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AN INTERVIEW WITH GARY BETTS

Gary Betts is a sculptor originally from East London, now working in his studio on a barge moored along the River Thames. Here, Gary discusses his multi-disciplinary background, the harmony between human and animal forms, and the narratives behind his illustrations.

CG Can you share more about your early life in East London and your decision to pursue art, as well as the impact going to study Art had on you?

GB Looking back, I see my past in a totally different way to my younger self. It is clear that art school was one of the fundamental turning points in my life. For the first time I met other people involved in art as well as people from all different backgrounds and nationalities. It had a monumental impact on me. People who I shared interests with and who took an interest in me.

Most of the people I had grown up with were from East London, our futures and horizons were quite narrow. We knew nothing about the existence of certain industries. Most of my friends went into the building trade or worked for the Ford motor company in Dagenham. At the time, nobody I knew was exposed to the existence of art as a career, profession or industry.



CG What prompted your shift from graphic design, illustration and advertising to full-time sculpting? Have these various forms of creative expression influenced your artistic journey?

GB The first year of art school was the best, trying various disciplines, including photography, illustration, graphic design, sculpting, filmmaking and so on. This helped me enormously, as I realised they all had one word in common, creativity.

Although I moved in many different creative directions, the overall journey was the same, to invent and to create. I never forced or rushed the path I was on, whether it was design, illustration, sculpting, art direction or writing television, each creative discipline moved naturally into the other. After all, I decided that out of these disciplines, sculpting gave me the most complete fulfilment.

CG Many of your works are created on your barge that is moored on the River Thames in West London. Could you share more about why you chose this unique location for your studio?

GB I have had a few studios in my time and for the past 30 years have lived close to the river. For me, working and watching a



tidal river move backwards and forwards roughly every six hours is hypnotic. As I stand at my window watching, the time disappears. It is magnetic and in total harmony with me. I always dreamt of working on a boat and I'm sure it has had a huge influence on my creations as a sculptor.

CG Can you elaborate on your choice of human-animal hybrid subjects, more so the role the human figure plays in your work?

GB When I was at college, we had life drawing classes. It was believed that if you could draw the human figure, you would then be able to move into the abstract world with more confidence. I still believe that. I was obsessed with drawing the human form and took it further, studying medical illustration for a time. A profession that no longer exists. At the time, you worked alongside a doctor who specialised in drawing diseases that were too complicated to photograph.

CG Can you describe your technique and process for creating these sculptures and what draws you to this particular style, colour palette and medium?

GB My technique today is the result of an ever-changing process. I initially started with porcelain clay figurative sculptures. It took a

long-time to master the material. I felt restricted because everything has to be put into the kiln and you never quite know what you are going to find when you open the door.

Later, I met an artist who introduced me to resin clay and for me that was liberating, you had total control over the process. The only problem I found was the lack of glaze or patina effects so I decided to start illustrating on the figures. I loved illustrating and I loved sculpture and the two came together perfectly with resin clay. It also meant that I could express myself with the illustration the way that I couldn't do with porcelain clay.

CG What draws you to such detailed motifs and narratives?

GB My pieces often feature my personal experiences, though not all of my work is autobiographical. As I work, it means something to me at the time but to the viewer it may conjure up a different emotion and that's exactly what I love.

CG How has your artistic journey evolved over the years?

GB Every step in my career as an artist has led to another, each with its own significance. You never totally realise this at the time but looking back now all the roads I took have enabled me to be the artist I am today.





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16 Crawford Street, London W1H 1BS