

## In Conversation with Nancy Patterson

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Over the past year I have been 'in residence' with Nancy talking with her about her life with Anthony and his career. Anthony passed away suddenly in 2002 and over the years, his work has slipped from public view. She's given me carte blanche to their archives as well as to her memories, a trove filled with tales involving fascinating people, places and events that took place during an exceptional period in Britain's history. Often, our conversations have been about where Anthony was geographically and whom he was surrounding himself with -- socially and professionally. Most often our talks move through exchanges and conversations his where his ideas were shaped and how his work and teaching may have influenced others.

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Stephanie Sinclair: Hello Nancy. The first part of Anthony's career is particularly seminal. Let's start there. You and Anthony were together for 43 years.

NP: We met in St. Ives

SS: In 1960 he won an Italian Government Award and you travelled to Italy together.

NP: He bought an old American WWII Jeep with no doors.

SS: So off you and Anthony went, in the door-less Jeep and you ended up in Anticoli Corrado, just east of Rome.

NP: Well, first we had to go to Perugia because he had to do a crash course in Italian. We were there for almost a month and then we went to Rome to register at the British School and then we went to Anticoli Corrado. We went to Anticoli because British Artists had been going there for a long time. Anthony knew Peter Lanyon and Heinz Inlander who had been there and there were other artists in the village just a few hours from Rome so it was not totally inconvenient. Anthony didn't want to be in Rome at the British school; he really liked being in the countryside.

SS: Do you think, that wanting to be in the countryside reflects his ethos for his life of being 'outside' the establishment, an outlier?

NP: Oh yeah. Rebellion. He never ever wanted to be part of a movement. He really thought of himself as totally an individual, a bit him out there in front of the storm, on the prow of the boat.

SS: How do you think his time in Italy influence in his work?

NP: In Italy, he was completely overwhelmed, particularly by Romanesque Architecture and with the color, light and early Renaissance paintings. He loved the flattening of space and particularly the rows of halos and the flattening of perspective. He was really a bit stuck as to how to move from where he had been, to where he wanted to go. When he was painting in the Social Realist period, it was very tonal. He used a lot of black and white paint. Because the light was so different in Italy and he was always so very very influenced by ambient light and color, gradually the pallet became much more colored.

SS: You mentioned Renaissance paintings; rows of halos and perspective. Did you travel to Siena to see the work by Duccio?

NP: Oh yes, when we were in Perugia, Brian Young and Richard Allen were on Italian Government Scholarships too and we sort of went the rounds to Florence and Siena. We traveled around quite a lot looking at paintings. I got a bit of Madonna indigestion to many banal stiffy ones. Duccio's *Maesta* was perhaps the most influential work that he saw, because he titled paintings after that piece. When Anthony attached a name to something it was mainly just to identify it but there was usually some kind of connection between the imagery and the inspiration or what not, almost a poetic connection.

SS: After a year you both returned to London where he was asked by Roy Ascott to teach on his radical new Goundcourse at Ealing Technical College & School of Art in 1962. Ascott studied under Richard Hamilton and Victor Pasmore and explored the notion that art is more than just the end product, that it is the dynamic process of creating, which includes exchange, choice and interaction with a participating audience. The Groundcourse experimented with curriculum practice by incorporating interactive exchange, experiences, participation and unmitigated relationships. How do you think Anthony processed his experiences in Italy at Ealing?

NP: The Italian stuff was in his head and it was fleshed out at Ealing. The concepts that Roy introduced were new approaches to making art. He focused the emotional response to what was in the head; what was conceptual and in the imagination and how that influenced the procedure of making the work. This was completely different approach. Up to that point Anthony was still attached to the old world of painting. The imagery had changed but the procedure was not that different to painting a portrait

or a landscape. Being at Ealing where they completely investigated participation and process. Anthony was teaching drawing but for him it really was a learning experience for him as well. Pete Townshend, who was a student in Anthony's class, writes in his book about the impact of seeing Anthony draw a line across a white sheet of paper with his own blood.<sup>1</sup>

SS: There was a change in the way that people interacted and experienced life during the 1960s. Was this change important to Anthony and how he taught?

NP: Not only a completely different approach to life and making art, it was a completely different approach to a relationship between the teacher and the student. It became interchangeable. The teacher at the head giving out knowledge and the student absorbing, it became like a dialogue. So that the teacher, at least Anthony was, influenced as much by what he got back from the students. I think he handed out drawing exercises to the student really as much for his own curiosity to see what would happen as to...I mean it was a learning experience. Anthony was a game lover into participation and adventure. He liked to kick over the traces. I think the ethos of the Groundcourse fit Anthony quite well but it also influenced his development.

SS: He never stayed very long anywhere, did he? He experienced a place, took what he needed and then moved on. At that time Ealing wasn't given the DipAD and so Anthony chose to leave and go to Ipswich.

NP: When the Coldstream Committee came around to assess the Groundcourse for granting the new DipAD, what they saw scared them shitless. I think to them it looked like anarchy. They didn't mind the idea of basic design, but basic design was just like the Bauhaus and more of the same, very nice and moving forward but the Groundcourse had gone several steps beyond that and the 'authorities' didn't like it. However, Ipswich wanted something new and it was pretty fertile ground. So he started teaching there.

SS: He was also teaching at Winchester and Ravensborne at the same time.

NP: Yes, he also taught a bit at St. Martins. I think he really liked teaching. He got a lot out of it. He liked getting into his little sports car and whizzing down the road at breakneck speed. At that time we were making Perspex sculpture. I guess that started in 1963-4 because I was working at City Display making architectural models and display models in Perspex. I was teaching at Ealing after I had worked at City Display and had taken some Perspex samples home. Anthony became enchanted by the intense colors. Today bright colors are common, but back in the early sixties everything was beige, green and brown. I can remember when I first saw magenta and orange fabric I was amazed! Everything had previously been modest and quiet. Perspex was just like, wow!

SS: It was a relatively new material at that time and came in vibrant colors.

NP: What he really liked were the fluorescents; if you cut it and didn't polish the edge it picked up the light beautifully and became kind of like fluorescent tubing. And at the time he loved neon signs and made drawing of them.

SS: He worked on a large scale with Perspex. They were more installations than stand alone sculptures, which incorporated reflective surfaces using bronze and aluminum. He worked them into undulating surfaces. What do you think he was he trying to achieve with his choice of materials?

NP: He was enchanted with reflections. He liked things that were sort of ambivalent and moving, I think he would have liked to work with video and film. Because he was fascinated with the idea of color moving through space. The backgrounds of the first large Perspex sculptures he made were rectilinear. It was as if he wanted a painting to start pouring off the wall. To lose its flat space and come into the viewing space so people would be reflected into the piece and back into the rectangle on the wall. He loved reflection. That originally came from his love of highly polished sports cars.

SS: He was very cognizant of having the viewer be a part of the work, a part of the communication between the piece and him as the artist.

NP: Absolutely. That's why with his more academic black and white drawings; he never put non-reflective glass on them, because he wanted them to reflect the room and the viewer to be drawn in and reflected by it. He wanted it to be more than just a passive experience. He liked the possibility of sculptures reflecting sound and music.

SS: Going back to his time at Winchester in 1967 and creating a different process - a different artistic process; the people around him that he was in communication with --- the faculty and students. They are all a part of his process at this point. To illustrate just how flat the relationship was between teacher and student and how Anthony opened dialogues between students, we are including letters in the exhibition between he and Brian Eno, whom he taught at Ipswich. They formed a connection and they wrote letters back and forth over the course of several years. Anthony persuaded Winchester to take in Brian Eno.

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<sup>1</sup> Townshend, Pete. *Who I Am*. Harper Collins: New York, 2012. Pg. 49.

NP: He really enjoyed their conversations and I think he knew that Brian had another direction. It was different from what the art school was used to and Anthony understood that what Brian wanted to do was as valid and that it was just different. Anthony enjoyed his company so much he kind of went 'to bat' for him in Ipswich to keep them from chucking him out because although the instructors professed that they wanted to move forward...they didn't want to move that much. I think Brian opened doors that frightened them a bit. At that time in the art schools, there were sit-ins and strikes the whole thing was in ferment. Anthony was a bit fed up with the situation in British art schools, so when he got the opportunity at the end of 1968 to go to Calgary to teach at the University, he went. He and Brian started writing to share the enthusiasm of what Anthony was finding in Canada and the difficulties Brian was facing with the status quo.

SS: They had a very nice rapport and within the letters, there are many threads of discussion, even though we only have Brian's side of the letters. As the letters go on collectively you can see topics pick up and drop off, there is a bit about what was going on in the department of art at Winchester, but also there is an expression of ideas in a very naked state. The clear and trusting communication between these two artists is remarkable; and a good representation of the leveling of hierarchy between teacher and student that was a tenement of the 'new' way of teaching in art schools. They are communicating about their processes and exploring ideas through writing even when there is distance between them. Anthony moved around a lot. He was a bit Nomadic. He went from London to St. Ives to France back to St. Ives to Italy to London to Calgary. He even went down into the United States.

NP: Keep moving. Yes, he went to California. That was more fruitful.

SS: That seems to be the essence of who he was as an artist. He was very interested in process and communication between different types of people. There are additional letters in your archive that he kept from academic peers, artists and other random characters.

NP: The connection with California came about with Brian Wall. We bought a house in London on Liverpool Road. Anthony and I bought half and Brian Wall bought the other half. Anthony and Brian had been best mates in St. Ives when Brian was working with Barbara Hepworth. Brian went from being the head of sculpture at the Central School of Art and Design, to being head of Sculpture at Berkley. Gimple's had just taken Anthony on in New York and had a show set for 1973. We had started making the sculpture maquettes in London and it was in that same month that Anthony had accepted this position in Calgary. He thought he would be closer to New York. He didn't look at the map. It was easier to get from London to NY than Calgary to London and certainly it was farther culturally. Anthony thought the 'Wild West' and thought Oil Millionaires. The Canadian border officials wouldn't let Anthony across the border because of the length of his hair. It was very confrontational. I had a silver André Courrèges direct rip-off coat, which would have looked at home in Star Wars, we wore Indian fabrics and Anthony had an Afghan coat. We were seen as an affront to society.

SS: He used a lot of his experiences and interests directly and indirectly in his art. The colors, titles and subjects all spring from what he was interested in at that particular moment. Even where he was geographically and whom he was communicating with are present in some form in his art.

NP: It was all very seminal. He never tried to reproduce anything or make a direct image from it. I think he was always trying to find the original inspiration for work that he appreciated...he wanted to go to the source of inspiration and experience it or for it to be a continuity.

SS: In one way, he bucks the system and comes around from another direction to find inspiration from a cultural history that is drenched in formality and conformity.

NP: He was always trying to beat the system. Always. But he wanted to take advantage of it. He wasn't one to just go away and hide or go into an ivory tower. He wanted to buck it but take the best bits and beat it. And he had been a member of the Anarchist party.... Well, that's what he told me.

SS: Is that something you subscribe to?

NP: He did say that he did actually speak on a soapbox.

SS: In Hyde Park?

NP: It is entirely possible because he was a very convincing speaker.

SS: That would have been in the 1950s. Do you happen to know the subject of his soapbox oration?

NP: It would have been non-conformity. He was anti-conscription. He wouldn't do his military service and there was an option to do community work but he refused to do that as well. He wasn't just against military service; he was against being forced to do *anything*. So he did his time in prison in the '50s. But being the contrary son of a bitch that he was he put his time in prison to good use in that he did end up painting signs and reading. He read the writings of Marcus Aurelius. So one of the reasons for going to Rome was to see the Marcus Aurelius equestrian, which is possibly the best equestrian statue ever. I don't like Romans. I see them as the source of trouble. I prefer the Etruscans.

SS: Leaving Italy...and onto teaching at art schools: Ealing, Ipswich Winchester, Ravensbourn etc. and then to Calgary in 1968 and Toronto in the 1970s. It is at this point that he is working on the *Roxy Bias Suite* screen prints, which we've included in the exhibition.

NP: The important conversations that Anthony and Brian Eno had I think happened when Anthony returned to London from Calgary. Brian was already starting his music career and wildly enthusiastic about electronic music. And they discussed electronic music.

SS: The letters that we've included are from 1968 and into the '70s. They span a period of time that seems enriching for the both of them.

NP: Yes, Brian was finishing art school and he and Anthony had enthusiasm for electronic music. But the work was in response to Brian's enthusiasm. The conversations gelled something in Anthony's thinking about making art through a kind of process that was not just an aesthetic choice. It wasn't just this looks nice and that looks nice. It was following a procedure and a process.

SS: Was Anthony interested in all types music?

NP: Yes, from the avant-garde to classical.

SS: You have an LP of Lejaren Hiller's work given to you and Anthony by Frank Parman in the early 1970s. Hiller was the director of the Experimental Music Studios at the University of Illinois back in the '50s and '60s. It seems as though it was a very fertile period for people working through investigational processes.

NP: Yes, he really loved it and he loved Pop music for the spirit of it but what he really liked were things like Mozart, chamber music and Baroque, things that were mathematical. What touched him were things that were playful. He wasn't into big drama but into games and engagement, play and mischief.

SS: When he was creating the *Roxy Bias* set...

NP: ...with Kevin Harris. We were living in the basement flat and Kevin and Ina were living in the ground floor flat. So Kevin and Anthony knew each other personally. They were very good friends. It wasn't just a technician and an artist. They spoke about the work all the time. They talked about it, they lived it, and they couldn't wait to get to the studio. Kevin's input was as big as Anthony's. Kevin was always willing to go the extra mile technically and do things that were above and beyond what were considered normal for the screen-printing process. Just to get absolute perfection. The amount of color proofing to get exactly the right vibrancy was endless.

SS: Talk to me about the color choices and what Anthony was trying to achieve visually, with this set of screen prints in relation to music.

NP: I think he wanted to set the colors to vibrate on the surface and to take the eye on a dance. He wanted to lead people into a deeper visual experience than one could comprehend in a passing glance. When he was making a print or a painting he would spend a great deal of time and he was very involved in the subtle differences of depth and illusions of depth and the surface rhythms that were set up. If you look at particularly at that one up there in different lights, at *Gala*, each one of those component parts, which are made up of four or five different colors, they start to pivot.

SS: There is a haptic response with the eye, a vibration that happens.

NP: He wanted the person to be drawn in. He didn't want, like in op art, for the painting to jump off the wall and smack you in the face. He wanted something more playful, something subtle, for people to be engaged by the beauty of the color and the surface initially but be drawn into it with more through time.

SS: Through contemplation and meditation.

NP: Yea, all of that.

SS: The titling of the *Roxy Bias* set is given in homage to Brian and his work with electronic music; and Anthony's later paintings, which are further explorations into the physicality of the visual response to certain color combinations in close proximity, are titled in response to his deep fascination with world music.

NP: Yes, *Tanakoul II* is named after an album by Alla, a famous Algerian oud player.<sup>2</sup>

SS: The large bold paintings that are in the exhibition are mostly from the last three years of his life. You both visited Morocco and became interested in Gnawa music. He was still working on this style when he suddenly passed away.

NP: Yes, we experienced Gnawa music up close, which is ritual trance music. It affects everyone differently but because his head was full of color and movement, the music triggered those especially in him. We returned to Britain where there was nothing musically like it. The Moroccan instrument, the gimbre, has a sonic range, which physically gets you in the chest. He felt that, it stayed with him, and he played that music when he was painting. It triggered memories of the colors that he's seen in Morocco. And he was trying to approximate what he felt in his paintings. This is why I think he spent so much time in contemplation. The way he worked them out was by cutting shapes out of painted paper and putting them up and moving them around experimentally to get patterns and combinations, he wanted.

SS: How long would a painting typically take him? Eight months a year? Longer?

NP: All of that. Not only were they technically demanding but also I think he didn't want to rush them. He loved his studio he loved being there and I think he absolutely enjoyed working on the paintings and he was prolonging the pleasure. Also he would leave the little paper bits stuck on the paintings almost finished and I think he would go and look at it fresh each day and make decisions to go ahead or make changes.

SS: A first glance they look simple, vibrantly minimal...but they are not. You have to work your way into them beyond the vibrant color and the small shapes and patterns; they rise up and reveal an incredibly complex execution. The layering and subtle ease of tone, only become apparent if you stop and really look, meditate. They change throughout the day as well with the light.

SS: They are paintings that respond in different ways to what is going on around them. The light, wall color, what is in their proximity, you can live with them and see them differently each day they are in a constant state of movement; in a way they are also Nomadic.

NP: It is very hard to describe them in one sentence. That is why he liked the titles to be slightly ambivalent. The titles are identifiers primarily but they add another dimension to how think about them. He actually liked the story of Alla who was a famous oud player but working in a furniture store.

SS: Something extraordinary hidden in the haze of the ordinary.

NP: He liked discoveries. Nothing was sought after, looked for or bought for a specific reason. He loved rummaging in junk stores. Most of our furniture came from skips. What you are sitting in came from a skip.

SS: It's very comfortable. You and Anthony have lived with these objects for many years, some of them for 30 or 40 years. They are objects of your pleasure and they show up in Anthony's art because of that pleasure. *Essoldo* is inspired by art deco and well as the London cinema of the same name.

NP: He loved art deco and he was very influenced by cinema. I don't know if his love of art deco came out of meeting it in the cinema architecture or if it was something to do with his childhood.

SS: There are themes that flow through his seemingly disparate oeuvre – color, music, popular culture, objects of curiosity, rumination and his opposition to the conventional society; but the most significant is his love of exchange and exploration, which he practiced through out his life.

NP: He was always interested in other people's opinions. Not as to whether it was good or bad but he really liked discussing his work in progress with other artists, because it would often point him off into other directions if he were a bit blocked about something. For many years in the '80s and '90s, Clarendon Graphics took place in his painting studio behind the house on Liverpool Road in Islington, which meant that the house was always full of artists. It was important for him to make many connections and have many discussions. It was a total integration of his work and life. And we talked about what he was doing *a lot*, his methods. He loved collaboration. But later years he would retreat to privacy. His work in pencil in the late 80's and early '90s were done in total total privacy, he was absolutely engrossed in them. That was different than when he was painting or

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<sup>2</sup> Birth name: Abdelaziz Abdellah. From the Algerian desert region, Alla is self-taught and plays both improvisational and traditional Middle Eastern Music. He is considered a virtuoso on the oud with a style unique among the masters.

printmaking, which he worked openly and with discussion. He didn't see making art as an ivory tower activity but open. And he really did believe that artists were going to lead society into a better way of living. An optimism that influenced him when he was young that he carried with him throughout his life. He disapproved of the big organizations and the hierarchy.

We both were never inclined to attach ourselves to any type of club, teams, or nationality. We were both semi-detached. I think that runs into bohemianism and nomadism. We never thought of any place as home. I think that is how our relationship stuck because we were both unattached.

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*This interview has been edited and condensed by Stephanie Sinclair, art historian and curator for Abbesses.*