

Günther Herbst

“I see these structures as a raft, a way of escaping... I am trying to create a world that the person who built it may have felt”

GÜNTHER HERBST spent several years toiling at graphic design and animation before turning to fine art. In the 1990s he moved from Johannesburg to Berlin and then London, where in 1998 he started photographing homeless peoples' makeshift shelters, gradually developing a way of painting them that could also comment on the bleak social issues involved. He works slowly, on several paintings at once, and often in series; High Holborn and High Holborn 3/White Red Blue Yellow – both shown left – were accepted, respectively, for the John Moores 24 (2006) and the Jerwood Contemporary Painters (2008) exhibitions. His multi-layered images are steeped in hints and references to other artists – from Patrick Caulfield to Piet Mondrian. As Herbst puts it, “I am interested in mixing up different art languages. When people look at the work I want them to construct their own idea of the paintings.” INTERVIEW: Vici MacDonald

Your name suggests you're German, but your accent is South African...

My mum's side of the family is from German missionary stock and we were brought up at home speaking German. My father spoke a bit of German but came from Dutch/French settlers. I get called many different names, but the correct pronunciation is “Howbst”, which directly translates to “autumn” in German.

Are the homeless shelters your first major body of painting?

They're my most thought-through body of work. I've been working with these images for a very long time. I initially photographed them in 1998, and always wanted to make paintings of them. I started out painting them in a cartoon style but the actual painting aspect wasn't that interesting. Then I started seeing this modernist grid in them, which gives the work a dignity. Because my works are not ironic: I am looking for a spirituality, which the modernist era of painting carries off really well.

You started photographing shelters when you moved to England – was that because you felt a bit transient yourself?

Definitely. Growing up in South Africa, I was always aware of discrepancies in poverty and wealth, people living in really horrendous circumstances. When I started noticing these structures I was attracted to them subconsciously because extreme poverty is so visible in South Africa. At one point I lived in a Johannesburg suburb which overlooked Alexandra township – a vast landscape of shacks covered in a fog of pollution.

Do you ever miss South Africa?

I do, but I went back a few years ago, and it's a very different country to when I was living there. I find Johannesburg quite chaotic and strange. There's a brooding element – it's quite a foreboding place.

The poverty in London is of a lesser order; do you find a strange beauty in it?

I do, I do. What attracted me was that these makeshift structures were so incongruous with the rest of the architecture. In London you are aware of its status – it's quite a beautiful city. Seeing these structures underneath buildings or staircases, they looked so unbelievably fragile and vulnerable. They would be there one day and gone the next. Being an outsider, sometimes I can't believe I'm living in London. I think a lot of people who have changed countries feel like that – it's not really home but it is, and you've partially lost your identity.

Were the homeless people OK about you photographing their dwellings?

I would never, ever photograph when people were there. I did feel awkward about it but my approach is as a landscape artist who is interested in the urban landscape.

Are the paintings named after the places you found the original shelters?

Yes – the actual street I found them in. I take several pictures, and look for one which is able to carry a modernist language the best. I am looking for unexpected possibility within the work. I've also gone back and re-photographed some of the original sites.

Where do the colours come from?

I choose colours that Mondrian would have used, so it has a modernist origin. Also, cobalt blue, white and red are the colours of the Virgin in Renaissance painting.

In High Holborn 3, the crate seems to be melding into a Le Corbusier-style home, set against a dark emptiness. Is that a comment on how we aspire to live?

Yes – I am very interested in Le Corbusier, and his idea of flattening Paris and rebuilding in a brutalist way. At the same time, my interest in [homeless] structures is that they reference a

failure within our society. The blackness is a kind of other world, the tragedy of this person. I see these structures as a kind of raft, a way of maybe escaping. It's an unstable and almost viscous liquid world I am creating behind the images. If you had to step into the world, you would fall – you would be almost floating. I am trying to create a world that the person who built it may have felt.

Glovers Island 3 is more like a barge on a river – it's got a natural setting.

It's probably the only painting which overtly describes the landscape. This structure actually exists, it's in Twickenham. A man has lived there, apparently, for the last 17 years. It was built in Westminster and then the Port Authority dragged this structure all the way to Twickenham and dropped anchor. There is apparently a law that if your anchor is dropped by the Port Authority you can legally live there. In strong winds, the place gets blown to pieces. It's forever morphing into different shapes.

Do you listen to music while you work?

I do. I like singer-songwriters, Mark Kozelek, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen. I listen to Radio 4 and I like BBC London Live. If I have a real tough time with a painting, I turn everything off: I need silence.

What do you like to read?

I like fiction, generally. However, I've just finished an interesting autobiography called *Stealing Water* by Tim Ecott. It's about an area in Johannesburg I am very familiar with.

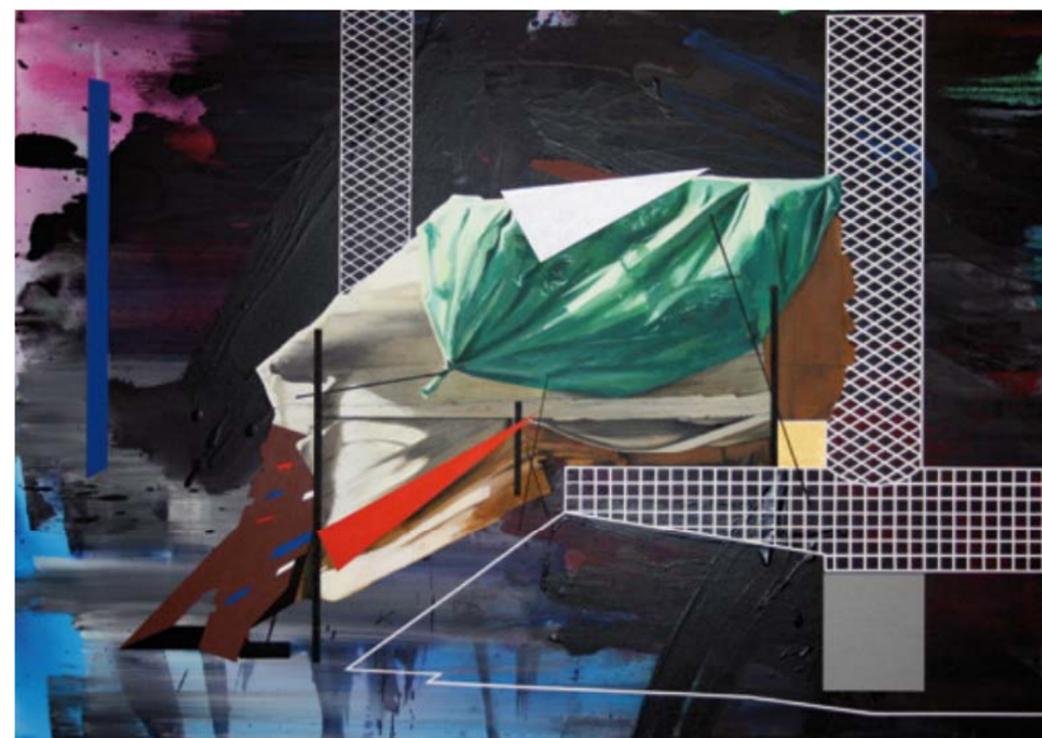
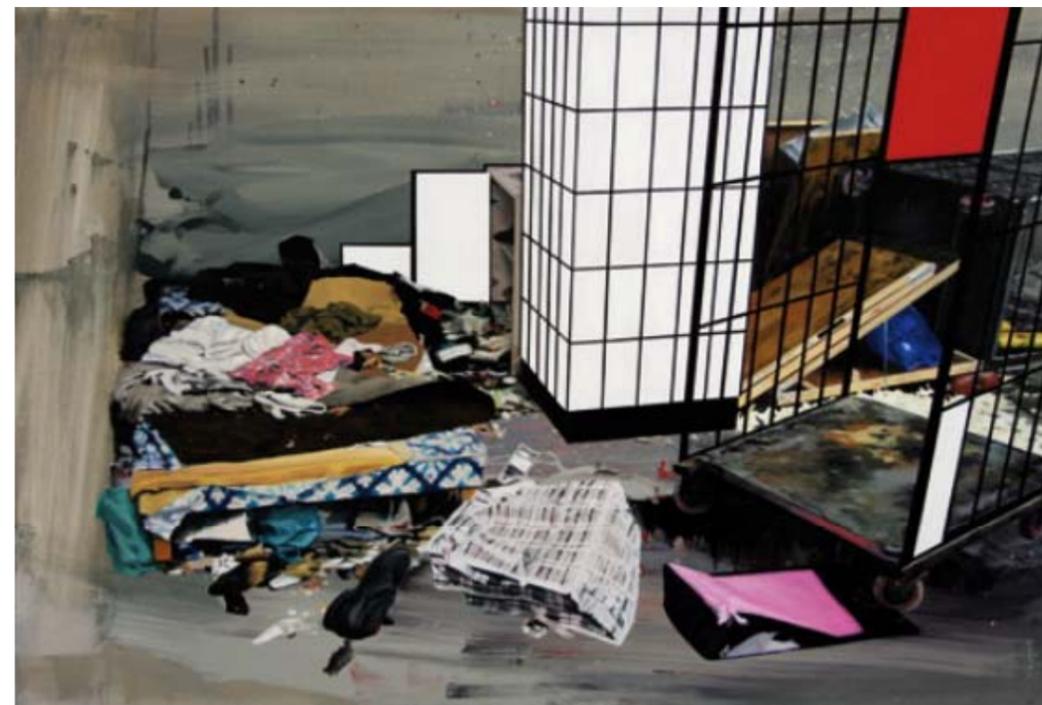
Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

A Poussin landscape – and next to that, Goya's *The Bewitched Man*. ☺

Exhibition: Jerwood Contemporary Painters at Royal West of England Academy, Bristol, 22 Jun–17 Aug, www.rwa.org.uk

CV Born: 1963, Pretoria, South Africa Studied: Witwatersrand Technikon, Johannesburg, South Africa; Goldsmiths College, London Lives and works: *London Represented: One in the Other, London*

All images courtesy of Günther Herbst and One in the Other, London



Above: *New Oxford Street 2/White Black Red (2007)*, oil on canvas, 68 x 100cm

Below: *Bainbridge Street 3/Blue Red White Grey (2007)*, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm



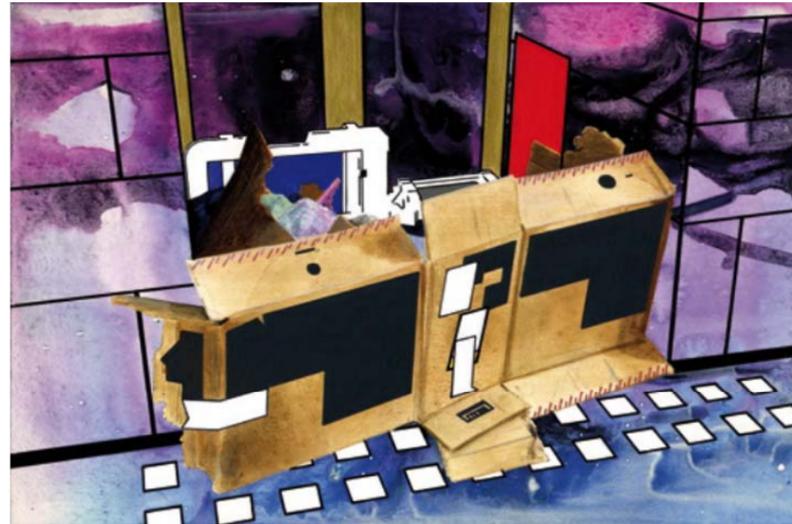
1 *Bainbridge Street WC1 (1999)*, photo

2 *High Holborn WC1 (1999)*, photo

3 *High Holborn (2006)* oil on canvas, 44.5 x 66.5cm

4 *High Holborn 3/White Red Blue Yellow (2007)* oil on canvas, 68 x 100cm

5 *Glovers Island 3/Red White Black Grey (2007)* acrylic on paper, 35 x 42cm



Above: Agar Street 2/Blue White Grey Red (2007), acrylic on paper, 33 x 40cm

Below: Mortimer Market / Grey Red Blue White (2007), acrylic on paper, 35 x 42cm

Opposite: Glovers Island 4/Red White Yellow Black (2008), oil on canvas, 126 x 162cm