

AFFAIRS OF THE HEART

What inspires the work of Britain's most admired artistic talent?

Laura-Jane Foley travelled to London's Portland Gallery to ask him in person.

JACK VETTRIANO is something of an artistic phenomenon. The Fife-born artist has enjoyed a meteoric rise to fame, outselling Dali, Monet and Van Gogh with his classically romantic images of high society. A former miner who was recently made an OBE, he is Britain's most popular artist.

I met Vettriano before his most recent exhibition, *Affairs of the Heart*, in London's Portland Gallery. Here, the carefree summery paintings for which he is best known were nowhere to be seen. "My style has changed," he declares. "My paintings have become darker. I'm moving away from being the painter of beach scenes". Inside the relatively small gallery were thirty-five of Vettriano's most recent "darker" paintings. Although the exhibition had not yet officially opened, all but one of his paintings had already been sold - proving that the new style appeals as much the old.

Despite Vettriano's claim that he is not an extrovert, the artist believes he has a "responsibility to the gallery, to the publishers and to the public" to carry out media interviews and appearances.

In recent years the artist's fan base has rocketed. Last year one of his paintings, *The Singing Butler*, sold for a record £745,000, and he has since appeared on the *South Bank Show* and *Desert Island Discs*. But Vettriano insists that his image as a "celebrity artist" is false. "I'm not a sociable person. I live in a low-key way. My work is more promoted than the person."

Yet fame is fickle, as Vettriano knows well: "Art is a bit like music and books. Tastes change. Even for me, I used to like van Gogh but now I don't care much for his works. The more you learn about an artist, the more you can enjoy him. I registered van Gogh's works more when I understood his life. When you stand in front of his *Yellow Chair* and you think to yourself 'he stood where I'm stand-

ing', the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end." The artist also speaks with admiration for the works of Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon, and notes that the latter has had a profound effect on him: "With a swipe of a rag he could have such a meaningful effect on my brain".

The Portland Gallery, run by Tom Hewlett, is the only location that sells Vettriano's work, and despite his mass popularity (or perhaps, as Vettriano feels, because of it), none of his works are to be found in any national art



The Singing Butler

© Jack Vettriano

Courtesy of Portland Gallery, London

gallery. "My works depict heterosexual behaviour and they [the art establishment] don't respect the art form. My work is popular so it counts against me. It encourages a view of 'them against us'". Vettriano describes the influence of Charles Saatchi as a "curious phenomenon. The art world is a game, and the media make or break an artist."

Vettriano feels that the public has been fooled into adopting a pretence about modern art: "There is an ominous significance when a work is in the centre of a room - people are intimidated into thinking it's art". He has the same reaction to the Brit Art generation. Tracey Emin's unmade bed is, he says, "like the Emperor's New Clothes. It's Art because Tracey says it is."

So what does Art mean for Vettriano? "Art has two purposes. It is a

form of entertainment - visual entertainment - and a form of recording what is going on in the world. The artist filters through his own experience."

Vettriano records and filters a lot. His output is substantial - he estimates that he has produced over 1,000 canvases. "I'm not sure if I could identify a fake" he admits. Because of this heavy workload he has developed a strict routine. "My wastage rate is low. When you find yourself in the wrong position, you know quickly on small pieces. If it goes bad, it goes bad early."

It is clear that the Scotsman lives and breathes his work. He explains how it pervades all areas of his life and makes relationships "difficult"; a word he also uses to describe himself. He also dislikes the effect an intensely close relationship can have on his output. "Having somebody with me restricts me. I feel anxious and nervous. I'm used to working in solitude and I'm always at work by 6am. I have an obsessive nature - an obsession with painting." That being said, the 53 year-old is currently dating an attractive young model, whose figure can be spotted in many of his works.

The self-taught Vettriano stresses above all the "craft of painting, the mixing of colours, the tonal qualities". He never sketches: "Images come to me in the night and I keep more notes than sketches. I need a basic idea and then I can fill the background in. I can't afford to get the dimensions wrong. I always need a photo for reference." He gathers background scenes continually - "bars, interiors, effects of lighting...it's subliminal. They're drawn into the mind". All this while reflecting on the nature of the art he produces, and its place in the public's affections. "It's curious to see the effect my works have had on other people. All the time you've got to remind yourself that you're making the history of tomorrow."

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