

Tony Bevan: Trees and Archives interview – organic, geometric, and human

Ben Brown Fine Arts, London

Exhibition showcases figurative painter's first archive paintings alongside an exploration into the natural world – and several new studies of his own head



'These paintings do in a sense leave the original tree behind and have a life of their own.' Photograph: Ben Brown Fine Arts

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Seven years ago, whilst travelling through the rural areas of China's Sichuan province, artist Tony Bevan stumbled across a gathering of ancient temples. It was a haunting, eerie place, he recalls, but it was a cluster of gnarled and leafless trees that caught his attention.

"The trees held these amazing forms within their crossed branches" said Bevan. "It was so unusual, I'd never seen anything like that before – they probably had been manipulated sometime in the past, but it was just a phenomenon, and as you walked around a tree new and various shapes emerged. It was like looking at a cloud. And there was something so exposed about a tree with no leaves, they seemed so stark."

The acclaimed figurative painter immediately took sketches of the tree's distinctive form, drawings that hung, untouched, on his studio walls for over five years. Yet over a year ago the unusual and almost limb-like formations of the trees once again caught his interest.

The tree now forms the basis of Bevan's newest exhibition, with the artist – known more for You're viewing the Guardian's new website. We'd love to hear what you think. large works based



This is one of the first times the natural world has emerged as the dominant theme in Bevan's work. Photograph: Courtesy of Ben Brown Fine Arts/Ben Brown Fine Arts

Yorkshire-born Bevan, 63, is famous for works that are imbued with a psychological intensity, most often raw and confrontational studies of his own head, though one of his most renowned works is a portrait of the pianist Alfred Brendel which currently hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. His previous exhibitions have also explored the linear spaces of architecture, in particular doorways and corridors, yet this is one of the first times the natural world has emerged as the dominant theme in Bevan's work.

However, this series of paintings does not embrace the unstructured chaos of nature and instead draw out the figurative, limb-like quality of the tree and manipulates the branches into formal, almost architectural shapes and lines

“I started introducing lots of limbs into the initial sketches for the paintings, lots of knees shapes and elbows, giving them a human element,” he said. “So the trees in my work have become very figurative in a sense.

“I like being able to manipulate how things form, how the branches cross and slightly touch, and influence the formal and spacial character of this tree for myself. These are not natural trees, and by using these deep red, purple and black colours I wanted to draw out how are sinewy and tendon-like they were, almost fleshy.”

He added: “These paintings do in a sense leave the original tree behind and have a life of their own, but there's still a degree of the original nature there. They go beyond that naturalistic world.”



'I was interested in that idea of being confronted with a physical form of the mass of information.' Photograph: Todd-White Art Photography/Ben Brown Fine Arts

The exhibition, titled 'Trees and Archives', is one that brings together the organic with the geometric and also showcases Bevan's first archive paintings, massive grid-like linear works depicting anonymous and repeating archive shelves, filled with faceless, titleless books.

The works, he said, were a response to the information age we live in, where more and more information is kept and stored on each of us, yet these archives of all our personal data are increasingly intangible.

"I was interested in that idea of being confronted with a physical form of the mass of information, a storage hall that could contain any potential knowledge, it could be military, political or sexual," said Bevan.

"I also got quite interested in just the formal elements of an archive and the grid structure that is inherent in them" he continued. "The way things in an archive are arranged in this cell-like structure that has the potential to be infinite, limitless - they can be as big as the library of babel, they can be as big as the universe, so the painting just a small snapshot."

While Bevan is insistent his own trajectory as an artist is one of "chaos, contradiction and constant revisiting", his interpretation of the self-portrait has remained at the heart of his work for three decades and, among the trees and archives, the current exhibition again includes several new studies of his own head.

The works, he said, have little to do with his own appearance, and by often taking a viewpoint looking up at head from the vulnerable area of the neck under the chin, he avoids the very personal identity of the full-frontal face and they instead become more of a map of the internal psyche.

"I may use my own head as a starting point but these are not works about appearance or a repeated attempt to create a replica of myself," said Bevan. "I don't really see the purpose of a self-portrait to just be a physical representation of the artist. What always interests me with self-portraits is the bit you don't see, looking up at the head from below almost up their nostrils. Then it becomes more about the bodiliness of the head, the structure and shape of it, which is more interesting for me and allows for more an entry into myself."

Bevan said it was familiarity rather than narcissism that explained his use of his own self as the basis for his works, and admitted that even in his commissioned portrait of Brendel, his own self had crept into the work.

“I tend to call these works self-portraits but it could be misleading,” he added. “They are not traditional representations of the face but more an examination and study of internal structure inside the head, in both a physical and emotional sense. How they come out is guided very much by how I’m feeling when I paint them.”

Indeed, with the facial features often obscured by harsh charcoal lines and wild scrawls and, in the case of many of this exhibition’s self-portraits, set against an opaque black background, Bevan acknowledged his work could be “quite difficult to look at because it can be very confrontational - though I never do that for effect.”

While the three series in the exhibition - the trees, the archives and the self-portraits - may appear disparate, Bevan said they all left space for the viewer to enter into them and project their own self onto the paintings, particularly with the self-portraits.

“I feel there is space in these particular heads and necks for people to bring their own emotions and feelings to enter into those particular heads themselves, so in a sense it can be a self-portrait for them as well,” he said.

“Everyone brings to paintings their own emotional baggage, which is what I like about it,” Bevan added. “Painting is a contemplative thing and it has to have more than a one line life to it - not simply that you get it or you don’t, that’s got nothing to do with it. Those are the worst kind of works, where a painting is a momentary experience but has no life after that.”

Tony Bevan: Trees and Archives is at the Ben Brown Fine Arts until 3 January 2015.

. This article was amended on 3 December 2014 to correct the title of Ben Brown Fine Arts.