

INTERVIEW. ROHAN CHALMERS. AUSTRALIAN ARTIST

Artist in
residence

A hunger for antiquity

ARTIST ROHAN CHALMERS, WHO LIVES IN VILAFRANCA DEL PENEDÈS, SAYS HE FOUND IN CATALONIA WHAT HE ALWAYS MISSED IN HIS NATIVE AUSTRALIA: THE SENSE FOR ANTIQUITY

BRETT HETHERINGTON

—What brought you to Catalonia?

In 1996, I came to Barcelona on a city break for the first time. I'd been teaching in London since 1994. I immediately fell in love with the place, as you do. It has a vibe, a joy of life about it. I looked at it visually, the life in the streets, the curves and sexiness of the architecture, also the artistic heritage of the place. It's the perfect city for me. The culture and the sea.... perfect!

—Why did you choose to stay in Vilafranca del Penedès?

When I arrived, I couldn't afford Barcelona so I tried to find somewhere as close as possible. Vilafranca was it. Close to Barça, close to the sea and surrounded by hills and vineyards that are magic in spring when all the leaves come out and you have seas of rich green all around you.

—How has living here influenced your work?

Living here hasn't affected my work in any way I know. I'm an internal painter. My view is from the inside out. I haven't noticed any real interference from my outside environment from any place I've lived or been.

—How have your feelings about living here evolved?

I love the place, but my nature is telling me it may be time to move on and experience somewhere new... But we'll see!

—What kind of professional opportunities are available and are they adequate?

I don't keep up to date on commercial opportunities etc., as I'm not a commercial type of artist. I paint for me, because it's something I love and can't help doing, and if someone likes what



A painting and two sculptures by Rohan Chambers/ARCHIVE

I do and wants to buy something then great! Dinner out somewhere! I tried once to be more public in Australia, but once people started to tell me what was fashionable, I turned off.

—What is your family background?

My mum was Sri Lankan but she died when I was 13. Her cul-

ture had a big influence on who she was and how she related to me. I was brought up to be an Asian boy in an Anglo, Anglican culture in Moonee Ponds in Melbourne, Australia (where Dame Edna is from), but I didn't fit into this way of life at all. While other boys were kicking footballs and hunting for frogs in the creek, I was having piano lessons while believing that I couldn't aspire to anything less than being a doctor or a lawyer like my other relatives.

—What was it like growing up in Australia?

Australia in the 1960s and 70s didn't really know what it was and for me it lacked a sense of antiquity that I hungered for. I remember going into Melbourne and looking for something really old when I was younger, but never found it. I know now that if I was allowed in my education to have access to Aboriginal culture (which was swept under the carpet) then maybe I would have followed this route and be some-

Questionnaire

A place to travel.

Africa is calling

A book.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead and Living by Soygal Rinpoche

A film.

The Big Blue by Luc Besson. Also: Betty Blue

A sport.

Swimming in the sea

A piece of music.

The 2nd movement of Rodrigo's Concierto de Aranjuez

What stops you sleeping?

A pin dropping: insomnia

Happiness.

The woman I love and a big studio

Work.

Something between paintings

Money.

I'm running out of different types of soup to make

Barcelona.

Curvaceous and smooth

Catalonia.

Creative, innovative

Spain.

Haven't really met Spain yet

Immigration

We are all immigrants



Australian artist Rohan Chalmers/ ARCHIVE

where now working in an Aboriginal community.

—What would you want to say to explain the art you create?

Somebody told me my pictures are always moving. That they're not still, that they're like a wave. You can come back and see something fresh each time, like looking at clouds, there's change. Some pieces I just start with a single word which is often on the canvas. I don't plan because one mark leads to another, it's cause and effect. At the end it's a footprint showing something working and always a kind of signature. I don't like leaving empty spaces. I tend to go for claustrophobia.

—What do you use?

Well, I like using bent wire in my sculptures and concrete. It's cheap! In my paintings there's pen, acrylic, pastels, crayons, pencil but things like polyfiller and putty too. Scratching into the surface is important to me to get texture. I think it's sad to lose the skills of the past. I try to get back to the rawness of the craft.