

Stephen Farthing

# Marginally out of control

Known for his explorations into the nature of drawing, Professor Stephen Farthing RA is now going wild with watercolour. Words: Lynn Parr

**C**ALLING HIMSELF a “slightly dotty inventor”, Stephen Farthing is busy reinventing watercolour painting and its relationship to drawing – and having a ball at the same time. “I’m very fortunate that I’ve got this chair at the university,” he says. This is the Rootstein Hopkins Chair of Drawing at the University of the Arts, London. “It enables me to spend a lot of time doing research. It’s one of the great pleasures of being an artist, really – you’re in a state of perpetual learning. One of the sad things is when you get into a state of perpetual commerce and believe you have to keep making this reliable product. At the moment, my product is very unreliable and I’m rather excited by it. I’m either going to find myself in a very new space, doing very new things, or crash. That’s part of the thrills of the occupation; that you should be able to crash – maybe not financially, but emotionally and intellectually.”

The “new things” Farthing is exploring encompass two very different approaches and topics, reflecting his “schizophrenic” life both in London and New York. In his American studio he has produced a series of large-scale acrylic paintings of jewellery for an exhibition next year to be called *Bling!* In London, in his studio at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, he is

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experimenting with watercolour, using it as a drawing medium.

“When I took on this job I had to start thinking about how I might write about drawing seriously. And I had this idea that it was essentially a dry activity, and the whole art world was becoming drier in that photographic darkrooms are no longer wet places – you just chuck the photograph through a computer and it comes out, and it’s not wet anymore. The most likely place you’ll ever get an ink blot today is in your jacket pocket from a leaky Biro. In the West we don’t have a tradition of drawing with a brush.

“I was looking at John Ruskin’s book *The Elements of Drawing* – I did an exhibition based on it in Auckland, New Zealand – and the strangest thing about it is that most of it is about watercolour painting;

about learning to control these coloured puddles. At first I thought he’d gone off the rails and lost contact with the difference between painting and drawing. But then I saw that a bigger picture of drawing would include watercolour painting because, like using a pencil or pen, it’s so much about what you do to the paper and how much you leave the paper.

“I began to see a substantial difference between watercolour painting and oil painting – and it was entirely to do with this idea of leaving the background to come through and play a role in it. Jackson Pollock didn’t differentiate between painting and drawing, because the background was always coming through: it’s just this mark that rolls across the surface leaving lots of spaces between. So I got involved in watercolour painting as a way of exploring the difference between painting and drawing.”

The results of this new way of thinking are huge paintings of objects both on and in water – feet, cruise ships and ducks, which was shown in this year’s Royal Academy’s Summer Exhibition. Each motif is painted loosely and quickly; each is slightly different from its neighbour. And with the reflections, you can’t always tell where the real object ends and the reflected image begins. Figures feature in a picture in a similar style.

“A lot of being an artist is playing games with yourself, trying out scenarios,” Farthing says. “You have to find ways of refreshing your relationship with it.”

A major aspect of his own relationship with watercolour is learning to work with its wetness; letting go.

“One of the changes in my work in dealing with this wetness is not to try and force the paint to be very precise, but to let it





be a bit more imprecise, so it begins to build different kinds of stories. I'm not a complete victim of wetness – if it's not going right I will throw it away. I'm interested in how it can corrupt and change a story – but in my mind there's still a very tight story. It's not this thing about 'Oh, let's let the audience make up their mind what it is'. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in a very precise rendering of a story – but you're seeing it through a rather smoky set of glasses; you're degrading it on purpose so it becomes not more ambiguous, but less what it was in the first place."

While each simplified motif is less than the original object, when put together, the images have surprised him by becoming a greater, more attractive whole.

"I think what is happening is that the images are, in a funny kind of way, becoming more beautiful – and I would like my paintings to be more beautiful. One of the ways I'm trying to make this happen is by letting the paint move its own way, so that my ugly hand isn't always there pushing it into an exact position. I don't think I'm blessed with natural taste like some people are. All the pictures I've painted to date have been hard won; quite

tough to make. I think watercolour is a more grown-up medium. I could never have painted with it when I was 21. I was too angry and wanting to be in control. But now I like the idea of being marginally out of control."

Farthing's position as a professor of drawing enables him to concentrate on his painting, while his standing in the art world means he can make a living from his work while not worrying about trends or the marketplace.

"I don't really understand what's going on in the art world now. I don't get a feeling of there being a strong direction; one shared set of values. It's pretty diverse. It's clearly going through

a boom time in terms of the financial rewards, and I think that does skew the results. Whenever there's a lot of money rolling around in the art world it becomes slightly confusing what is going on. You take out the money and you've got some exciting things happening – though I'm not sure it's that exciting at the moment, to be honest. I think there is a desperation to find things new. It's a bit like walking into a secondhand shop and asking if there's anything new." ▷

"The art world is perfectly poised to be turned upside-down. People have to get angry with the way things are"

**OPPOSITE** Cartier, oil on canvas, 102x667cm

**ABOVE** Stephen Farthing in front of some of the new paintings that will make up his *Bling!* exhibition

So how can the situation be fixed?

“Just time fixes it. People get bored with it. What has to happen is that people have to get angry with the way things are. Why did Pollock paint his drip paintings? He probably got fed up with looking at paintings that looked like they’d fallen out of Germany in 1912 – and probably stopped seeing the world in the same way that artists had seen it before him, and wanted to find a way of putting it down. Today, people are quite happy with the way the world is at the moment; they’re just seeing it the way their dad saw it. Like with rock music: young people today are listening to the same music that I listened to when I was young – and there’s got to be something wrong with that.

“The art world is absolutely perfectly poised to be turned upside-down. But there’s no financial interest in making that happen. Either through boredom or the money drying up, there will be a reinvention.

“I’m a slightly dotty inventor in that I can afford to do things in my own mind that don’t conform to contemporary fashion or the marketplace. Interestingly enough, it doesn’t stop people buying my pictures.”

Although his pictures mostly sell across the Atlantic, he has brought the jewellery paintings back to England as the Americans “just don’t get the irony of them.

“But it doesn’t do a lot for your reputation if you’ve got two types of painting,” he adds. “Artists are supposed to be at the margins of society, but people like you to be dull, boring people; who have interesting stuff written about them – that they’re drunks or wear crazy clothes or behave badly – but they like the work to be absolutely consistent.

“It must be quite fun to be the Pope; but you’ve got to conform to other people’s idea of religion, whereas I don’t have to conform to anyone else’s idea of what art is. And that is a fantastic privilege. You belong to this big club, but it doesn’t have any rules.”

So having at least two painting styles, how would he describe himself?

“As somebody who continues to look for new and exciting things. It’s got to be the most interesting life: you’re an explorer. What I’m not very good at is staying in the studio and doing what I’m told.”

He does work to commission every so often, but though he loves doing it because it is “paid employment”, he finds it “hard work. Like having a day job, because you have to worry.” One painting he is looking forward to, however, is for Aston Villa Football Stadium. An earlier commission, for the National Portrait Gallery, was a bit more fraught, no less because it was overseen by a panel of nine.

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**Profile**

Professor Stephen Farthing RA studied at St Martin’s School of Art and the Royal College of Art, London. He has taught extensively and exhibited his paintings all over the world,




representing Britain at the São Paulo Biennale in 1989. He was elected to the Royal Academy in 1990. He was executive director of the New York Academy of Art from 2000 to 2004, when he was appointed Rootstein Hopkins Chair of Drawing at University of Arts, London, a post he still holds.

See [www.stephenfarthing.com](http://www.stephenfarthing.com).

“It drove me crazy because, in the end, I didn’t know who I was pleasing. The only one who didn’t complain was the one who died halfway through the process.”

However, despite the vagaries of painting to commission, Farthing is loving every minute of his working life.

“It just gets better. I much more enjoy painting and my interaction with the art world than I did 10 years ago, because I feel no pressure. Painting is the absolute pleasure of being alive. It’s just a question of doing what I want to do – and how many people can say that?” 



**FAR LEFT** *Drawn Ducks*, gesso on canvas, 207x173cm

**LEFT** *Cruise Ships*, acrylic on canvas, 207x173cm

**OPPOSITE** *Painting the Atlantic*, oil on canvas, 8.2x2.4m

### WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE IT AS AN ARTIST

- It would be nice to be an engineer of the human soul; to do the Eliza Doolittle thing and take hold of someone and wilfully mould them.
- To make it big, you've got to be prepared to do absolutely anything.
- You've got to constantly test yourself. David Hockney did some work using a camera obscura. He didn't need to; he draws perfectly well. It was like trying to play the piano with gloves on. He did it to make things more interesting.
- Art is nothing to do with the subject matter at all; it's the way you say it.
- There are so many ways of approaching art, it's difficult to advise. But the main thing to remember is you've got to really love what you do. If you're not enjoying it, you're doing it wrong. That's what makes great art: people loving what they do.



LEFT One of the untitled paintings for *Bling!*

BELOW An illustration from Farthing's exhibition exploring John Ruskin's *The Elements of Drawing*

