

## Br. Daniel Morphy - The Artist as Autojournalist

I have been briefed by *Pluscarden Benedictines* to interview Br. Daniel, one of the colony of monastic artists currently thriving at Pluscarden. I direct my steps to the former bookbindery, a slowly maturing wooden portacabin round the back of the Abbey painted an anaesthetic shade of peeling dark emerald. Despite still being stocked with a complete range of bookbinding equipment, this provides studio space for three artists. Inside I find Br. Daniel contemplating a large canvas covered with shapes in blobby white impasto.

**PB** Br. Daniel, can you tell me something about this painting?

**DM** I can tell you that the impasto technique takes far too long to dry for my liking, it'll be weeks before I can do the next bit. I'll have to think again. The thing with me is I'm impatient, I want to get on with it.

**PB** Icon painting takes a lot of patience, is that why you're not doing that? After all, this is what one usually expects of monastic artists these days.

**DM** Partly for that reason, partly because no one has asked me to paint-write I should say-any icons.

**PB** After all, you studied icons under Sr. Petra Clare did you not?

**DM** Yes, this formed part of my juniorate studies here. It ended when I made solemn profession in July '03. I had begun this course in 1998, before I had entered Pluscarden and Fr. Abbot put me back onto it after simple profession. I'm glad I did it. It has provided a foundation for what I'm doing now, rather like a grounding in classical art.

**PB** Were there any other reasons for the change?

**DM** I found that it went against the grain of my art 'instincts'. I have been drawing/painting since 1982, subsequently doing a degree at Camberwell art college in London from which I graduated in 1996. I was already formed as an artist, one can't just switch into something so profoundly different after all that. I think that an icon painter has to start from scratch as an icon painter. In my last year at college and when I entered Pluscarden at the end of '98 I thought that icons might be the big answer to the future of 'Christian Art', this is not so clear to me now, and anyway I'm profoundly sceptical about the validity of such a category. I think the only distinction you can make is between 'good art' and 'bad art'. I'm all in favour of icon painting, but do it for it's own sake, not because it's the big white hope.

**PB** I detect a trace of disillusionment.

**DM** When I was a 22 year old agnostic in 1979, I was converted to the Charismatic Evangelicals, and stayed in it for 16 years. We were going

to change the world for Jesus. I was one of a small group of painter friends, 'Christian artists'. We had a lot of fun and it was a good creative time. But as an 'evangelical' project, a dead end, we knew this at the time really. Any 'Christian Art' organisations just seemed a black hole.

**PB** But why?

**DM** I think the mistake, my mistake, was in trying to set up a special category over and against the world. Art is particularly reliant on the culture of the day. You can see this in all mediaeval and eastern iconography. The earliest Christian art derived from the secular Hellenic style, as in the Roman catacombs.

**PB** Hence your foray into 'modern' painting. But what were you doing before with the Evangelicals?

**DM** A sort of self generated thing, 'naive' art if you like. I quite like most of it in retrospect, but it rather fell between two stools, being neither directly religious or really engaging with what was going on in the mainstream. I think I had a vague idea of a kind of 'Evangelical' alternative.

**PB** So have you given up entirely on icons/'Christian' art now?

**DM** Not at all. I still see what I am doing as having a theological orientation. In my final year at college I noticed that my work was beginning to have a religious dimension without my really intending it, not necessarily Christian in a overt way, more Christological in an incarnate sense and exploring the language of natural religion. This unconscious process struck me as quite significant. This is what I have been trying to reconnect with over the last year or so. I think that the experience of icon painting, and even of being in the monastery, strangely enough, has helped to exorcise the spectre of what is 'Christian' in a contrived way in favour of more authenticity. I hope.

**PB** Are there any artists that you can cite as influences?

**DM** Lots of people, the abstract surrealists like Joan Miro and Paul Klee or more recently Francis Bacon; but everything, really. There is a lot of talk about the decadence of Modernism, but one day they'll look back on this period and see it as a time of wonderful creativity like the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Even the daft stuff, but that is always the way of it. In terms of productivity, 'good art' always seems to rest on a greater foundation of 'bad art'. The real decadence was in the effete neo classicism of the 19th century. Thank God the Impressionists came along and kicked it to pieces, we don't know when we're well off.

**PB** But all of this remains in the secular sphere, it is still not a solution for art in the Church.

**DM** Solutions again! But is there a problem? I don't know. For me it

seems interesting to build bridges, like, for instance, between the monastery and the secular art world. Why always preach to the converted?

**PB** Preaching? Perhaps you're still an Evangelical.

**DM** I sometimes wonder.

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