

“TYPECAST AT NURSERY SCHOOL...”

...as the boy who'd draw the Magic Roundabout's Mr Rusty for you on request, I was given my first canvas at thirteen by an art master named Tom Griffiths.

Griffiths had studied at the Slade and in Paris but now spent his days running the art room off a crypt beneath a monstrous chapel buffeted by rain that swept in across the South Downs. He had a greenish face, purple lips, rheumy eyes and white hair. He was exceptionally gloomy. Every painting I ever did, he told me, would darken to black. But for all his bleak views, his domain was a haven of light.

In this bright cave, I could smear my dismal adolescence with the magic of oil. He showed me slides of works by unimaginable men: Fra Angelico,

Pollaiuolo, Breughel, Caravaggio, Vermeer, Ingres, Seurat. I still have their faded family tree in my old copy of *From Giotto to Cézanne*. Even now, I delude myself that my family will want to spend an afternoon of our holiday trekking the cobbled lanes of Père-Lachaise in search of the tomb of Delacroix.

The slide in my mind is Piero Della Francesca's "Baptism," but Cézanne was my first model, perhaps because his Provençal sunshine so contrasted with the Sussex rain. Then Magritte made me paint chess pieces and floating apples. Then Hopper sold me the idea of painting balmy New England mornings. Dream worlds, foreign lands: anything triumphed over that Prussian

blue darkness beyond the art room.

A foundation year at art school taught me nothing. I told Griffiths I'd write books instead. "Just as bad," he said. I returned to painting only in fatherhood, and so rediscovered a lost world. The smell of oils quickens the pulse. I'm in a state of grace. Time and space change dimension. Coffee stands cold. To paint is to concentrate. It's miraculous. I'm intent only on applying paint. I dab away, try a new colour, step back, lean in, look, and it's done.

Maybe that's why my subjects include people in a similar state of concentration, where they want to be, doing what they want to do. It's pleasant to witness the self-possessed: playing an instrument, or dancing, talking, eating.

But I also paint because it helps me to see better. When a painting is in progress I try to view it in the same way: as if seen for the first time. I try to catch it by surprise; look at it in a mirror or stand before it and then raise my eyes. I trust fresh impressions.

As to why I paint, beyond being in that clean, well-lit place, perhaps it's to avoid speaking, or to speak without interruption. Perhaps I paint to contemplate. It's a private experience but it extends me into the world. I enjoy interested responses, even though I'd be as happy painting in a crypt where no one visited beneath a chapel where no one worshipped in a world where no-one else existed except a maker of art supplies I never had to meet.

But there again, I'm

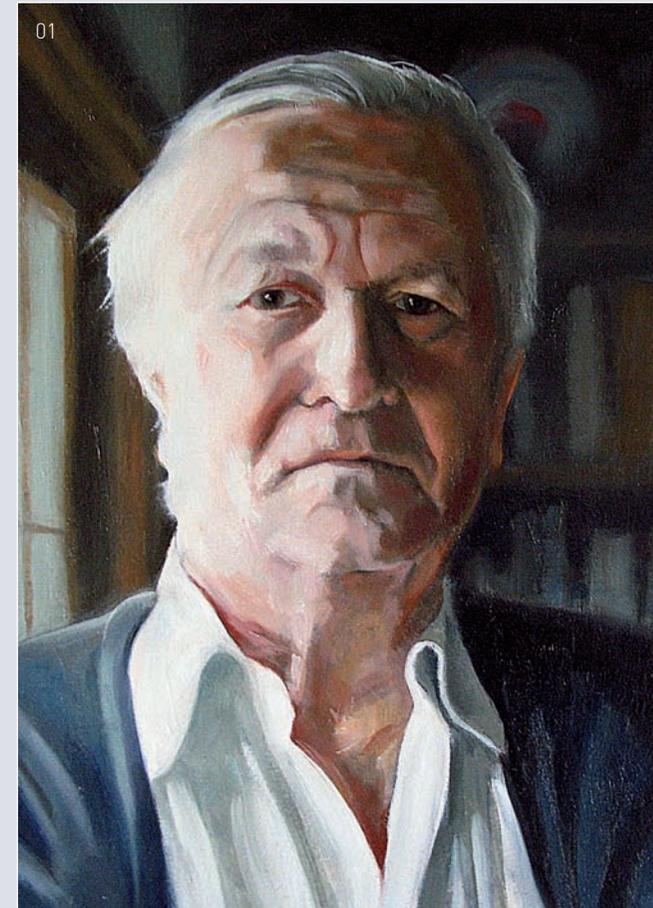
surprised at how often I paint people as well as places, and not just people concentrating on a skill. Painting a portrait is a form of intimacy. This is you, I think. This is your face. These are your eyes. This is a hint of what is behind them. This will outlast you.

But I also paint because I expect to do better than last time. I study Rembrandt, or Gerhard Richter, and try again. I paint the way I do because I can judge it against what I'd like to achieve. I aim high because that might help me paint better.

Sometimes I wonder what will become of my paintings. Most will outlive me; some will be destroyed or painted over; some will stay in the family. I imagine a painting of mine in a junk

shop among objects of lives long gone. A stranger enters from a street glittering with rain. Above the musty furniture, the painting catches their eye. They buy it on impulse, hang it at home, examine the brushstrokes and ponder it as the work of a once-living person in an unknown place. To own it makes them happy. Maybe I paint to rescue junk—to frame the ephemeral to outlast me, if only in this humble form. I really don't know.

When I paint I'm a workman with a little skill in a little area, and happy in my work. When I paint I'm an exceptionally simple man."



01 – William Styron
02 – Girl With Saxophone
03 – Bongo Room, Chicago

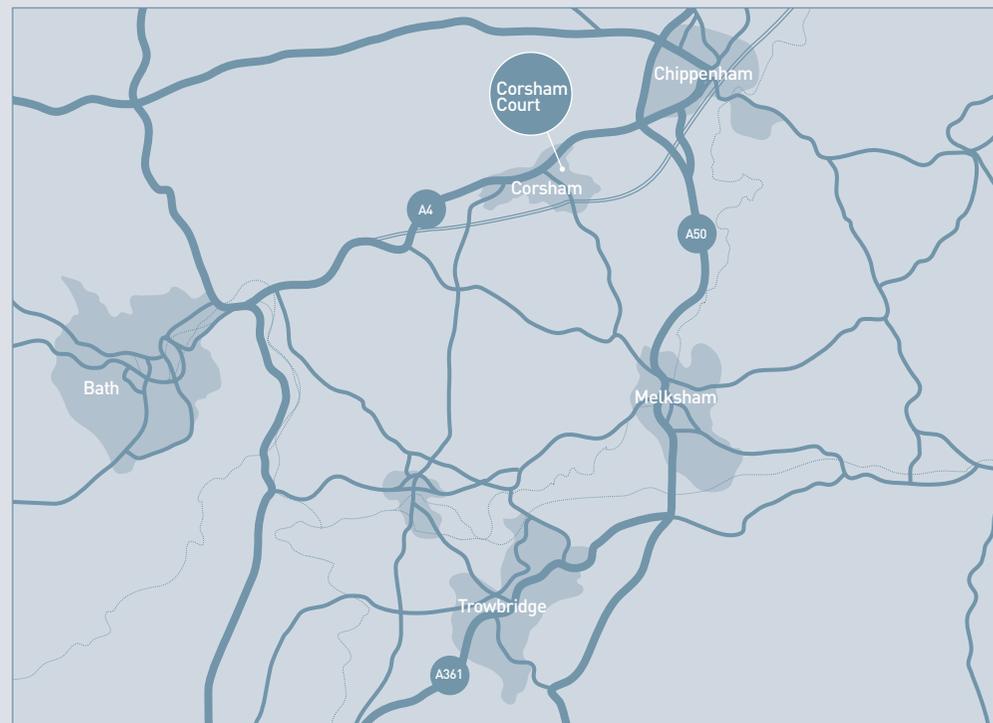
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Cover image – A Simple Man



“WHEN I
PAINT I’M AN
EXCEPTIONALLY
SIMPLE MAN.”

Gavin Cologne-Brookes

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Design: Mytton Williams



GAVIN COLOGNE- BROOKES — PAINTINGS 1995 – 2011

Exhibition from 19th March to 18th April

You are invited to a private view on 18th March, 6pm to 8.30pm

