

Profile: Orde Levinson - Home is where the art is...



Painter Orde Levinson pictured in his studio at Folly Bridge

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Stuart Macbeth meets an entrepreneur, inventor and writer now focusing on painting

Orde Levinson tells me over a glass of chenin blanc: "I'm finally back to where I should have begun. Writing and painting is what I'm going to continue to do from now on. I've given up all my business interests."

We're at Song, the gallery and studio Orde owns on Oxford's Folly Bridge. It stands next to the house which he's made his home for the past 15 years.

Orde arrived in Oxford in 1988 to read for a DPhil in history of art at [Magdalen College](#). Before moving to Folly Bridge he engaged in numerous ventures and is mostly known as an entrepreneur, inventor and writer.

Now aged 64, he insists that it's art which continues to make him tick. He speaks passionately about Lived Experiences and Visions, a new exhibition of his painting,

photography and sculpture which opens here this month.

Orde's fascination with art is evident and displayed on the bookcases all around us which creak with monographs. They include many on John Piper, whose Catalogue Raisonné Orde has published.

Tubes of oil paint hang from a shop display cabinet which he acquired from another gallery which was throwing it out. Orde keeps the paints he works with in a plastic box on the gallery floor.

Brought up in Namibia, Orde tells me: "I wanted to paint when I was young, but my mother discouraged it. She was a collector who often saw the difficulties artists had. She saw how they suffered and didn't want that for me. But when she died I discovered some drawings she had kept from when I was 15. I was very upset that she'd kept them."

Orde lived in Namibia until, aged 18, he found himself conscripted into military service in neighbouring South Africa: "Namibia was ruled by South Africa at the time and I found myself drafted into the air force. I got on to the officer course but they pulled me out, claiming I had poor eyesight. I think it was more the case that my views were too left-wing."

Now 64, Orde insists that it is art which continues to make him tick.

"My first venture into the art world was in the 1970s after I had taken my philosophy degree at university in Johannesburg. I worked as an art dealer, and then I set up Nedart.

"This was a project which I approached Nedbank with – one of the biggest banks in South Africa. I said: 'Why don't we use your banking halls for art exhibitions?'.

"The exhibitions travelled throughout all their branches all over the country. We featured South African artists but also brought over British artists like Tom Phillips and Euan Uglow, people whose work would not otherwise have been on display.

"Logistically it was difficult, but it was so interesting to see how artists from overseas interacted with the culture of South Africa, which they often found bewildering."

Around the same time Orde wrote plays.

"I had sent copies to Samuel Beckett and Etienne Leroux, a South African writer I admired very much. With the plays I enclosed a letter which read 'either I am practising gross self-deception or you must acknowledge me'," he laughs.

"I got a very positive response from both, although soon after I destroyed everything I had ever written. I had a realisation that even though I could make something great, it made no absolutely difference at all. So even if I was highly complex in my early 20s, at least I didn't commit suicide," he jokes.

Turning back to this current exhibition, Orde shows me around the studio. He takes photographs and makes sculptures, some of which he has cast in bronze. But mostly he works in oils, daubing paint directly on to the canvas. Orde claws through a stack of pictures which lean up against the wall overlooking the Thames.

"Most of these paintings have been made for the exhibition in the past six months," he says, holding up a recent portrait, "but I've included one painting from each of the past 10 years, just to give myself an impression of how my style has changed. And it has changed.

"It's much more precise, much more technical. But at the same time I have become freer

with the way I apply paint. I have become more suggestive of the feelings I want to capture.”

Orde cites his main influence as Pablo Picasso, and he has even written a poem about Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. No. 119), the painting about which Georges Braque famously said looking at it was like being forced to drink petrol.

“Picasso has been such an enormous influence on my life, not just as a painter and innovator but as someone who persevered. Picasso could have stayed in a comfort zone, but he moved on through his blue and pink periods to cubism and beyond, even though, at the time, nobody bought his work.

“But then a lot of great artists were met with a derogatory reaction, but at least they were able to engage people.”

Not something Orde worries about then?

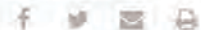
“If you do art, the big thing is to engage,” he states. “I love it when people walk into the gallery, see something and say ‘what is that?’ “The picture is only completed in the mind of the viewer. If you look and it does nothing for you then it falls flat. I’m not sure then that’s it’s even art. Either it is a failure – or you’re not looking at it in a way that’s worthwhile.”

In the curious position of someone who paints and owns his own gallery, how does Orde put a value to his work?

“It’s just like Picasso said. In order for paintings to be worth a lot of money, all you have to do is sell them cheaply to start with. So I think I’m going to price my paintings from £400 upwards, nothing over £2,000.

“But if I sell a lot I won’t think it’s because it’s too cheap. Hopefully people will buy it because they like it. That how I think you should price a painting. Make it affordable. Sell it to people who like it.

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“That’s what art is all about to me,” he concludes. “It’s about the magic of an artist seeing something. If things don’t move you as a person then you shouldn’t paint.”