

## **Distracted and Ready For Action**

### **Simon Armitage**

If you spend any time in Cornwall, and particularly in St Ives, as I do, then Anthony Frost is hard to avoid. Not the man himself, but the work, which adorns the walls of many a public space in the town. His trademark ‘triangle’ has even been incorporated into the logo of a local restaurant and the reflection of their neon sign can often be found floating in the sea during nights of high tide and little wind. Frost explains that this triangle, like a laterally aligned stylus with a blunted tip, is in fact a diamond, and has been a recognisable motif in his work for many years now.

“How many?” I ask him.

“Too many,” he replies.

Apparently it stems from a project in which 52 artists were each sent a playing card and Frost received the ten of diamonds in his envelope. He’s done dominoes as well. But things are changing. Of the thirty or forty pieces laid out in readiness for his new exhibition, Surface Noise, the diamond has been phased out, or at least relegated to some of the minor pieces. Taking its place is something far less pre-figured, less cautious, possibly, and certainly more energised. Whatever has given rise to this new burst of creative expression isn’t completely clear (I have my own theory – more of that later), but Frost is obviously excited about it. And with good reason, in my opinion. The work is exuberant, almost ecstatic in its use of colour, and suggests a kind of artistic exploration, in which the journey itself is the whole point of the project. Paint and process, Frost says, are the key issues here, as if the finished product is almost an unexpected bonus. It begins with a surface – usually but not necessarily a stretched canvas – onto which a further surface might be appended, often some strip of fabric ripped from an everyday object, such as an onion bag, or a potato sack, or on one occasion, a director’s chair. Onto several other pieces Frost has attached what to you and me looks like a piece of groundsheet, or the lining from some high-performance fleece jacket. It’s called “ripstop”, apparently, a material from which sails and other maritime equipment are made, and I take it as an indication of Frost’s recent creative ebullience that he should be applying paint onto one of the world’s most liquid-resistant materials. And apply paint he does, in great quantity. With such a hefty price for each tub a more prudent artist might be more careful as to how, where and why such paint is used. But for Frost, intuition appears to be everything, and it’s for this reason, I would argue, that the studio is full of distractions. The subconscious – like a night-animal coming to the lawn – can never be summoned. Somehow, we must occupy our rational thoughts with other matters, and simply hope that the mysterious occurs. So the kettle boils, or the phone rings, or the workmen whistle, or the view beckons. Or a poet visits. Or family and friends pop in for a chat. And almost continually the radio speaks, or a CD plays. It’s no mere accident that Frost is both a fan and an acquaintance of The Fall’s Mark E. Smith, a master tactician when it comes to disruption and distraction, whose own output might be thought of as the musical equivalent of Frost’s paintings. In fact Frost’s work proudly appears on the cover of a number of Fall record covers, most notably the Extricate album. Typically enough, it was photographed upside down. Restored to its correct perspective, it now takes pride of place on an easel in the middle of Frost’s studio, perhaps as trophy, perhaps as an emblem of everything that matters. The fact that the studio is very cold is further testament to Frost’s attitude to art,

and evidence of his technique. A poet, sitting and writing, wouldn't last half an hour in this temperature. But Frost's restlessness must keep him warm as he approaches then withdraws from the work, or even turns his attention to another piece in order to keep the spontaneity alive.

The title of this current exhibition is a quote from another of Frost's heroes, the late John Peel, and most of the pieces have been given names relating to song lyrics or track titles. Captain Beefheart gets a mention, not surprisingly. And if the music is name-checked as the inspiration for these works, it is also credited with a second function: that of creating sufficient diversion to allow Frost to steal in under the radar of his own rational mind and apply the brushstrokes. Or the palette-knife. Or whatever else he might attack the canvas with. To that end, the pieces needn't be thought of as literal interpretations of the tracks themselves, although it is intriguing to speculate that a kind of captured noise is on display here: the world of sound given its physical form; a sort of cross-section or CAT scan of the soul as it responds to musical stimulation.

That evening, at Frost's house above the mystical and primal north Cornish coast, I wheel out my theory. It's a bit Freudian, I'm afraid. Even a little bit Oedipal. I'm thinking out loud at this point, but I wonder if this new vibrancy and freedom in his work isn't a kind of ironic manifestation of bereavement, or release, for an artist who lost both of his parents about three years ago. Not only did Frost grow up in the world of art, but in his own words, he grew up in "a house of abstraction." In those circumstances, wouldn't all artistic rule-breaking feel like conformity, or the continuation of a family tradition? Also, for a poet like myself, always rummaging in people's dustbins for a free symbol or working metaphor, isn't the piece "Digital Mystic", with its bandaged cross set against a euphorically coloured background, both a tribute and triumphal at the same time?

Frost, his own man, isn't so sure about this interpretation. And he has every right to disagree. After all, he's spent a lifetime working all this out, and my own theory is less than a day old. But in the hours after my departure, while I'm still lost on the mist-shrouded lanes of the Penwith Peninsula, I hope he might come to think of it as a compliment. That was the intention. It must take a heart of huge muscle to make such dazzling art from the canvasses and paint which were, quite literally, his inheritance.

Earlier in the day, back at the studio, I'd shown Anthony Frost a new trick. Well, it's probably old hat in the playground by now, but to me it's a revelation. Here's how it works: play some music, dial 2580, then hold your mobile phone to the speaker. A few seconds later a service called Shazam sends a text message with the name of the track and the recording artist. Ten pence a shot. Works every time. My approach to art, it now occurs to me, is not dissimilar: I look at something, and wait for a response. In the case of Anthony Frost, I detect an artist who is passionate about colour and transfixed by contrasts, and I sense art which resonates with personality and crackles with confidence. Stand before these paintings, and listen.

***Simon Armitage.***