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Andrew Litten, *Breathing*, 2012. Image courtesy of Anima-Mundi Gallery

# Pain, wit and gesture

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The visual oxymoron of a whimsical and lyrical tendency combined with raw, almost brutal elements is the driving tension that gives Andrew Litten's work impact. He is an expressionist painter and, although he had some formal training (evening drawing classes), one can't help thinking that had he not later abandoned art school (reflecting on its claustrophobic and restrictive atmosphere), he may have been influenced by the far more commonplace irony and sensationalism that was typical of his generation of artists.

*Creativity is empowering and empathy is powerful. I want to create art that speaks of the love, anger, loss, personal growth and the private confusions we all experience in our lives. Perhaps subversive, tender, malevolent, compassionate—the need to see raw human existence drives it all forwards. - Andrew Litten 2018*

Expressing intelligence, wit and raw emotion is a tall order and difficult to balance on the picture plane, often failing or slipping into one or the other. Litten's practice manages to contain this energy: choice of colour, materials and a folksy, naturalistic approach to figuration helps to douse and add a little poetry to brutal mark-making and difficult subject matter.

Litten's forthright, engaging style and the frankness of paint handling make him a premier example of an unpretentious contemporary artist working with psychologically intriguing subject matter that often explores sex, death and violence, and the awkward need for companionship.

## **How do you define the body?**

My approach to representing the body is almost entirely guided by a sense of the subject that I am wanting to connect with. The figure can radically change position or shape as the work evolves. I have to go with it and support the changes compositionally and anatomically. The face is an essential element for me. We all intuitively read people's faces to understand their thinking and initially go for the eyes and mouth—particularly to read emotion.

Often, when I am creating the figure, a likeness to particular people I know will creep in and the subject might then begin to live in a slightly different way. Sometimes I use a photographic reference for further information, but it is all exploratory and there are no predetermined processes.

## **In what way do you feel you've pushed your conception and application of the body?**

My approach to the human body is to make representation read

emotionally. It is usually important that the descriptive information is present without slowing the reading or jolting the flow of engagement. I suppose this sounds simple, but it takes time to work through a lot of visual information.

Depth of emotion comes through consideration and reassessment of life experiences, and I think that this is important if you want to really represent something tangible in a convincing way.

## **What potential do you see in bodies?**

The human body is the most powerful timeless model of expression and I enjoy the process of trying to find my own way within a genre that has historical weight behind it. I can't really say beyond that, as my ideas and inspirations change all the time.

## **Are you conscious of your own body in the same way as in your work?**

My painted figures are usually around life-size. I view them as actual identities that are being created, not just as images of something. So, for this to read convincingly, I am actually engaging mentally and physically. In this way I am aware of my own body in relation to the painting and there is a behavioural connection as I self-identify deeply with what I am creating.

**What do you see as the greatest challenge to the body?**

Personally... staying alive.  
I don't know, otherwise.

**Why and when did you choose the body as a medium for your work?**

I left art college early because I was tired of the ego-driven environment and constant talk about ambition. This was the time of Brit Art and Shock Art. Personally, I preferred awkward honesty.

In one way or another, I have endeavoured to represent this within my particular milieu.

**Whose work regarding the physical human body do you admire?**

I tend to gravitate towards female art as it is typically more honest about the body. Louise Bourgeois obviously, Tracey Emin, Jenny Saville. I love the power of Rodin's sculptures at the moment, as I am using clay.

**Describe your technique?**

Any predetermined technical approach bores me quickly and if I decide to do one thing I usually begin to see equal worth in doing the opposite. Each piece of work needs to be a discovery for me and this means allowing in self-doubt together with the moments of clarity.

My attitude is to engage in an unguarded way. To focus to the extent that I can think about nothing else and for long periods of time create an image that feels right—even if it looks wrong and unexpected, it has to feel right. It is all very precarious. The whole surface of the painting



feels alive and unstable at the same time: like a mass of raw nerves on the surface.

**Where do you find inspiration?**

I never get inspiration copying images or anything stylistic.

It is always actual observations, conversations with people, hearing or reading their stories. It's the personal stuff that means something.

**Do you see the body as a place of permanence or change?**

There is possibly a hopeful world out there where we can change our body limits to a significant level alter gender, intelligence, stop ageing and cognitive decline, or potentially improve our bodies in extraordinary ways with prosthetics, etc.

The vast majority of people who face discrimination and

misunderstanding are stuck in their bodies and have to quietly cope with not fitting in.

**If you could change one thing about how humans are constructed what would it be?**

Fewer fingers, please! For some reason thumbs are great to paint and sculpt. And three fingers look good, too, but four fingers is a struggle for me to represent. I don't know why, but often think it.

**With developments like VR changing the way we view our bodies, will this affect your work?**

Definitely. All these things are exciting and odd so will affect my work.

Left: Andrew Litten with  
his work. 2018  
Below: *Sexual Inter-  
course*, 2012



Image courtesy of Anima-Mundi Gallery