

Gin Joint @ Searcy's
The Barbican

He drank a single espresso, sparkling water, a coke
I drank two lavender martinis
8pm
22nd October 2014

We arrive at the bar and take a seat at a high table in the corner which looks out onto the water and the Private Girl's school which Alex tells me is quite good. We sit opposite each other and peruse the menu handed to us by the smartly dressed waitress.

The room is rather dark, almost romantic and is full of middle-aged diners and drinkers. A couple sat to the left hand side kiss innocently seemingly unaware of their public situation. It goes unnoticed.

I order a lavender martini and Alex requests a single espresso and a sparkling water. When they arrive, the waitress confidently places three square, white napkins on the table before serving the drinks. Everything feels very Art Deco; the shape of the glasses and the simple tapering of the table legs compliment Alex's dark suit and glasses.

So Alex, tell me about your progression into sound.

I definitely see myself within a lineage of composers; from Debussy to Stockhausen, a line is clearly defined and I suppose I am part of the electro-acoustic genre, a probable distant descendant of the Frankfurt School. My work comes from an understanding of classical music, composition if you like; pop music is written and classical music is composed so I guess I'd define my work as being somewhat contemporary classical. Having said that I'd probably be down the Jazz aisle of HMV.

What about your paintings? How do they fit with the sound elements of your work?

Painting is relatively new for me. The paintings and sound are the same - I see them both as an externalisation of my emotions. They both offer temporal elements and I see them very much as time based. This can be seen through sound as durational but in the paintings, the temporal aspect is very much hidden and only occurs through making. I can spend a significant amount of time preparing the canvas or board or whatever it is I'm using, building up layers of colour until I'm ready to start. The shapes happen spontaneously and while they may look constructed, up close the edges aren't so perfect... they happen as a response, a knee-jerk reaction, a snap decision of the moment.

That must be quite satisfying...

The euphoria of creating something, for me, only lasts a few seconds and then I generally hate what I've made especially with the music. The same goes for selling work; selling a painting is so cathartic to me.

Why painting over another outlet for creativity?

A few years ago I learnt how to screenprint and I really enjoyed the process but I could never get the aesthetic I wanted, something was lacking.

For me, painting allows me to have the desired balance of anarchy and control - the shapes are in arbitrary positions and so in a sense are anarchic while the colours give a sense of control, I choose dependant upon certain variables at a specific time.

This idea of anarchy and control is quite evident in your sound work. For instance with '10 Empty Boxes' a number of musicians were present and assisted you in your live performance.

The musicians I included in the performance are all classically trained to a certain extent. For instance Henrik Munkeby Nostebro plays the trombone to a high standard but is also a prominent improvisation sound artist in Norway. The sounds he makes take on a vocal-like quality as well as being drone, it's an interesting mix and one I feel works well with me. I've worked with him a few times on various projects and he's become an indispensable aspect.

How do you work with the invited musicians?

They are given specific starting points. This could be a note, a position or a time to play but the rest is left up to them. I sometimes like to provide a graphic score which is usually pictorial, and sometimes I tell them a story or show them colours to aid a response. Sometimes I'll turn out the lights before we begin and start screaming. The only thing I'm really strict about is that the musicians must be strangers to each other. Familiarity kills spontaneity and I like the musicians to relinquish any predisposed ideas they may have and react to what I'm doing, the surroundings, even the audience members. This is where the music takes on something different.

The audience were asked to wear blindfolds throughout your performance. Was this integral to the viewing or listening of your work?

The blindfolds were chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, to take attention away from myself and to the making of the sound. I didn't want there to be any distraction. In a sense, the blindfolds allowed for a breakdown between the audience and the performance, a seamless amalgamation where the audience became the stage. It's a reversal of social context. Of course, the blindfolds have something to do with perception and by subtracting other senses the sound is given prevalence.

I don't like live performance, I don't usually do it. It takes time, not only to prepare but to set up. I use an eight speaker configuration and so the space needs to be of adequate acoustics.

The exhibition surrounding the live performance consists of ten boxes, each relatively small in size and hinged to allow the audience to open and close them impulsively. When a box is opened, a sound is played and when the lid is closed the sound stops. In this way the sound is hidden until an audience member is curious enough to open. The word 'empty' in the exhibition title hints at some level of conceptual art; the box is indeed physically empty but metaphorically full of potential. I find it interesting, this perception of sound as being an object and I suppose this relates back to what you said about your painting and music as being one and the same. Why boxes?

My obsession with boxes and cubes can be traced back to two significant areas.

When I was a child my father used to play 'Little Boxes' by Pete Seger to me all the time. The song is about capitalism and how it turns us into commodities; the American Dream is still aimed for. America was, and still is, packaging people to attain to something considered normal - we are being classified into sections of society, all being made the same. My father used this song to explain Marxism to me.

In my case, the boxes signify metaphorical liberation.

The second reasoning behind the boxes comes from a book by Sigmund Freud called 'The Interpretation of Dreams' which I read aged eleven. The part of the book that made an impression on me was a story about a woman who dreams she is trapped inside a box. Freud suggested that the woman was sexually repressed as the German word for box is also the slang term for vagina. As the story unfolds, the woman's anecdotes continue to become more and more sexual.

I am suspicious, aroused and interested in the idea of a box; it's probably a fetish. Boxes are my unofficial logo.

What's next for you?

I've got some potential residencies coming up in the next year. Hopefully a stay at 'The Aldeburgh Beach Lookout' in Suffolk with Caroline Wiseman who has an amazing collection. I plan on making a film there alongside some other things... I just need to decide on a date to go. I think I want to distance myself from boxes, a sort of abandonment leading into a maturity of other forms, other ideas. Self portrait is everything. Maybe I'll focus on that.