

DAVID COWDRY

'The art of being there'.

By Chris Jones

Picture the scene. David Cowdry, the artist, cramped and crouched within a makeshift hide made from some poles and a tarpaulin. It is horribly cold and damp. It is a precarious position on a rocky ledge somewhere in deepest darkest Wales where no iPod toting, quad driving farmer would venture.

A yellow dawn glows in the gap between the dark silhouetted hills and the grey black clouds. Eye firmly fixed on the nest of a wild bird of prey made from a messy tangle of twigs, small bones and sticks just a few yards away across a vertiginous drop, his hand begins to mark the sketch book on his knee with swift confident practiced strokes and lines.

Being there

David Cowdry's obsession is capturing the ephemera of wildlife experience, of 'being there'. The premise underlying all his work is that you cannot paint wildlife (or a landscape for that matter) without having experienced it physically. He is not attempting to show Nature in a literal way even though his paintings are clearly accurately observed and representational; more he seems to be wanting to express a feeling, generate a mood of recognition and participation in the viewer. He wants the buyer of his paintings to experience the same thrill as he has had in being there in the landscape with the wildlife.

Talent

So what characterises a 'good' artist? Firstly, the artist must have something called 'talent'; an attribute very difficult to define but it can be that painting or drawing comes easily or naturally to them from an early age as a way of communicating and interacting with the world. Only some people have this gift and most others (including many that already call themselves artists) do not. Some children will draw and paint to express themselves; others will kick a football or each other.

Of course, having talent is by no means enough to make an artist rich and famous. Oh no! Some commentators would even go so far as to say that talent is a hindrance to an artist's career in the contemporary Art world – project management and sub contracting skills are valued more..

So does David Cowdry have 'talent'? Well yes. I think he does. You only have to see his vast collection of sketchbooks. From a very early age David has been drawing and painting wildlife. The talent is readily apparent, he has the gift.

Sadly, in most people with artistic gifts, real life, jobs, and family takes over and these talents are never developed. So those individuals that persist with it

are very rare indeed and are possessed with special qualities not related to talent (mainly egotism). Most have been severely hindered or damaged by the so-called education system unless they have been fortunate enough, to study art in a relatively supportive environment. David too has suffered in this way and consequently has a low opinion of art education.

The Craft

The next attribute that an artist must have is ... the craft. In art, as in most other walks of life, you can only break or go beyond the rules and the 'status quo' if you know, have been taught and have mastered them in the first place. Painting is a craft that has many rules that have evolved over centuries. These are rules of perspective, colour, paint/paper/canvas properties and so on. No person that has not mastered the craft through drawing, practice and constant use of materials can call themselves an artist. If these craft skills are not present it is instantly and horribly apparent to the discerning eye. The late Sir Kyffin Williams has lamented many times the lack of training or ability to draw and paint in most contemporary artists even those most celebrated.

So has David Cowdry mastered his 'craft'? Yes, he has. Is he in a position to be able to 'break the rules' or 'push the envelope boundaries' of art – well, that is what we all hope for.

Style

What happens when you begin to 'break the rules'? This is when the evolution of 'style' begins. Style is an artist's signature. A style is achieved when someone sees a painting, recognises some aspect of it and remarks ...that is 'a Picasso' or a Kyffin Williams or (it is to be hoped) 'a David Cowdry'.

When an artist begins to paint in a style of their own, each painting shows their trademark ways of seeing and expressing things.

Personality

If I were to be brutally honest, I would say that 'talent, craft and style' are less important, these days, than having a charismatic 'personality'. Much as we might prefer that the 'good guys' win through, sadly, in the Art World this is rarely the case. Those that flourish nowadays are 'personalities'. Is David Cowdry a personality? Well no, at the moment he is not and he probably hates the very idea of it. Could he be? Possibly, but he will have to play the game either by himself or through his gallery representation.

Welsh artists need critical reporting

Finally, a sad reflection of the poor cultural status and confidence of the Arts in Wales is the dearth of any kind of critical reporting in any of the Media. Where are our Sunday Supplements, literary

reviews, art reviews, theatre reviews, New York Times, Evening Standards? Critics, love or hate them, can fulfil an essential role in controlling the overly political, pointing out basic errors, plagiarisms and placing things in a broader more international context. They also serve to promote (and destroy) reputations. In the long term, artists like David Cowdry would benefit more from critical review and assessment than from any number of 'puff pieces' written to promote Wales and the Welsh. It is only through critical review that some artists can be brought up short, their hubris punctured, and made to think (and try) harder about their work. It is only through critical review that new artistic talent can be discovered and promoted. Maybe Cambria will help to address this in the future.

Note: David Cowdry is one of the principal gallery artists of the Bridge Gallery in Llandeilo. His work can be seen there and on the Internet at: www.bridge-gallery.co.uk .