

## Q & A: A New Series Where Practising Artists Answer Questions About Their Practice

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Jake Attree, a painter based in West Yorkshire, discusses his work.



Jake Attree (c 1998) *A Study of Dean Clough from North Bridge (Blue)*

Oil on panel

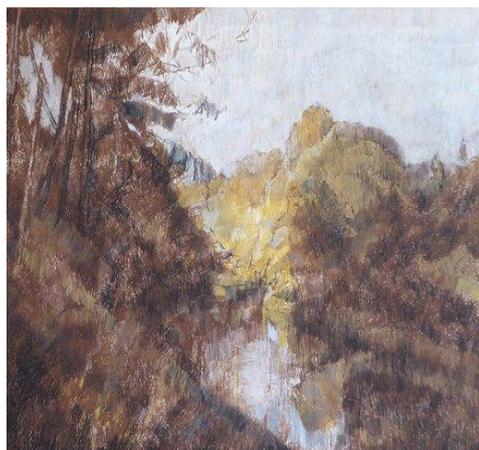
Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council

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*Can you describe your artistic practice?*

I begin with lots of drawing, primarily in ink or graphite, and mostly from life in a sketchbook. Then, if a subject engages my attention, I will make larger drawings, the paper pinned to a drawing board. I also draw from the work of the painters I particularly admire; Pieter Bruegel the Elder is an artist I have drawn from a lot (in both senses of the word) for a long time now and continue to do so. I do also use photographic sources, always bearing in mind the painter Walter Sickert's dictum

that photography is rather like alcohol in that it is fine to use it so long as one is not completely dependent upon it.



Some of the drawings stand by themselves, some will lead on to oil paintings, my primary medium.

Others may become oil pastels, a medium I have worked with a great deal for a considerable number of years now.

[Left: Jake Attree (2020) *The Derwent at Malton*, oil pastel, by permission of the artist]

Some of the imagery might remain completely figurative, some become more abstract; whichever, they are both completely reliant on some empirical experience.

I feel the artist must be completely dependent on their sources and, at the same time, completely independent of them. My ambition is to make an image, be it an oil painting, oil pastel or drawing, that is completely independent of me, that has a life of its own, having new and previously unseen harmonies and logic. I have never yet managed to do that and probably never will, so I continue to try and, to quote from Samuel Beckett, to 'fail better'.

*What started you off as an artist?*

After my mother's death, my sister and I were going through her effects; somehow a book my paternal grandmother had given to my sister was amongst them. As my sister leafed nostalgically through the book, it soon became evident that, as a small boy, I had drawn on every available blank space (my indulgent sister forgave me). A few pages in, I found I had made drawings of a recurring and disturbing dream I had been having. I was perhaps four at the time, so from my earliest years I was drawing things that had a deep emotional effect on me.

Also, when I was very young, my father would take me to the locks at Naburn, about four miles south of York; at the time this still had a working water mill. Or we would climb up onto York's Baile Hill, which I remember having a large rookery in the trees

covering the earthwork. Later, when I was about fourteen, the discovery through reproduction of the work of John Constable and Pieter Bruegel struck me with such force that I determined painting would be what I would do with my life. The water mill and locks at Naburn became my *Haywain*, and the experience of standing on Baile Hill with my father looking across York became my *Gloomy Day* from Bruegel's *Seasons* series.

*Who or what are your influences?*

As mentioned above, Constable and Bruegel have been a big influence on my work. Paul Cézanne has been a seminal influence, both formally and also as an example of how an artist should live their life. 'The man must remain obscure' he remarked, implying the work is what mattered, not who made it or any incidental facts about them.

If I think of all the painters who have influenced me, what they all have in common is a deeply felt formal restraint. While they are too numerous to mention them all, they include Gwen John, Giorgio Morandi, Paul Klee, Therese Oulton, Agnes Martin, and Brice Marden. David Bomberg, Frank Auerbach, and Leon Kossoff have been very influential too, but I find in my seventieth year that the earlier formative influences reassert themselves. I was also fortunate in having supportive teachers and tutors throughout my artistic education, to whom I am very grateful.

*How would you describe your recent work?*

Like many other artists, I return again and again to the same subjects, not because one feels comfortable with them but because previous attempts seem wholly inadequate or compromised, or both, and one is hoping to make the definitive version, which will of course never happen, so one continues, *ad infinitum*.

I am currently working on six transcriptions in oil pastel after Bruegel the Elder, having just completed thirteen oil pastels that will be used as illustrations to a collaboration with the poet, Michael Symmons Roberts. Michael's twelve stanzas and my oil pastels were inspired directly or indirectly by Bruegel's *Procession to*

*Calvary* in the [Kunsthistorisches Museum](#) in Vienna. The limited-edition publication will be published by *Fine Press Poetry* shortly.

*What would you say is the main challenge in your making?*

Trying to make something that looks completely authentic, that has integrity and a certain kind of rawness. The challenges are not so much technical, having after all been doing this since I was about fourteen. Having said that, one is always aware that any ability one may have acquired over the years must be used to try and say something original; technique for its own sake is futile.

*How has this recent period of lockdown affected your work?*

Much less than I felt it might. I can't get into my studio at Dean Clough in Halifax as I live in Saltaire and don't drive. I was going in by bus as usual at the beginning but



that seemed reckless, to say the least! So I have been working at home in oil pastel as using oil paint in the way I do at the studio would be more than a little difficult.

I see very few people when I am in the studio, so not seeing people now is not that big an issue for me. I simply get on with the task at hand, finding this takes me away

from myself, which I think is what makes us truly happy.

*Do you have a website where our members can find out more about your practice?*

My website is under reconstruction; when it is up and running it will be [www.jakeattree.co.uk](http://www.jakeattree.co.uk). Meanwhile, examples of my work are available at [https://www.messums.com/artists/view/965/Jake%20 Attree](https://www.messums.com/artists/view/965/Jake%20Attree). There is also a YouTube video on me in York entitled 'Jake Attree: Artist in the City'. A four-minute excerpt is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAGkq2fQ5Nk>.

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