



Don't Miss This!

PROFILE Mike Sims on **Gerry Baptist ARWS RE** and his restless switching between the drive to *do* and headscratching about *what exactly*.

The first time I interviewed Gerry Baptist was in the early 1990s for a news piece in *Printmaking Today*. He'd made a series of digital prints with bold, flat colour cut through with spontaneous marks revealing a layer of old maps. They were commissions from Guildford Council that he'd made while freelancing in Frankfurt, having found his way around Adobe software using a German language edition.

Not that many fine artists were taking digital technology seriously at the time. Hamilton and Hockney were experimenting with temperamental Iris printers, while art colleges were putting smaller if similarly tricky machines through their paces. The middle art market worried about lightfastness, while traditional printmakers agitated about the unexciting, uniform surface of computer prints, and whether they were only reproductions anyway.

Baptist, on the other hand, was an unperturbed enthusiast. Perhaps because he'd trained in graphic design, perhaps because he'd worked in advertising during the buccaneering 1960s and 70s, he wasn't precious about tradition. He is a steadfast admirer of artists who have gone their own way – Picasso, de Kooning, Hockney and Hirst. And at that time, it seems to me, digital technology freed his hand and helped him move on from more commercial work he'd lost patience with. He would have liked being in on the argument about aesthetics and integrity, too. Baptist has what you might describe as a lightly interrogative disposition – an enquiring mind and wide-ranging views, though he is always keen to hear what you think as well. As an habitually improvisational artist, Baptist clears his way from time to time. In the 1970s, he turfed out a pile of his abstract paintings and burned the lot. Though for a

time they had absorbed him entirely, 'They were an embarrassment.' Later, he better understood, 'that being an artist means accepting that you may be embarrassed by what you produce sometimes and not to give a damn.' This readiness to chuck things over for a promising new direction, combined with a readiness to give apparent missteps another go, is an appealing aspect of Baptist's approach.

You see it in many of his prints, in the way he embraces the challenges of new techniques. After an ash tree was blown down in his garden, he taught himself woodcut, using slices of the tree as blocks for his series *The 7 Deadly Sins*. The results are rugged but inspired him to refine his technique for his subsequent series of garden prints. In the garden prints, it's possible to spot elements from some hard-won, Abstract-Expressionist-influenced drawings he'd made after leaving college (a foundation at Walthamstow School of Art and Graphics at London School of Printing).

Engagingly, Baptist can't say what it is that prompts him in one direction or another, or how sure of success he ever feels. It gives him both a detachment and a curiosity about what he makes, perhaps founded upon a breezy confidence that, with a fair wind, he may be headed elsewhere. This improvisational energy – a restless switching between the drive to *do* and headscratching about *what exactly* – adds an irrepressible exuberance to the occasional *Sturm und Drang* of his images and themes.

In the end, he is less concerned with imparting *The Last Word* on a subject than the relevance (or not) of his output to this more tantalising question: *what sense can I make of what's in my head right now?*

When I went to interview Baptist, we spent an interesting hour looking at his father's books. They'd been shipped from India to England, the family's new home after the end of WWII; Baptist, who was born in India, was ten years old at the time.

The few remnants of what had been an enormous library 'of fiction, biographies, poetry, botany, science, philosophy, music scores, comics, trashy detective paperbacks and of course numerous books on art', included elegant surveys of type and poster design in which Baptist's



father had annotated in pencil anything he found noteworthy and instructive. There was also Marvel and DC, Fleischer, Fougasse and Bateman. Baptist would pore over all of these, copying out what interested him (he continues to test the mind-bending possibilities of cartoons).

I was struck by the lasting influence of that first library. As a child, scouring his father's books, Baptist would have been introduced (as we all at some point) to a fully adult world: sophisticated, portentous, sometimes impenetrable. (That move back to England from India must surely have felt like a very clear break with boyhood.) Those marginal notes of his father's have their equivalent in his own adult output: the speech bubbles, the cut-out texts, the scratched-on slogans and quotes; Baptist often incorporates the titles of his works into the images, too.

Sometimes Baptist's texts have a didactic intent. They focus our attention: 'Don't Miss This!', 'You Don't Need More'. Quite often, they mock – the cartoon speech bubbles and graffitied insertions functioning as boisterous, freewheeling metatexts. Sometimes they confound, by which I mean that things don't always (as is so often the case for children in the adult world) *add up*; they conflate but they don't necessarily clarify. In his father's library, Baptist learned the multiple possibilities of accretion and improvisation.

Baptist is a thoroughly grown-up artist, of course. He is influenced by all the variants of Expressionism, from George Grosz to Philip Guston. He has a sophisticated understanding of Pop Art tropes, its cheek and affability. Hirst's cheery cocksureness is also a guilty pleasure.

In his work, Baptist deals with big themes, and the scale of his opprobrium is often biblical. God, Christ, John the Baptist and Salome mingle with financiers, heavies, priests and coquettes in a neon-bright, twenty-first century *Danse Macabre* – the greed and vanity of the modern world pictured through bank crashes, boob jobs, Black Friday and planet-poisoning road-jams. He can be cheerily baleful – the overweight Jumbo trailing smoke in the carborundum print *Happy Holidaymakers*, the daft, horrible prancing towards the endgame in his multimedia sequence *The Salome Show*.

Baptist is seriously concerned about the state of our morals and the future of the planet. At the same time, Popeye's pal Wimpy bumbles in and out of view, munching his trademark burger; Jessica Rabbit poses and Betty Boop drops a curtsy. It's difficult to feel that Baptist's hellfire isn't moderated a touch by their appearance in his to-hell-in-a-handcart cast, in a comic leavening that lets us off our hook a little. Baptist isn't only a satirist, pondering rules and rebellion, right and wrong, art and morality. He makes puzzlement fun though it's dangerous fun; we *are* the subject, whether or not as viewers we like to think so.

Will you mention *joy*, he observes when I show him a draft of this article. He's right to ask, it's there throughout the work. Baptist's ongoing series of garden prints and paintings, dedicated to his wife Jean, a garden designer, are a good example: a vivid celebration of that most traditional of retreats, the English pastoral. But even here Baptist's approach is restless, questioning. The glints of colour in some of the prints are, he tells me, diagrammatic representations of the DNA double helix of the old conifers in his garden – the garden is a symbol but also scientific. You see how Baptist relishes debate, in this case about beauty, biology and morality. More delight, more big themes and always more questions...

Gerry Baptist ARWS RE will be exhibiting in the *RWS Contemporary Watercolour Competition*, 2–14 March, and in *RE Original Prints 2018*, 18 May – 20 June, both at Bankside Gallery, 48 Hopton Street, London SE1 9JH, UK. www.gerrybaptist.co.uk

Images

Envy (2012) Woodcut, 230 mm (diameter). Edition of 10, printed on 71gsm Asuzo Japanese paper
Happy Holidaymakers (2006) Carborundum, 300 x 400 mm. Edition of 25, printed on 250gsm Somerset soft white paper

Learning the Art of Diplomacy: The Waste Makers (2006) Pen and ink. Photo of A3 sketchbook
Supermarket Man (2007) Hexachrome print, 800 x 800 mm. Edition of 30, printed on 300gsm archival paper

The Salome Show (2009) Digital print with screenprint varnish, 600 x 900 mm. Edition of 30, printed on 300gsm archival paper

What is it that makes burgers so appealing – after Hamilton (2013) Woodcut, 300 x 400 mm. Edition of 15, printed on 71gsm Bunko Shi Japanese paper