



Nicholas Weist talks to Simon English

Simon English is a UK-based artist who recently published a monograph with Black Dog Press and Nicholas Weist is an editor-at-large for NY Arts magazine.

Nicholas Weist: Simon, many of your works on paper use the rhetoric of scrapbooks, but the final works do not actually contain collaged material. What prompted this disassociation?

Simon English: I like the rhetoric of the scrapbook and you are right, in many ways the work does simulate collage. For me, the most important thing is starting with the blank page. There is no pre-existing imagery or text to either collage into or kick-start a dialogue. I draw or write to set things in motion, and in this sense the process of drawing itself activates the work. I am interested in the internal logic of the page, the set of chain reactions and counteractions that take place.

No two days are the same...it's delicate-drawing-day, it's thick-paint-desperate-Dan. I do use elements of collage when putting together very large sheets of paper, but less and less. They exist in a box usually salvaged from different drawing sources and act as a narrative or visual link between pages. They have to somehow interact or throw the image with all the luxury an external logic can provide.

NW: The physical practice of "scrapbooking" aside, one gets the sense that the work is diaristic, intimate even. How much autobiography is in the fantasy?

SE: There is a strong diaristic and autobiographical thread in the work, and fantasy plays a strong part in bringing that to the surface. Bringing memory to the light of day is a bit like Orpheus retrieving Eurydice from the underworld, you cannot look at it directly in the face, you have to dance around it. Quite often, like Proust and the madeleine, it comes when you least expect it.

I wrote on a drawing last year, "Draw to forget, try to remember." In the midst of a personal relationship breakdown, I was painfully aware of how important it was to use drawing as a means of escape—and yet also realized that wherever I went all things returned to Rome, as it were. I like to play with fiction and reality, the one embellishes the other and makes for a better story. I once invented a "big lie series," which was itself a lie, yet it gave me carte blanche to rewrite history and go anywhere I wanted—freedom being the ultimate goal.

So many day-to-day experiences enter the work, and in this sense it is diaristic. When putting together or editing works, I am often drawn to the pieces that are most relevant to my life. There's a sort of truth I can trust, a sense of coming home and a tangible meaning that supercedes aesthetic criteria: "My god it's so terrible but it has to be there, it's real."

NW: It's interesting you mention Proust.... His writing about the relativity of memory mirrors your process of compilation: assemblage as investigation—an aggregate of information distilled variously across time. Would you rather be the Baron or Morel—the coveter or the coveted?

SE: Before endeavoring to answer your question, I must say that I have only just been given *Swann's Way*: I'm loving it and am around page 150. It has been temporarily abandoned, though, for a mass dose of Agatha Christie to help me get to sleep at night in the build up to a new show. And if I highjacked the murder mysteries to describe the process of studio assemblage, I would say it's akin to solving a clue in



Opposite page: **Simon English**, *The Call of the Ancient Woods, Bleat, Bleat*, 2006; ink, acrylic, crayon, and oil on paper.
 Right: **Simon English**, *R. Dadd, "I Paint Loss"*, 2005; oil, acrylic, gouache, ink, and crayon on paper. Private collection.

a police incident room. It's not until one starts placing works together that one begins to forge poetic connections and find synchronicities and patterns.

To state the obvious, the present affects the past as the past affects the present. I once put a large piece together for a show in Berlin and called it *R. Dadd, "I paint loss"* after a quote from the Victorian painter, spoken whilst incarcerated in Bedlam. [*Richard Dadd, English painter of the "Fairy School," was institutionalized in Bethlehem Hospital, a psychiatric ward otherwise known as Bedlam, after admitting to the murder of his father. —Ed.*] A friend of mine pointed out that the entire work was about the loss of my father, who died in a car accident in Germany when I was two and a half. I realized that "R." could have been "our," and was astonished not to have made the connection myself. The process of assemblage had completed the investigation.

I think the question of the coveter and coveted is a complex two-fold relationship. The idea of "painting loss" looms large in the work: I covet the things I've lost—the unrequited, the wanted—but I also celebrate the beautiful things I have, including (not to sound too romantic) "life itself." I hope I have long since stopped barking at the moon and am very happy to follow the path of requited love. Of course as artists we want to be loved and we want people to covet our work.

NW: Speaking of the Fairy School, some of your works show sex acts between, well, creatures. How did you come to realize these mostly half-human forms?

SE: I was going to tell you that "Fairy School" has been on something

of a sabbatical of late, but I've just this minute agreed to take part in a special fairytale print edition for Jane Simpson and Gavin Turk. So while I was about to say that only affected and disaffected angels have been entering the work alongside regular appearances from Pan (when the call of the ancient woods is heard) it seems I must return to looking in foxgloves for the odd chance sighting.

The hybrids first crept into my work nearly ten years ago. They brought a nursery rhyme with them and belonged to a world that was safe and self-contained. They occupied a picture space I wanted to enter and opened the door to the chamber of the imagination. Rabbits, bears, and waddling ducks signified "story telling," and to this day wander around in search of narrative.

The fact that they all ended up fucking each other had something to do with the world I occupied at that time. I was incredibly promiscuous, and it all just found its way onto the page. That sex is a place of invention and "let's pretend" intimacies amongst strangers was profoundly compelling.

My work exists in a state of continual metamorphosis, and I think drawing is a bit like entering C.S. Lewis's wardrobe. "This must be a simply enormous wardrobe!" Lucy says as she pushes the soft folds of the coats and discovers powdery and extremely cold snow beneath her. The soft fur has given way to "something hard and rough and even prickly." She stands at the edge of a forest. But later on, and most importantly, she learns that you can never enter Narnia the same way twice.