this time what my ambitions as an artist were, I might have answered ‘to marry Constable with Blake’, or perhaps artists of the early Netherlandish school with the flowing style of the Impressionists. I admired painters like Manet and Velasquez

who seemed to have an unerring grasp of form yet were wonderfully deft in their use of colour. Parallel to what I would have called my ‘visionary work’ I also wanted to capture some of the beauty of the landscape surrounding me in Oxford and set within it the joy of being young, especially in my last summer when the river beckoned and romance was in the air. I took as my inspiration Manet’s *Dejeuner Sur l’Herbe* but in the end failed to complete the dream. Only now (2010) can I show what it was I intended to achieve (13).



13. Dejeuner Sur L’Herbe (2010)

Lastly, because I also admired Rembrandt and Van Gogh, I wanted to paint a self-portrait. Needless to say, what you see in the mirror is seldom what other people see: it’s what you want other people to see. However, if the two are too far apart the portrait fails to achieve its purpose, which is precisely to reconcile an inner and outer reality. The surviving 1969 version shows what Karl Leyser meant when he said that three years at Oxford had turned me into ‘a typical student’. Seen from forty years on the image is rough, plebeian and frankly a bit of a fake...(14)



14. Self portrait as an undergraduate (1969)