

One other Enterprising Mind

An Interview with British Artist John Gledhill

Artist John Gledhill was born in Bolton, Lancashire but is currently based in London, where he shares Clink Street Studio with Richard Hoptroff since 2008.

“The skill of drawing has always been the foundation to Gledhill’s work.” He has experienced with various mediums, among them drawings with charcoal and pencil. The artist focuses undoubtedly on London but also, perhaps more importantly, on its people and their daily routines while out and about in the city.

“For me these animals are themselves magnificent works of art, and by including them in my own art works I wanted to help create a desire in people to hold on to them.”

Gledhill has studied at the University of Lancaster and the Royal Academy Schools in London and was awarded a doctorate by the University of York. He has collections in the U.S.A., South Africa, Australia, Ireland and UK and has exhibited extensively including often times at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in London. He was also invited in 2012 to give a lecture at the Washington University in St. Louis, USA.

Gledhill has published *A Catalogue Raisonne of the Oil Paintings of Matthew Smith 1879-1959*, and other works on this master landscape artist. His major paintings include 'The Treadmill', 'The Ship' and the latest 'Extinction' series. His fascinating Ships were inspired by words from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem. They are a unique statement, in his own words, of “the anticipation and joy of setting out on a journey and the romance of travel but also the way each one ploughs their own furrow symbolizing personal isolation”.

Gledhill’s concern for animal extinction has led him to donate part of the proceeds of his most recent work, [The Extinction Series](#) to [The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust](#). In the striking Last Elephant Gledhill represents a future in which these magnificent animals will be extinct. One last surviving creature is ‘paraded’ around while onlookers, with the exception of very few, are aloof and unaware of this species unfortunate destiny. The artist’s linocut print of The Last Elephant has been acquired by the V&A Museum for their permanent collection.



- **Are there special qualities that define an artist?**

The word artist is one of the most overused words in the language. But no I don’t think of the artist as having special character traits if that is what is meant by special qualities. An artist in my view is by definition someone who spends the main part of his/her time making artworks. To maintain this does require great determination and the ability to sustain long periods of isolation. The production of Visual Art is demanding both intellectually and physically. As Van Gogh said, ‘I have a hard and dirty profession’ so physical strength and intellectual rigour would be important.

- **How long did it take you to see yourself as one, was this passion always in your heart?**

I was always looking for what it was I was meant to do and went to University partly with that aim in mind. I knew with certainty that I wanted to be an artist from the moment when I first made a drawing sat by the Campus Lake, March 1971. The drawing was of a Daffodil.

- **What's your favourite medium?**

My favourite medium is oil paint for its great flexibility and its maddening recalcitrance.

- **Which creative medium would you love to pursue but haven't yet?**

I would love to be able to play great blues guitar.

- **What do you want your work to achieve?**

A great Jazz musician once said that good music is good to listen to. My first and by far the most important aim is that the work should be good to look at. That means it's good to look at in terms of the drawing, the composition and the colour and texture. The second aim is conveyance of the issue that artwork is dealing with, but with the important proviso that the viewer is free to interpret the image according to his or her own thinking.



- **Would you tell us about the first artwork you ever sold?**

I sold a landscape while at the Royal Academy Schools in London studying for an MA in Painting. It was bought for the Art in Hospitals collection for £65.00 in 1978. I later found out that when it was first displayed in a Hospital it was stolen!

- **If you could own one piece of art, any, which one would you choose and why?**

Without hesitation I would choose the extraordinary Van Gogh Self Portrait 1889 now in the Musee D'Orsay Paris – one of the world's greatest masterpieces.

- **How did you come up with the title for The Last Elephant and what is this for you about?**

The Last Elephant imagines a time in the near future when the last elephant on Earth is being paraded from town to town for the edification of a largely indifferent public. The image is a protest, but is intended to stimulate a reaction in the viewer to do whatever possible however small to save these wonderful creatures which are themselves works of

art. As a composition I was interested in the idea of putting a crowd of people around the edge of a painting and have the space in the middle.

- **Do you find that the ever growing ‘social enterprise’ is the way to succeed while committing to support causes for conservation and resolution of conflict between human populations and animal habitat?**

I have always been interested in all forms of wildlife and nature. My cousin with whom I was very close devoted his life to conservation, working in Kenya on the effects of human infrastructure on the environment and he was a strong formative influence.

- **Are there financial risks involved when committing to support good causes and therefore donating proceeds from your work?**

Working in partnership with charities has been a positive experience. There is a financial deficit when you donate proceeds from a sale but the benefits of gaining a wider audience who are drawn to the work because of the subject matter outweigh that deficit. People who respond through the Charities are purchasing a work that they really love.

- **What’s the best advice you ever had?**

In terms of the Art work the best advice I ever had was when as a student we visited the Sculptor Henry Moore and he said; ‘There is just one thing I want to say to you and that is: Never stop Drawing.’

- **And finally do you believe ‘Extraordinary’ is possible?**

My latest exhibition at the Strule Art Centre Omagh 6th-28th February 2015 has had an extraordinary response.

“Ships that pass in the night,
and speak each other in passing,
Only a signal shown and a distant voice
in the darkness;
So on the ocean of life we pass and speak one another,
Only a look and a voice,
then darkness again and a silence.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

For more information on John Gledhill’s work you may visit his [website](#). You will also find updates of his work and exhibitions [here](#).

By Patricia C. Prada Jimenez

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