

# JUAN BOLIVAR IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN GREENWOOD

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**JB:** You began as an abstract painter. I was very surprised to find out that your early works, during your BA at Cheltenham, had Futurist and Suprematist references, with slightly Cubist motifs of reinterpreted figures as their starting point.

**JG:** I think that's a reasonable description. They were concerned with movement – they weren't necessarily Cubist – they were more Futurist. Going to art college was a little bit scary. You can go with one set of interests, and these can dissolve under 'the pressure' or 'expectations'. There is an element in which you are second guessing tutors and I thought that maybe that's what they wanted. I started out basically making work with a ruler but nearly everything I have ever made has been interested in creating an illusionistic space to put things into other than the very first tentative steps that were mock Joseph Albers works. The planes and the geometry were never about stillness. There was usually this frantic, mad energy, and in a way both of those things remain an interest.

**JB:** As your practice developed, drawing became a very big part in this, and in particular, you once mentioned a sketchbook that you made in India whilst travelling. This sketchbook became quite formative, crucial even, and the template for many ideas that emerged later whilst

you were studying at the Royal College.

**JG:** In my mid-20s I went travelling to India and around South East Asia – I think I was slightly dissatisfied – I found that I was running down cul-de-sacs with the work and in the process, being an artist was depressing me: the struggle, the difficulty, the lack of money, the lack of reaction from anybody – the sense that you were making these works and they weren't going anywhere. What I found when I was there was that I was finding the place fascinating; discovering new things – I had a camera with me but I actually found that there were things which I wanted to record, but not photographically: my responses to and thoughts about the place. So I bought a Rotring pen and a little sketchbook while I was there, it felt like I wasn't carrying the expectation of having to be 'Me', as in my previous work, so when I sat down I was drawing things like birds on a branch in a tree – not realistically, but just the shape of them against the sky, or little thoughts. That sense of starting from nothing – responding to what was in front of me but not necessarily drawing it realistically. It was anything I was thinking or reading; everything mixing with the peculiar world that I was living in. It actually set a pattern. To that point I hadn't sketched a lot, now 90% of what I do is in sketch books. Eventually I felt the desire to turn these peculiar thought processes, these funny little drawings, into something that exists more in a public space. A lot of them were meant to be funny. I didn't use to cartoon at all before I started doing the India sketchbook. It was a starting point, a point of liberation.

**JB:** ...and many years later you are at your MA degree show at the Royal College and there is a note that somebody had left for you after you returned from your lunch break.

**JG:** Yes: 'Phone C. Saatchi'. He wanted to get hold of two of the paintings in the show and said, 'Can I have six more?'



**Collection**  
2014  
Oil on linen  
75 x 95cm

*Courtesy of the artist*



It took me about 18 months to do the six paintings.

**JB:** He then went on to show them with a group of artist now known as the YBA's...

**JG:** It was a show called *Young British Artists*, a very simple title but it has subsequently become the way of referring to people who made their name at the time, usually associated with Saatchi showing them. Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread were in the show along with Alex Landrum, and Langlands and Bell. The term 'YBA' is one used retrospectively, it wasn't necessarily something used at the time – people weren't like – 'Oh, you're a YBA!' – I don't think I ever was, even though I was in the seminal show. When Andrew Graham Dixon interviewed me for the Late Show, he said 'You are a bit of an odd fish in this group' – I misinterpreted him and took it as a compliment.

**JB:** Strangely, I remember seeing the show and with hindsight I thought you had made the 'Hanging' paintings for

that exhibition, but in fact they came after. What was the transition – where did those works come from?

**JG:** The story I tell, or the memory of how the more complete *Hanging* works came about, relates to a walk I had in the mountains of Romania, when I was with a friend travelling on trains and we were visiting these painted monasteries in the North East of Romania, which seemed a really alien world, very backward – very poor and in many ways it felt mediaeval. The area felt like the living backdrop to fairy tales; heavily wooded with wolves and bears roaming around wild, so we were told. In fact you could hear the wolves howling at night. We decided to walk between two of the monasteries, a good days walk. The forest was huge and uninhabited. The locals had insisted 'Don't leave the path!' All of which made the woods seem scary and enchanting; they took on this eerie character. We weren't following any maps and could easily have got lost, and within

this journey (it was during the autumn) – there were some Death Cap mushrooms on the ground and they had these inky, hanging globules coming off them.

At the same time I saw a beech nut that had fallen and been caught in a spider's web, and I remember thinking how this seemed to take on some of the quality of this magical, scary forest, and in my imagination some of that strangeness was held in the dangling objects. It's possible that I would have seen Cotan's hanging still-lives in books and not thought much about them, but when I made the decision to hang my still lives rather than have them on the ground I don't think I was doing this because of Cotan, more because of the experience of this haunting walk.

**JB:** Your hanging paintings presented luscious food like objects; they were also very sculptural. A strange mix of edible-looking things which could also eat you.

**JG:** A feast for the eye.

**JB:** Not just a feast for the eye, but – as seen in paintings like *Too Much is Never Enough* or *Nothing Sucks Seeds like Excess* – they are a sumptuous feast. They are not still lives.

**JG:** I often think the word Still Life is quite interesting because it's still... life. Often this means paintings of fruit, but I think the idea that it is life... stilled. Once the fruit is picked, in a way it's dead but my forms aren't susceptible to the same laws. They hint at a life internal to them. As if that life is stopped briefly – a hiatus hinting at a level of existence.

**JB:** I want to talk about your more recent works, such as those you made for the exhibition at C&C in 2014, but before I do that – the question that many people ask is what happened to John Greenwood.

**JG:** My paintings were selling well but I paint very slowly – my first hanging painting which is six foot across, took six months to make – so even though I was selling most of what I did for eight years it wasn't paying for itself. I never thought



I would stop for twelve years. At first I thought I'll stop for six months and it coincided with two studios in two years having to close down and move again. I thought perhaps I could work from home but it just didn't happen: there was a point when my first son was at nursery and I went to pick him up one evening and his carer said – 'He's sitting in a chair waiting for you – he's just chilling.' My son was normally a gorgeous bundle of energy that never sat still but had apparently been sitting on this chair for about an hour waiting for me, and I just thought 'F\*\*\*k – he's depressed!!!' – I can't do this to him; I've chosen to bring him into the world – and I could either be a cr\*\*\*p dad and (in my view at the time), a half-arsed artist – or – I can be the best parent I can'. The simple answer to your question then, is that I did what many women do, which is; I took a career break for family. Nobody raises an eyebrow at this, but when a male artist does it, who has a bit of a profile, it's more of a question.

**JB:** So the two new paintings that you made for *Being John Greenwood* at C&C were literally the first two new paintings you had made after a nearly thirteen and a half year break. How did that feel?

**JG:** I've filled about seven sketchbooks

Sunday Times article on Young British Artists I at Saatchi Gallery March 1991  
From left: Ben Langlands, Damien Hirst, John Greenwood, Rachel Whiteread, Alex Landrum and Nikki Bell.



**Model for Too Much is Never Enough**

*Courtesy of the artist*



**Too Much is Never Enough**

1993

Oil on linen

137 x 183cm

*Courtesy of the artist*



Above: **Nothing Sucks Seeds Like Success**

1994  
Oil on linen  
137 x 183cm

Left: **Cluster**  
2014  
Oil on linen  
75 x 95cm

*Both courtesy of the artist*



since I resumed working, with small often repetitive, obsessive, drawings that are about 2 inches by 3 inches or smaller, many on a page, interconnecting, cross fertilising, just grinding out ideas. Developing a new language for myself that expresses who I am now.

**JB:** Now that the panorama for the British art scene has changed – becoming more expansive than in 1991, how do you feel these new works fit within that panorama?

**JG:** I haven't got a clue. I lost contact with the Art World when the kids were little and I found that hard to cope with so I stayed away. I don't feel there is any longer any one thing happening now; it feels more like there is a wonderful sense of 'anything goes'. And that's a wonderful openness which I don't think I experienced before. Maybe it's ignorance, but now I don't feel any restrictions.

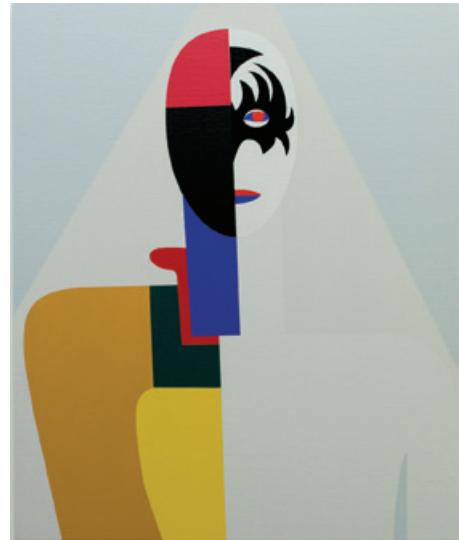
**JB:** Sometimes when I've shown your work now to a younger generation – it's funny – they seem to think your paintings have been made by a computer. It's as if they don't imagine somebody painting like that today in the post-digital-internet- CGI-age.

**JG:** I think I've ended up with an accidental relevance. My rather deadpan painting, edge-to-edge style that I do, in many ways does look digitally rendered. And actually it looked like this before 'digital rendering' was something we were familiar with. I can see similarities to the rendering currently done in computer animation and I think this is a fabulous thing – but it's not something I built in intentionally. The fact that these paintings have passed through a human eye and hand becomes a novelty. It changes what they are and how we see them. I find that very interesting.

**JB:** I think that I first noticed this sense of personality that you speak of in your painting *fruit de mer*. It doesn't just depict amorphous objects, but objects somehow filled with personality – each object

conveying emotion in their own way – I'm not sure whether that is something you can convey digitally.

**JG:** Of course you can! Look at Pixar or Disney – the tea-pot dancing with the kettle and the mop. Animation is what does that better than anything. And whereas in my work there is an implication of these still objects having a life, it is not that far removed from animation. I think there is part of me that has always been thinking in these terms. Cartoon and animation. It's a nice thing to emerge into a world which seems to be more open to a more varied range of art and I think it's wonderful if my rather deadpan way of painting achieves this accidental relevance. It's really nice.



Demon - Juan Bolívar  
2015  
acrylic on canvas  
58 x 48 cm

Courtesy of the artist / Photo by Tom Kitchin