



Mike Molloy

Guy Landis talks to the artist about his extraordinary life and work.

Mike Molloy's exhibition of paintings in London this autumn marks another milestone on the remarkable journey he began in his youth when he walked away from art school to take a job as a copy boy on a newspaper.

So, Mike, how did it all begin?

I saw a small ad saying *Mirror Newspapers* were offering a year's employment. It sounded like fun, so I decide to take the next twelve months off, a sort of early gap year. In those days art schools were extraordinarily flexible, so I wasn't worried about getting back in. But after a couple of weeks at the *Sunday Pictorial* the editor offered me the chance to become a layout artist. The work left most of my days free so I returned to Ealing Art School; I even paid my own fees. I had the best of both worlds: all the fun of art school and a well-paid job in Fleet Street. I could even afford a tailor-made suit.

But you had no desire to be a painter?

No, being at art school was great, but I couldn't make any real connection with contemporary painting. In those days we were like sheep, just following the latest fashion.

What were the main influences?

Mostly I tried to imitate the Abstract Expressionists and, for a time, Frank Auerbach, who taught life classes at Ealing. Auerbach was a wonderful teacher. The studio crackled with his energy, but, like the rest of us, I made a sorry job of imitating his work. Secretly I



admired the Pre-Raphaelites but they were laughed at then. So I concentrated on my newspaper job and eventually discovered I had a bit of a flair for the work.

In your twenties you rose rapidly through Fleet Street's executive ranks until you were appointed editor of the Daily Mirror in 1974, Did he ever paint in those years?

Occasionally - they were all figurative pictures and delicately constructed. Sometimes I felt like an old lady doing needlepoint.

After ten years of editing the Daily Mirror, Robert Maxwell bought the paper and, having opposed the takeover, you assumed you would be fired. Instead, Maxwell appointed you Editor in Chief?

Yes, Everyone should work for a mad dictator for a while, it would make us value democracy more.

Five years later you left the Mirror Group and wrote several critically acclaimed novels including The Century and for children The Witch Trade trilogy, but you were still working as a newspaper consultant?

Yes, the money was good but the job was intrinsically boring: editing a newspaper is astonishingly enjoyable, but being a consultant is a dreary way to make a living.

So what brought you back to painting?

Something quite extraordinary: I'm still not sure what happened. One day, a bit over ten years ago, I was overwhelmed by a compulsion to start painting again. The passion I'd never felt in my youth suddenly arrived like a massive electrical shock and I was hooked. I just went out and stocked up on equipment and took over my wife Sandy's beloved conservatory as a studio.

Was it a fulfilling experience?

Molloy shakes his head. Quite the contrary: the driving desire to paint was there, but whatever force caused me to begin again conspicuously failed to provide me with the necessary subject matter. For a while I was lost and just floundered in a sea of frustration.

What turned the key?

I'd tried a few townscapes, which helped a bit, and then one day I found a fragment of a photograph in a book of pictures taken in the early war years. The people leapt out at me. I began to trawl obsessively through old family pictures, black and white movie stills, and ancient copies of pre-war magazines. Then, in my mind, the images began to montage on one another. There was a definite sense of painting a time I'd been tantalisingly close to but never actually known.

Did it seem odd to you?

Very much so, then a psychiatrist friend of mine told



me I was in the grip of a fairly common condition. He called it post-generation nostalgia. The golden times of my parents' youth, and the early childhood of my half-brother and sister, were spent in the thirties and in the emotional intensity of the war years. For them it had been a special time. Somehow they'd imprinted those emotions onto me.

So these influences got you started?

Yes, and other factors suddenly kicked in. I had always loved the cinema and in particular Ealing films. Many of them have scenes made on the streets where I lived. In my mind the distinction between cinema and reality became blurred, I began to imagine a sort of perpetual movie inhabited by my parents and relatives; I still do it today. Images from the past triggered memories of stories I'd been told as a child. What I was doing was painting scenes from movies I'd made in my head.

Do all movies influence your work?

Oh, no, I love American and European films, but I'm an English painter. The Thames and the suburbs of Richmond and Ealing haunt me, and the countryside to the west of London. Sometimes the countryside of Durham, where my mother's parents lived.

So you'd describe yourself as a narrative painter?

I think so. All my life I've remembered the first two paintings that ever impressed me. As a small boy my father took me to The Imperial War Museum. It was there I first saw *Gassed*, John Singer Sargent's picture of a line of blinded British soldiers; it's always stayed with me. The same day I saw Dame Laura Knight's painting, *Ruby Lofthouse Screwing a Breech Ring*. Both pictures captivated me. I could relate to the stories they told. My Great Uncle Arthur had been gassed at Ypres and two of my aunts had operated lathes when they'd been co-opted into factories as war workers. As I got older and became more knowledgeable, I came to appreciate the superb techniques they'd applied in the pictures, but for me it was always the sheer skill of their storytelling abilities. If I can ever achieve anything approaching that, then I will have done something worthwhile.

opposite left: The Scarecrow's Wife

opposite right: The War Game

below: Aunts on a Swing

Mike Malloy's exhibition runs 28 September – 12 October at Belgravia Gallery, 45 Albemarle Street, London, W1S 4JL. Telephone: +44 (0) 20 74951010. www.belgraviagallery.com