

East Anglian Daily Times, Saturday April 24, 1999

Close to home

Suffolk artist becomes observer of domesticity

"THE NUDE in the bedroom has become my signature, if you like. It's a subject I find incredibly fascinating - the possibilities are endless and open to innumerable interpretations. There is almost something spiritual about it."

These are the words of Suffolk-based artist Hugo Grenville - a former Captain in the Coldstream Guards - who is currently enjoying his second one-man exhibition at The David Messum Gallery in London.

Hugo describes himself as a keen observer of domestic life. Since moving with his young family from central London to Mendham three years ago, his work has taken on a distinctly home-centred flavour.

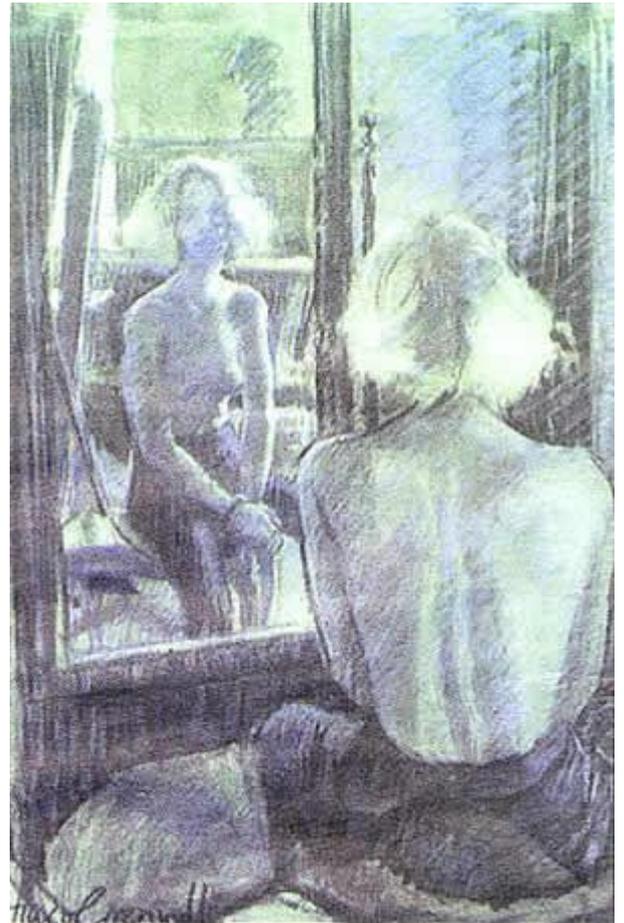
"The figure can take on so many forms. It can be nude, half dressed, the light can fall in a variety of ways highlighting the face, the back, the line of a body - aesthetically the figure is immensely satisfying. "Setting the figures in bedrooms reflects my interest in human relationships. Figures in bedrooms are part of private moments that we rarely get to see. It's a privileged insight into people's lives. I find relationships wonderfully intriguing.

"Obviously there is a sexual aspect to the work, largely because of the setting, and that is more difficult to articulate. It is an important part of human relationships and that element of my work comes more from my subconscious than anything I deliberately set out to achieve. "Certainly, if you introduce a second figure into a scene - particularly if it is a man - then there is immediately a degree of ambiguity introduced into the situation."

Hugo Grenville is a successful self-taught artist who gains his inspiration from the work of novelist Graham Greene. "I love the ambiguity that is inherent in all his characters and the seedier, grittier areas of life that they exist in."

He said that while he lived in London many of his paintings were concerned with people meeting in public places - parks, street corners and train stations. It is only since his arrival in Suffolk that the focus of his attention has shifted indoors.

From the moment you meet him, it is obvious that Hugo is passionate about his work. He is an earnest interviewee



Antonia in Reflection

which is off-set by a charming self-depreciating sense of humour. He also thinks long and hard when answering questions which he then answers in a very direct manner. Although Hugo comes from an artistic background - his father and uncles were all accomplished amateur artists and draftsmen - he is the first member of his family to make a living from his work.

And then it took him nearly 30 years to progress to the point when he felt confident enough to take the plunge. "I always knew I wanted to be a painter. I did fairly well at school in art. I won various prizes - basically because no-one else did very much I think but it gave me a boost.

"I hated sport. I couldn't play sports at all - hopeless I was, so I sought refuge in clay and paint. After I left school at 18, having done the hippy trail to India, I went for a job at Sothebys and basically they told me to clear off. They suggested that I live a little and the chap who interviewed me suggested I join the Army.

"My parents were divorced by this time, and I was told that there was no money to be had from them, so I had to do something to earn a living. I followed that chap's advice and joined the Coldstream Guards - and hated every minute of it."

Hugo lets out a smile before continuing: "That's not strictly true. I hated the training with everyone screaming at you all the time but once we were out in the real world, it did get an awful lot better."

He trained at Sandhurst - spending his weekends with his school chums at university. "I stuck out like a sore thumb. I'd turn up with my ridiculously short military haircut, getting out of my head and having a great time before having to sober up and go back to training."

During his time with the Coldstream Guards he served in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) helping to pave the way for local elections and did a tour of duty in Northern Ireland - "which wasn't fun".

Throughout his five-year tour of duty with the Coldstream Guards he was painting all the time. "One of the greatest assets of the British Army is that they draw their officers from a very proud range of interests - so although I didn't exactly fit the model of a career soldier, I wasn't made to feel completely out of place."

In fact during Hugo's final years in the Army he served as the ADC (Aide de Camp) to the British commander of Nato forces in Germany. "The Army was an incredible experience - not one I would ever want to repeat but not one I would forget either."

Having left the army he joined a leading American advertising agency J Walter Thompson. "I was bored stiff. During meetings I used to look out of the window that overlooked Berkeley Square looking at the colours in the shadows beneath the trees. Let me tell you the shadows

were an awful lot more interesting than anything that was going on at the meetings."

Hugo left after a year and with a friend started his own art dealership before selling his share of the business after five years and opting to paint full time.

"I was going to life classes most evenings at this point and it had become difficult for me to function if I wasn't painting. There was so much that I wanted to do and even though I had all the traditional warnings about it being a good hobby and you'll never make a living out of it, I felt I had to try. Fortunately I've been able to sell enough work to allow me to keep painting and to pay the bills."

His painting also helped finance the move to Suffolk three years ago and carry out restoration work on an old farmhouse that was, as Hugo described it, "very much on its last legs."

Hugo, his wife Sophie, and children Hector and Oscar, had to contend with a house that looked like a building site, (one end of the house had to be dismantled and rebuilt from the ground up), one tap that supplied running water and an outside toilet. "We had to live here while the work was going on. We couldn't afford to rent anywhere else."

Now they have settled in, Hugo has gathered together a good selection of local models, 14 people answered one advert alone, and has set up a twice-yearly teaching course.

The state of Britain's art schools is the one subject that is likely to ruffle his air of quiet geniality. He admits to being exasperated by reports that art schools no longer teach the fundamentals of life drawing. "Figure drawing and painting has been the cornerstone of the art world since time began.

"Art schools seem to be pushing virtually every other form of artistic expression except painting. I can't understand why they should want to do away with an art form that has been around for 35,000 years. It has been man's basic form of communication and all of sudden it's out of date. I think it's the very height of arrogance.

"Of course there's always room for new expression. I try to experiment with new ideas in my work but you don't throw away 35,000 years of experience and tradition just to be stylish or modern. "Everyone seems to be obsessed with novelty rather than with excellence. I think history will look back on art in the late-20th Century and will regard it as a particularly uninspired period." He sees art as an expressive medium rather than one which blindly reproduces the world which we can all see. "Painting should capture the spirit of a person or the atmosphere of a situation. A painting should say something about its subject."

Of his landscapes, he says that these are something he thinks of as his holiday work. "I tend to do landscapes when I'm on holiday or when I'm out with the family. I take a pad and a box of paints and paint scenes or situations that capture my imagination."

He said that his appreciation of landscapes has increased since his move to Suffolk. "I don't think you can live anywhere as beautiful as Suffolk without being seduced by the world around you."