

Black Mustard

the art of the interview

AT THE HEART OF ALL OF OUR EXISTENCE IS A SACRED PATTERN

Black Mustard talks to
Sabrina Rowan Hamilton

issue #2

January 2014

Talking to artists about why they make what they make leads us
towards a greater understanding of what it is to be human.

Sabrina Rowan Hamilton

(b. 1962)

Sabrina Rowan Hamilton is a traveller at heart. At 51, after decades of hosting a bohemian salon at her Chelsea home and studio – the infamous 18 Rawlings Street – she is moving house and moving on. Both geographically, and in her painting, writing and printmaking, she is ready for new pastures.



At the heart of all of our existence is a sacred pattern

Black Mustard: Does art have the power to transform lives?

Sabrina Rowan Hamilton: Art heals the soul. For many years it has helped me unravel my own emotional landscape. It got me through my divorce. It is my salvation. I don't know how people can live without doing something creative. I can't sit here and say my painting is going to heal you, but it has transformed my life. You hope that the power of the paintings will help other people work things out. With my painting I am trying to create a new reality. It's not of this world. It's in the cosmic landscape. It's about sensation. I want to put people in touch with their senses. I have asked myself questions about security. Where is our security? And I know the answer is that what makes you feel safe is neither a house nor a family nor a man, but what is inside of you. I make my paintings to find a safe place in my heart amid chaos and loss.

BM: Why do you need to feel safe?

SRH: I had an emotional and nervous breakdown after my divorce in 2000. I was married in 1993 but we'd been together for years before that. My husband and I were a team. We went to Morocco and built a dream house in the souk – a riad. But it didn't work out. He still runs the riad as a hotel. I returned to England alone and went back to college – an MA at City & Guilds – where I found a level of emotional support that held me together. I was hankering to be in the souk smoking pot, but it was right for me to return home. I began relearning the language of paint. The MA pushed me beyond painting what

people wanted to see. It used to be that I'd go to Greece and I'd paint the sea and I'd go to Morocco and paint the houses. But at art school they said, "If you are going through a difficult time emotionally, we want to see it." I used to always put a horizon and a moon in my pictures but they wouldn't let me put them in. They said, "It's not a narrative. We don't want to know where you've been, we want to know what's inside you."

So I tried to make memory visible. I was interested in time. I spent months thinking about it. I used to sit on the tube devouring TS Eliot's *Four Quartets*. I asked questions. I started painting these stacks, with patterns from Moroccan carpets and tiles. Everybody always sees time in horizontal lines, stretching away to the future, back to the past. But I began to see time vertically. Like a tower. In London, I am surrounded by high-rise buildings. I continued to paint towers right up to 9/11. The collapse of the twin towers was pivotal for me. I am obsessed with the search for a safe place to reside – a search for the peace beyond understanding.

BM: Is asking questions more important than finding answers?

SRH: I am comfortable with mystery. Five years ago I went to Egypt with Katy Noura Butler [author of *The Egyptian Path of Love*] and learnt about sacred mysteries. It's quantum physics. I love sacred geometry for its promise to transform consciousness. Rachel Whiteread's *House* [Turner Prize, 1993] in the East End of London had an impact on my work. Filling up the inside of a house with concrete, giving form to the unseen spaces. What is a dimen-



Two Towers, 2010



Annunciation, 2010

sion? I am intrigued by sacred geometry – I have a pyramid in my studio in which I sit to meditate. Why is it sacred? Geometry is powerful whether you perceive it in nature, architecture or design. I have time to ponder questions. I'm not one to sit with a compass and work it all out, neither in life nor in my paintings. But I believe that at the heart of all of our existence is a sacred pattern.

BM: Is it important for you to sell your work?

SRH: I could do something simpler with my life. Or I could do my work and send it 'out there', where it might have an impact. I am always interested in the opportunity to change perception. Anselm Kiefer had an effect on my psyche. He took on German history. He tried to redeem the devastated landscape after WW2. I suppose in my work I am attempting to salvage my own devastated landscape. The desire to reconnect the viewer to an alternative reality that affects the senses.

I subscribe to the philosophy of Joseph Beuys – the German artist who talked of art as *gesamtkunstwerk*. He believed that art could shape society and politics. I am ready for my work to have an impact. The man who was making my website came to me recently and said, "Why don't you sell your prints and your books?" So I took stock. And now I will sell prints and books. My paintings will follow their own course. A massive part of my life has been having parties and looking after others. It's time to get businesslike. I have always known that my work is powerful but I couldn't escape the fact that I didn't need to push myself. I had family money. I am not greedy and I am not a capitalist. I didn't have the balls to be commercial with my work.

BM: Let's talk about your family...

SRH: I am the youngest of five. I grew up near Crieff in Scotland, the gateway to the Highlands. My mother was not the most conventional mother, but always creative.

She had friends in every corner – people in castles as well as the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker. It was a bohemian set up. Crocheting, art, home schooling. She was ahead of her time. We ate sunflower seeds. There was no sugar in the house and no coffee. There was a telly but we weren't allowed to watch it, which meant we watched it all the time, of course. I was reading and writing at home before I even got to school. I was the social experiment. All my siblings went to private boarding schools, but my mother wanted to make friends locally so I went to the primary down the road.

BM: Was that difficult, coming as you did from the 'arty' house on the hill?

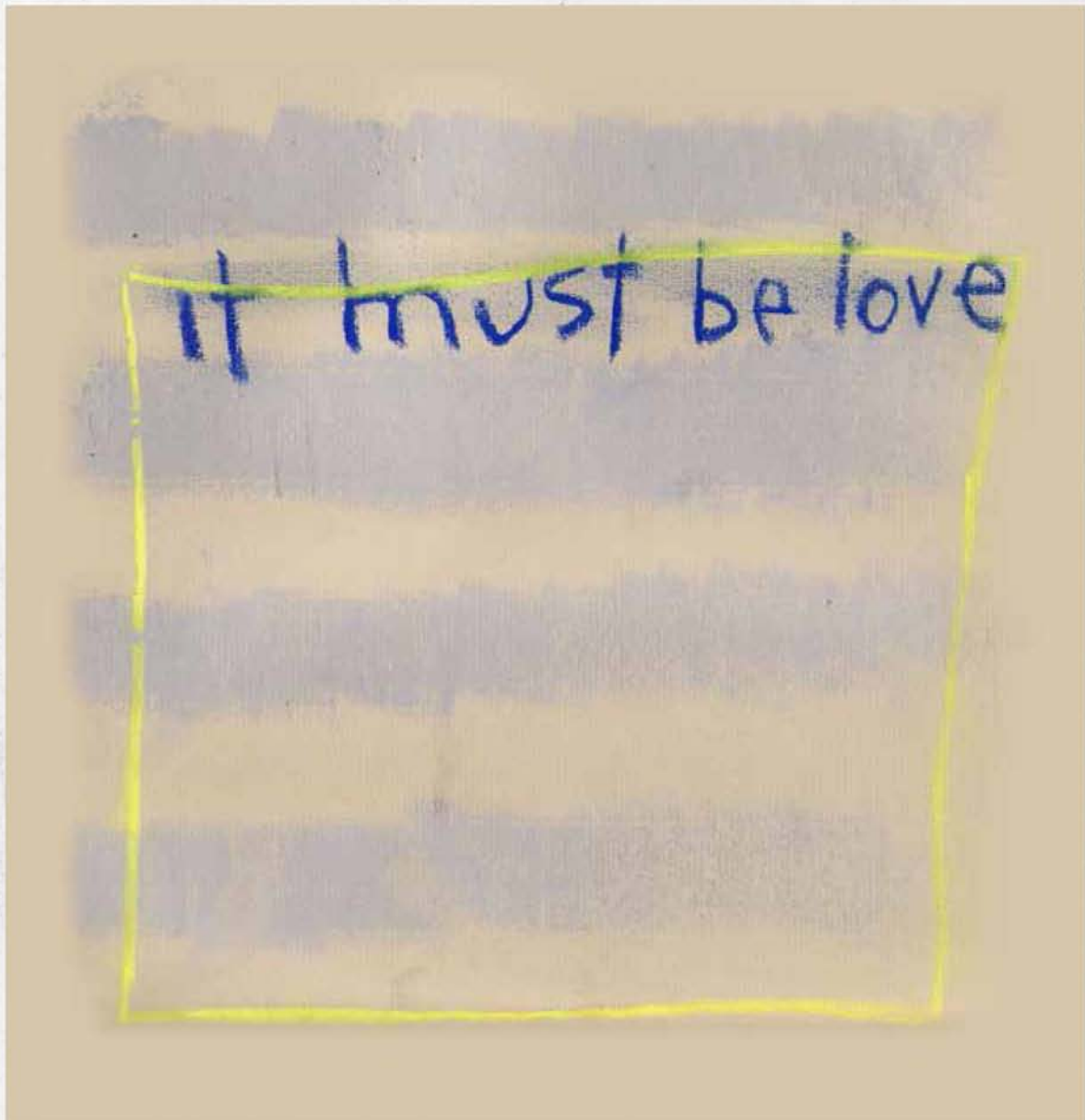
SRH: I enjoyed it, but I did feel a bit weird and out of place.

BM: Your name's a bit of a handful, for starters...

SRH: I know. My name. I am proud of my name now but it has had its problems. When I married I was so happy to lose it, but now I am divorced, I have reclaimed it and I feel it is really my own. Also, Sabrina is a teenage witch, which is a good thing [*Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, ABC TV]. I worked with the art dealer Stephen Lacey in the Nineties and he was desperate to change my name, but I wouldn't. I am the person I am and my name is part of me. Everybody has a story.

BM: Were you a teenage 'witch'?

SRH: My father died when I was fifteen. His death marked a growing up, fucking off phase of unbridled youth. I was pacing the King's Road [Chelsea, London] in high heels and short skirts. His departure haunted my early years. I have learnt to live with his passing. I loved it when the Queen said, "Grief is the price you pay for loving". In my early twenties I was surrounded by death – my best friend, my therapist, my cousin from an overdose. All my friends were on the front page of the *Daily Tele-*



graph. I was over-sensitive, and I still am. To everything. I wanted to fit in and be normal. As a young child I was always running out the back door when I saw an adult. My brothers and sisters used to come home from school bringing friends and I would run away. It was a feral childhood really. There was not much love.

BM: What does love mean to you now?

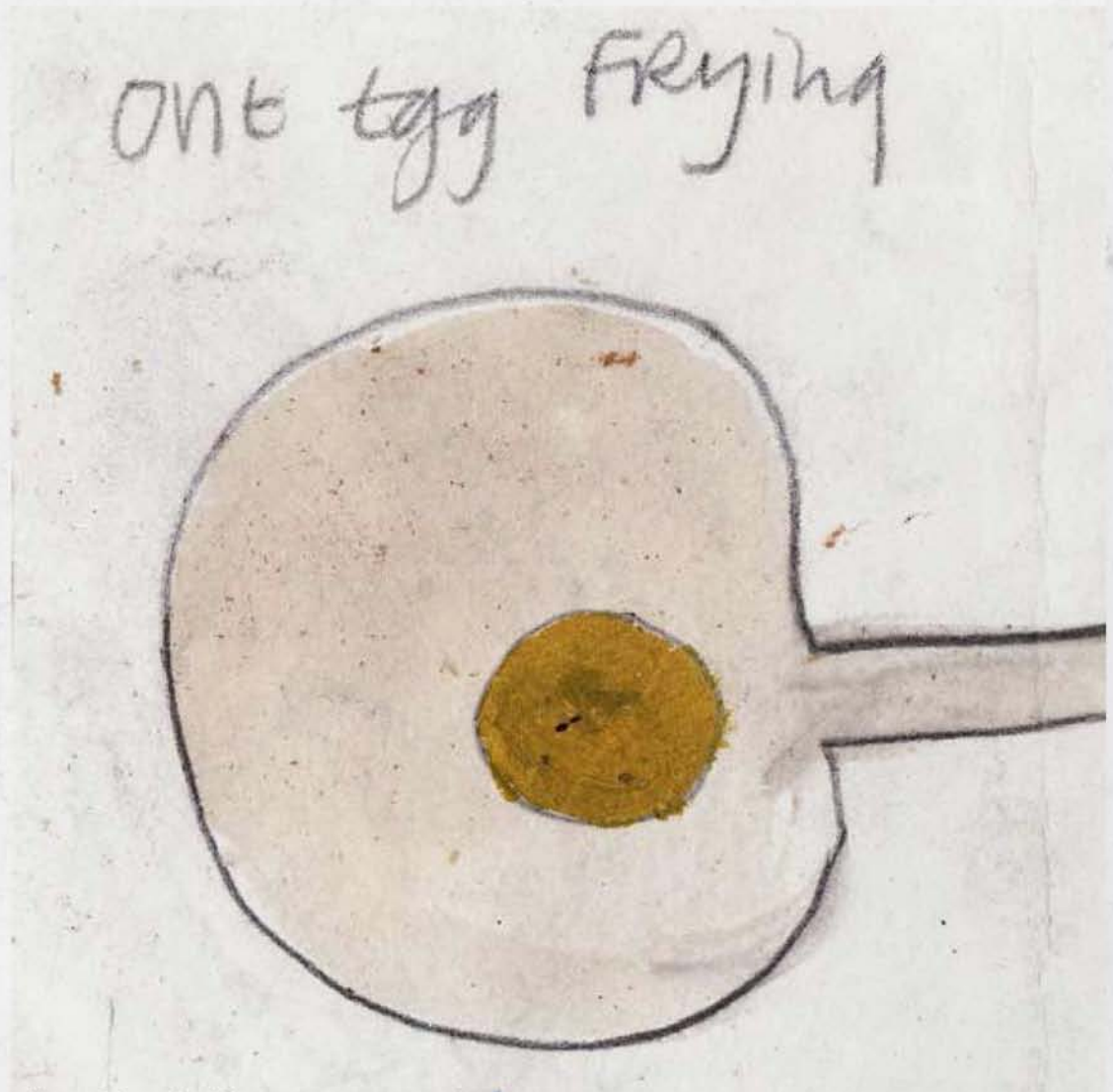
SRH: Love affairs and romances interspersed with the periods of deep solitude I need in order to make work. Love every atom.

BM: You read *English at Exeter University*, and then in 1985, you flew to Japan.

Why did you feel the need to travel that far?

SRH: I wanted to go to art school but I was embarrassed to, because I'd been to university already. In Japan, I was far away enough to study art without being seen. I was also avoiding my family.

I lived in Kyoto. To keep my visa I had to do twenty hours of study a week so I took classes in ceramics, ink painting and calligraphy. I didn't speak Japanese but I got by. There was a community of ex-pats, travellers, Kiwis. We all lived in big houses with no furniture. You were a big fish in a small pond. I was teaching English, working as a model, getting small parts in

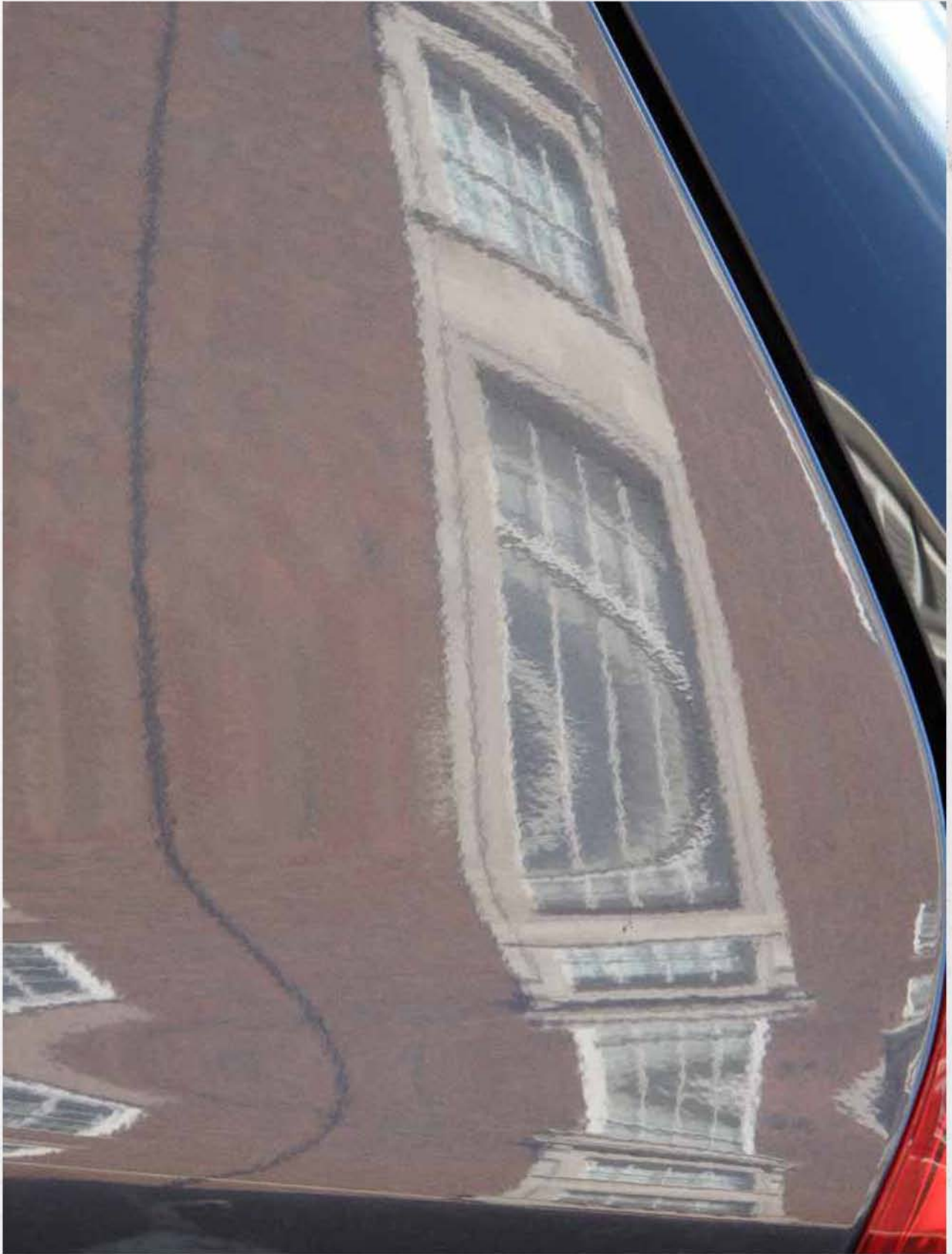


English movies. More bohemia. We were all passing through. The Japanese thought we were aliens, I think. Foreigners.

So much of what I believe in stems from that period. Japan had a profound influence on me and my work. The writing I do in my prints and books, for example, is like Haiku poetry. The Japanese intellectual system is so different from ours. I am interested in the way they make sacred space and how they design. A pot is alive, for instance. They believe in the inseparability of us and our environment, and us and our bodies. Western medicine says that it doesn't matter what you say or think or eat. You just treat the symptoms when they crop up. In Japan, how you act, and how you behave and what you say and do and eat is integral to the understanding of the human body and its function and therefore their attitude to medicine is different. When I came back to England I became a Buddhist, following a particular Japanese strain of Buddhism.

BM: After your experience in Japan you allowed yourself to apply for art school back in London...

SRH: Art school. I've never worked so hard in my life. I was addicted. I became fascinated by putting one colour down next to another. I took a lot of acid in those days. I did lots of things at the same time. I'd mix up a colour and put some on one painting and some on another. I was amazed by how a colour can change, if you change its context. Once you have got that kind of love for something, you don't think about why you do it any more. You just do it. And I don't think about it. A painting is finished when you don't want to change anything any more. You are trying to make it work. Francis Bacon said you just keep going till it's right. That's what I do. Bacon's work has been a great influence, as have the paintings of Sean Scully.





BM: Are you a bit of a rebel?

SRH: My brother commissioned some paintings for his kitchen. Fifteen of them. While trying to complete this commission (which was never finished) I realised that I can't bear to paint a painting that 'you're gonna like'. I have to disobey the rules. I have problems with authority. I can't quell the rebel in me. I find it hard to take the creative process into the market place. It's never been on top of my agenda. The rebel is in my character. I drive around Chelsea in a camper van. I can't conform. I was free as a child. I wasn't nurtured. Honestly, I came to London when I was fifteen and my mother had no idea where I was.

So, I never delivered the paintings to my brother. And I've never done a commission since. I go mad with anxiety if I have to worry about whether my work is going to be liked.

BM: What do other people think of your work?

SRH: Someone wrote on my Facebook wall, "A touch of Tracy Emin with a bit of William Scott." But who knows? My paintings just come out and I don't have too much control. Bridget Riley taught me that paintings emit energy and have a life force of their own. People connect with them in different ways. People see things in my work – the Westway or this swimming pool in Bognor or a ladder or a building, but the things they see are not always there. Sometimes they hang them upside down. I took a painting to a client and she hung the work upside down. Upside down! I wanted to say – if you knew how long I'd taken trying to make it work! My photographs are simpler to comprehend. Photography helps me find beauty everywhere I go. I love walking the streets with my camera, looking at walls and pavements and graffiti and endless buildings. It's so easy to take photographs – so much more carefree than painting. When I was at art school they said I was

'unteachable'. I just pile on in there. I try everything. I can't follow the rules.

BM: How have you been able to marry your rebellious side with the discipline of Buddhism?

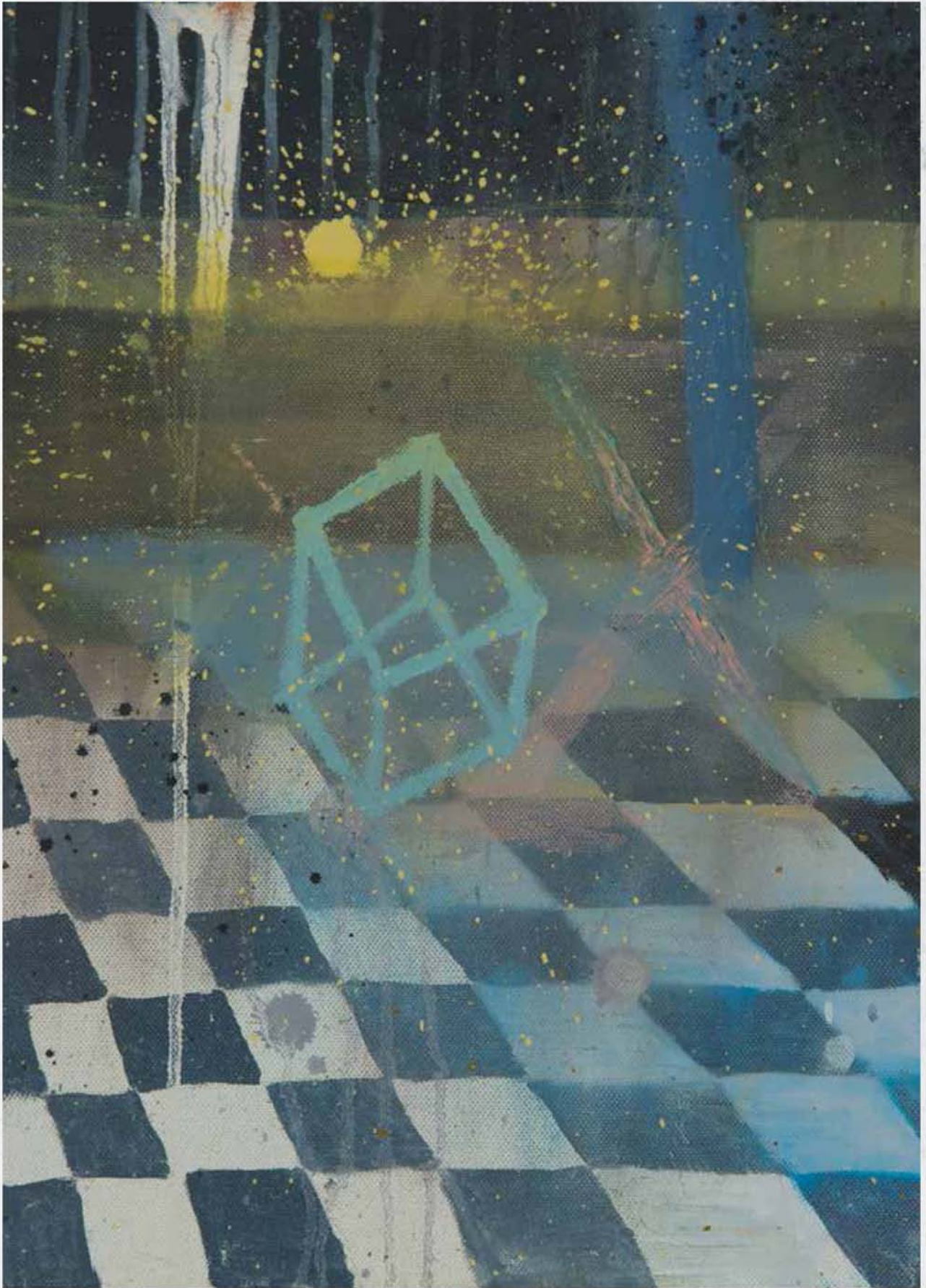
SRH: In 1988 when I came back from Japan, I practiced full on – chanting twice a day. Between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-seven I was part of a community of Buddhists. I was obsessed and fanatical. Then I went the other way, like all fanatics, and I grew away from it. Buddhism was a religious marquee pole for me. Something from which all else pivoted. But after my marriage broke down, the discipline went out of the window. I didn't want to be limited and to say 'this is the way to the divine.' I wanted to be open to other ways. Now I meditate, I chant, I walk in the park. I prefer not being tied down by an organization. I still chant but I don't proselytize.

BM: Would you say you are changing?

SRH: Probably. The men-o-pause. At first I thought the menopause was something scary. I would get these hot flushes. I would just light up from within and turn red and feel like I was bursting with heat. But as it progressed I began to respect it. It's a fabulous time. I am impressed with the way the body changes. It's a new age. The age of 'the crone'. People are so afraid. They think it means the end of your sexuality. But it doesn't. It's a different, wiser age. More circumspect. I have respect for this moment in the female chart, as it were. Moving into a different phase. I am more excited about my work than I have ever been. I want to sell it and spread it about. I have never felt stronger. I never wanted children. I don't know why. I have eighteen godchildren. I have a family of friends. I suppose I have always reacted against the grain. I was never going to be conventional, and do things in the way other people did them. Maybe it was my upbringing. I am independent.



Three Into Two Won't Go , 2005



Divine Doorway, 2012

I suppose I am having a rebirth. By selling prints I am spreading my work in a more egalitarian way. I've always been a writer. When I was a child I wrote a little book about a girl who kept a cow in the field. The story went like this: one day the little girl goes to look for her cow but it has gone. So she asks everyone – the policeman, the farmer and so on and then she finds it. All the time it was in her shed. I am thinking of finding the story and bringing it up to date. I always feel writing coming through. I have just published *The Book of Cornish Love* [a collection of prints and thoughts]. It's simple but meaningful, I hope. It means something to me anyway. Agnes Martin's poetic insight has fuelled my love of words and solitude. She wrote, "The function of art work is... the renewal of memories of perfection."

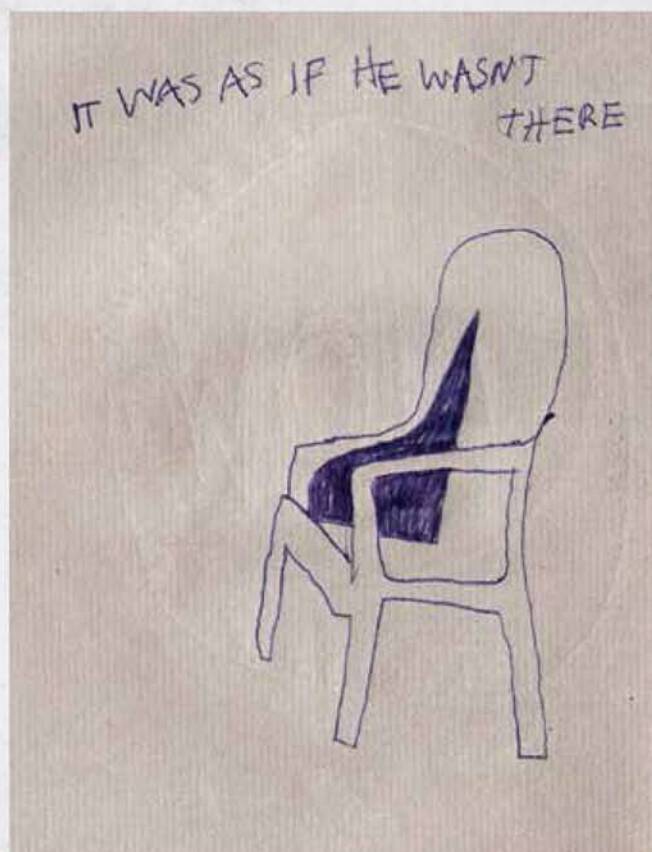
BM: So you are moving on. You are selling this house in Chelsea that has provided the setting for so many gatherings...


SRH: 18 Rawlings Street has been a hub, I suppose. A five-storey town house in Chelsea. I think you can understand my work if you visit Rawlings Street, with its endless flights of stairs and ladders. It became a safe house. People would stay. I used to say it's free B&B but I don't do breakfast so it's just a free-B! I've been having parties in the house since the Eighties. But I've been feeling like it's the end of all that for a while. I'll have a final fling this year. I'll get all my pictures on the walls and we'll drink *gluwein* and say goodbye to an era. Yes, I am selling the house. I gather people. I always had that idea of art happening. You do it with people. It's a serious endeavor. I've worked and worked for twenty-five years. I'm never going to stop. I'll keep going till I'm eighty, I hope. I can work with people around. I have never needed seclusion. I can paint while I'm on the telephone. But that part of my life, when I'm taking people in and looking after them, is over. I've been listening to other people's problems for years. Then at times I've been in floods of tears at home alone myself. Painting has

been healing and now the paintings need to go out and do their work.

BM: Where are you going?

SRH: I am moving to Wiltshire. Near Silbury Hill and Avebury. There is magic in the West Country. Ancient wisdom. The Pewsey Vale is the land of milk and honey. There's a village called Honeystreet, which really was seen as a haven and fertile ground in the Neolithic period. I know that place. I know where to pick blackberries, and in which stream to swim, where to walk and how to find the sacred places. I suppose it connects with the Buddhism and the sacred geometry. Now I am looking for peace and a quieter place to continue my work. I will take the spirit of Rawlings Street to Wiltshire. Of course no doubt I will be unable to resist gathering people around me and before you know it, there'll be caravans and tipis all over the garden. We'll see.





“I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir,
to be patient toward all that is unsolved in
your heart and to try to love the questions
themselves.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (1903)

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