

BEHIND THE PICTURE

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Paintings and Narrative by Simone Sandelson

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BEHIND THE PICTURE

For me, painting must be real and honest. It doesn't need to be earnest but it does need to provoke a visceral response – to make me laugh out loud, to feel outrage or empathy, despair, a sense of mystery or just to be touched by its simple beauty.

My early studies to be an Art Historian instilled a rebellious response towards art. Over analysis and supposition of influences ruined my enjoyment of the work and made me into a dispassionate observer merely assessing the quality, style and 'meaning'. Looking became no more than an academic exercise.

It was only when I returned to painting, (I had painted throughout my childhood,) that the joy of both looking and doing, returned. For a while I worked in a traditional portrait painter's studio where I learnt the strict techniques of grinding pigments, making gesso boards, under-painting and glazing. It was a useful discipline but I needed to find my own voice.

My work has been formed by many diverse elements – a feeling of powerlessness amidst trauma in my own life, the philosophy and practice of Buddhism; an encounter with a prisoner on death row in America, teaching art to refugees and prisoners in London and much else. And I have been inspired by a variety of art and artists – Rembrandt's self-portraits, Fra Angelico's frescoes as well as Gerhard Richter, Freida Khalo, Folk Art, ancient Buddhist Thankas, Insider Art and the list goes on.

Behind the Picture is a collection of paintings inspired by images that tell a story that may not be immediately apparent when looking at them. Simple objects like a child's dress, a wooden spoon, clothes hanging on a line, a rusty custard tin, become a testament to lives that have existed, like fading memories halted in time. Other work alludes to personal experience, nature and even politics. What threads them together is they all contain their own individual narrative.

In presenting my work in this way I want to share my response to these stories. They are always subjects that resonate with me and provoke a reaction. I am constantly putting things in and rubbing them away and then usually end up with a starkness to allow space for the story to unfold. The colours are often muted suggesting the passing of time, like faded photographs and at times the shadows evoke the human presence behind the story.

These are portraits through objects, conveying a presence through absence.

Simone Sandelson

THE LETTERS

I started writing to a death row prisoner in May 2004, having been put in touch by the charity 'Human Writes'. This is an extract from one of many letters written to me by Jack Alderman from death row, Atlanta, Georgia, over a four year period.

"Your letters impact my world profoundly. It centers on the acceptance, it is fuelled by freedom. I trust you to let me be who I am. I am not suspicious or defensive. You cannot imagine the assault on the soul when the interrogations begin. I have no complaints about doubts or questions, they are reasonable. What can depress is a façade for curiosity..."

All Jack's letters were written on the same prison file paper, placed in the same regulation envelope and stamped with a prison stamp to indicate they had been read by the authorities.

They contained the unfolding of an extraordinary story of a deeply spiritual man, who had been on death row for 34 years for the murder of his wife, Barbara. It is the story of the destruction of evidence by the State of Georgia to cover up their own improprieties and a confession by the actual murderer, who was offered his freedom by the State, in return for implicating Jack Alderman in the murder. Hundreds in the US and abroad, including the Prison Governor, thought him to be innocent.

He was executed in 2008 in spite of a campaign to try and prove his innocence. New evidence was discovered to show he was not at the scene of the crime, but the Court refused a retrial on the basis there were no witnesses. The witnesses were both dead.



MEMORIES OF BARBARA

Nov 10th 2006

One of the many descriptions Jack Alderman wrote from prison, about his wife, Barbara.

“Barbara was truly pleasing to the eyes. She had lustrous chestnut brown hair; she let me do a ponytail for her before we went horse riding or to the beach. Her eyes were hazel. There was depth, real windows to the soul. I spent countless hours sitting outside dressing rooms as she presented one outfit after another for my opinion. I did not complain. It was my pleasure.”

She was found dead in a creek near Savannah. He was accused of her murder.

He pinned a photo of this painting to the wall of his cell and wrote to me saying she would have been honoured.



I QUOTE DAVID

"We are permitted to go on the yard twice a week; yesterday it was wet and windy, I was asked why I participate?

I could remind them of the six years spent without ever going outside; but I quote David and explain that I commune with God through the trees, the birds and the sky".

Letter from Jack Alderman October 2005'



WOODEN SPOON

Leon Ferber carved this spoon while he was fighting for the Partisans somewhere in a Ukranian forest, between 1939-41. He escaped Poland where his parents were taken away to Auschwitz. He never saw them again.

The spoon he carved was his survival tool while living in appalling conditions in the forest; he said it had given him a sense of his humanity.

The spoon travelled with Leon while on the run through Russia and eventually to a Russian labour camp until the end of the war when he returned to the place of his birth in Kracow, Poland.

The spoon remained with him long after its original purpose had been served: a reminder of the triumphs and disasters he had experienced.

He ultimately settled in England with his youngest son Charlie.

Leon Ferber died in 1986

The wooden spoon remains with Charlie – my dentist.



THE CONVERSATION

The conversation we never had.



DRESS WITH STRAWBERRIES

This painting was inspired by Katie Hims' play 'Lost Property' on Radio 4.

The dress with strawberries is the hero of the story.

It reunited four generations of a family after the Second World War, thanks to the insertion of a photo of a small girl wearing the dress, in a newspaper 60 years after she had become separated from her family. She was an evacuee from the East End of London and was put in a different carriage from her siblings on the train to Yorkshire. Her name tag was lost, so she was untraceable when the war ended.

The dress was passed down from mother to daughter, daughter to grand-daughter and ultimately from grand-daughter to great grand-daughter.

It became a totem for the family who somehow believed that by preserving the dress, they would one day be united.

The illuminated dress stands out against a dark background like a religious icon.



JAMES

James was my only brother.

He died before his 21st birthday when he was a student at Cambridge.

He was intelligent, handsome and sensitive. I still miss him and all the years we should have had together.

When I look at old photos of him now, I see his vulnerability in his slightly awkward stance.



PENGUINS ON THE EDGE

The natural world against man and his machinery.

The penguins stand helplessly in a line.

The female penguins struggle to navigate their way to the sea to find food for their chicks due to rising temperatures and melting ice and many others are killed by oil slicks.



GRANDFATHER'S CHAIR

Grandfather's chair was never to be sat in by anyone but him. It became a game for us to try.

He worked in a clothing factory in an old mill in Stockport, Lancashire.

He would leave every morning on the dot of 7.15 wearing his tweed flat-cap and raincoat. If we were lucky he would take us there. I loved going – the smell of machine oil and bales of wool and striped ticking; boxes of giant spools of cotton thread in every colour, wads of zips, leather and horn buttons and the sound of machines clackety-clacking.



PROSTRATION

On July 13th 2012 thousands of followers of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood gathered in Tahrir Square to pray and express their support for President Mohammed Morsi, disappointing millions of Egyptians who had staged an uprising in the very same square the previous year, risking their lives for a meaningful democracy.



ABANDONED JACKETS

The Asylum for the Chronic Insane was built in upstate New York in 1869. Most of the patients who were admitted into the institution, lived there for the rest of their lives and were buried in the grounds. When it closed its doors in 1995, many of the patients' possessions remained there including these jackets. We do not know who owned them but they conjure up an image of the desolate lives they might have lived there, probably forgotten by those who once knew them.



CUSTARD TIN AND GRAPE-NUTS

The team at the British Survey Base in Antarctica were given less than an hour to abandon camp as an iceberg approached in October 1954.

The Custard Tin and Grape-Nuts remained there frozen in time and were discovered over 50 years later.



WHAT REMAINS

The robes of the dead, Gysenyi, Rwanda, May 1994. 1,000,000 people died there in 100 days.



WILL'S WHITE SHOES

Worn, loved and discarded. This marks the end of the white shoe phase in Will's life.



NO ENEMIES, NO HATRED

The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Lui Xiaobo in 2010. He was unable to attend because he was in Jinzhou Prison serving an eleven year sentence for 'incitement to subvert state power'. His chair at the ceremony was left empty in his honour.

His statement at his trial read:

"I have no enemies and no hatred, None of the police who monitored, arrested or interrogated me, none of the prosecutors who indicted me, and none of the judges who judged me are my enemy. I look forward to the day when our country will be a land of free expression; a country where different values, ideas, beliefs and political views can compete with one another as they peacefully coexist... a country where it will be impossible to suffer persecution for expressing a political view. I hope that I will be the last victim in China's long record of treating words as crimes."



GOATS IN A TREE

I read an article in a newspaper about goats climbing trees to eat fruit. Apparently this only happens in parts of Morocco where the goats find the fruits of the argan tree irresistible (they taste like olives).

I painted this as a testament to the goats who will no longer be able to enjoy these fruits because they produce argan oil which is now being sold as an anti-aging product. The farmers follow the goats from tree to tree collecting their excrement in which the undigested seeds are hidden, and grind them into oil. Those marketing the oil felt it was not an attractive thought to put goat's excrement on your face and have campaigned to keep the goats away from the argan trees forever.

How sad that we will no longer be able to witness this adorable sight and that they are banished from whatever the Moroccan equivalent of Eden may be.

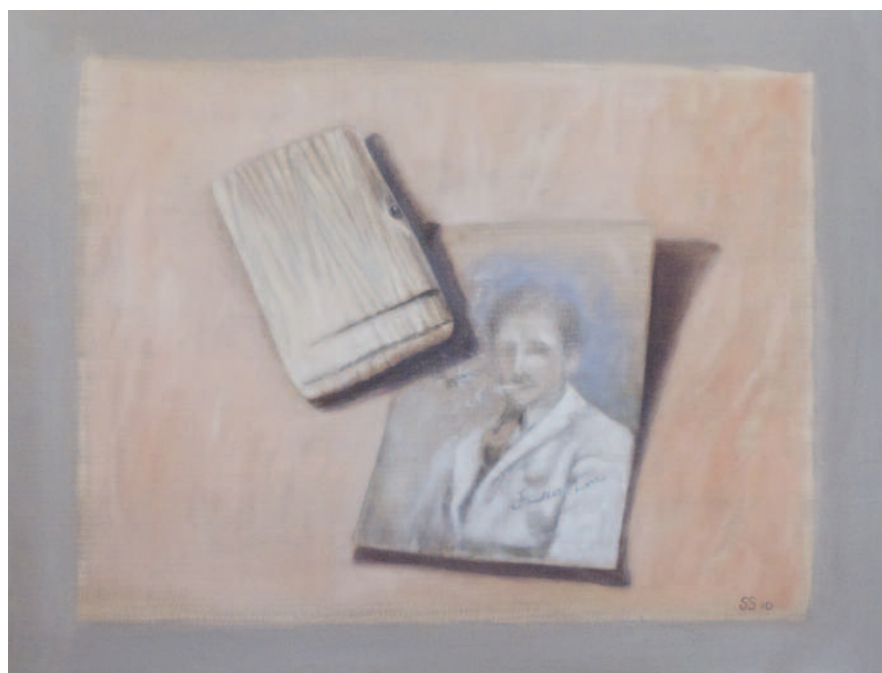
This is a memory of their days in paradise.



THE CIGARETTE CASE

My Father's 1930s gold cigarette case with a sapphire clasp, lies across an old photograph of him. He sent this to my Mother, when he was a debonair young man in the army with the words 'fondest love' scribbled across it.

He died of lung cancer aged 47.



SNOWY CHAIR

Thoughts on the transitory nature of everything.

“Now the last cloud drains away we sit together, the mountain and me
until only the mountains remain.”

Li Bai Eighth century Chinese poet.



PAINTING SHIRT

I often wear my son's old shirt when I am painting. The left cuff has been removed for use as a rag. The yellow blossom is the joy of a flash of inspiration.



WHITEWASH

The accumulation of many years trawling street markets and table-top sales in search of antique cotton garments and nightdresses which evoke curiosity about those who had previously owned them.



PRAYER FLAGS IN THE WIND

Colourful Buddhist prayer flags have been seen fluttering in the wind across Tibet for centuries. Each flag is inscribed with a prayer. Tibetans believe their prayers will be blown by the wind to spread peace and compassion into the world.

They are now discouraged by the Chinese Occupation.



CONSCIOUSNESS

“Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate”.

C.G.Jung



EMPTY ROOM

Young birds fly out of the nest, once they are old enough to fly.



BEHIND THE PICTURE



1
The Letters
70 x 60 cm
oil on board



2
Memories of Barbara
122 x 76 cm
oil on canvas



3
I Quote David
122 x 76 cm
oil on canvas



4
Wooden Spoon
40 x 50 cm
oil on canvas



5
The Conversation
40 x 50 cm
oil on canvas



6
Dress with Strawberries
73 x 54 cm
oil on canvas



7
James
50 x 40 cm
oil on canvas



8
Penguins on the Edge
90 x 120 cm
oil on canvas



9
Grandfather's Chair
76 x 61 cm
oil on Board



13
What Remains
100 x 80 cm
oil on canvas



10
Prostration
100 x 81 cm
oil on linen



14
Will's White Shoes
76 x 51 cm
oil on canvas



11
Abandoned Jackets
80 x 80 cm
oil on canvas



15
No Enemies, No Hatred
65 x 81 cm
oil on linen



12
Custard Tin and Grape-nuts
40 x 50 cm
oil on canvas



16
Goats in a Tree
160 x 73 cm
oil on linen



17
The Cigarette Case
40 x 50 cm
oil on canvas



21
Prayer Flags in the Wind
81 x 100 cm
oil on canvas



18
Snowy Chair
71 x 91 cm
oil on canvas



22
Consciousness
41 x 38 cm
acrylic on hand made
paper



19
Painting Shirt
50 x 40 cm
oil on canvas



23
Empty Room
102 x 76 cm
oil on xxxxx



20
Whitewash
97 x 97 cm
oil on board

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