

New English Art Club

Now that's what we need: something fresh, vibrant and youthful to shake up the art scene. When did they first get together?
Er, 1885.

More like the Old English then...

Well, yes. But that's a sheepdog. Anyway, they were young at the time. And angry at the exclusivity of the stuffy old Royal Academy. So they mounted a rival show and signed up George Clausen, Stanhope Forbes and John Singer Sargent, among others. Ironically, by the 1940s, some artists saw the NEAC as a launch pad to membership of the RA.

Turncoats!

Well, you can't be young and angry all your life. Besides, there were debt collectors to pay, art dealers to impress. Now, the NEAC is a pillar of the art establishment and prides itself as a 'centre of excellence for drawing and painting'. Current members include William Bowyer RA, Diana Armfield RA and Jane Bond RP.

A Blairite transformation.

The NEAC says: 'It is very difficult indeed to establish a reputation as a young artist. In order to make work which is vigorous and lively and life enhancing, an artist's needs are... a shared artistic language, an education in this language, an exhibition space and a public to buy work. All of these the New English helps to provide.'

A Full English.

With a nice cup of Earl Grey.

The annual exhibition of the NEAC runs from 1-18 December at the Mall Galleries, 17 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5BD (020 7930 6844) from 10am-5pm daily, closes 1pm on final day. Receiving days, 20 and 21 October, 10am-5pm. Maximum number of works: six. Sculpture not admissible. Visit www.mallgalleries.org.uk



John Mackay talks to NEAC member David Cobley who is more than making up for lost time.

Most artists reflect on seminal moments in their lives: when they were first introduced to paint; the 'breakthrough' work. For David Cobley, a chance meeting in the street could so easily have meant a life miles from the easel: he was 18, doing his foundation course in Liverpool, when he was approached and asked if he was interested in 'new ideas'. He subsequently spent five years with the Moonies, a journey that ultimately led to Japan. "It was a weird and crazy experience. It took me a long time to get over it."

It was 12 years after leaving art college in search of a "meaningful alternative" that David returned to painting, and he admits that if he had his time again he wouldn't have dropped out. But, aware of the artist's regrets, a friend contacted him recently to say that even if David hadn't taken off on his spiritual sabbatical, 'you'd still be the painter you are today'.

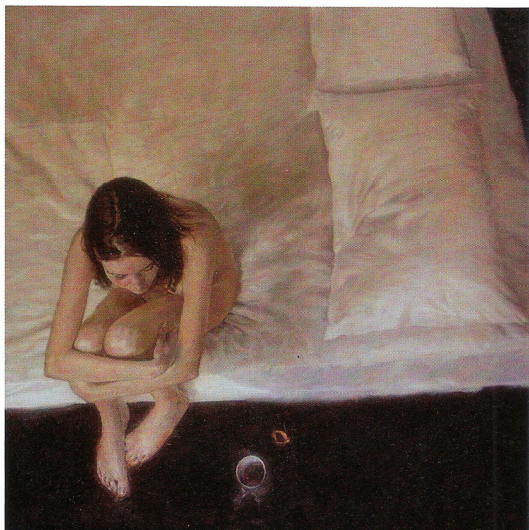
And he is a fine painter: a master portraitist who takes a cerebral approach to his work, thinking carefully about each sitter, and how he can best illuminate for the viewer something of their essence. David's portrait of Ken Dodd (*A&I Books*, issue 237) is striking in its unsparing focus on Dodd's exhausted face, and the reflected angles on the subject's body in a series of mirrors. "Dodd was fascinating; I had seen him as a kid, and was knocked out by him. Mirrors are significant because they reflect back what we are." When he painted Dodd, David tried the picture in several different ways before he was satisfied, a process that took him about five years.

Safe to say, he is a man who doesn't take short cuts. "Drawing is the crux of it. It is more challenging than painting. It forces you to really look, and consequently it is a very exacting business. When you draw, you understand what an object or a person really feels like. It is not just surface, but the parts and how they fit together."

When he returned from Japan, he used his drawing skills to take up a career as an illustrator, which he enjoyed, partly because "it was easy to make a living". For six months he lived in Wales,

"in the middle of nowhere", with his wife and two children. Then he moved to Bath, where he lives now. Because of the distance from London, David admits he is not quite as involved with the New English Art Club as he would like to be. "The drawing side of things is good [The NEAC offshoot, The New English School of Drawing, initiated by a group of younger artists], and the members are good artists. It is great the NEAC is around."

A devotee of traditional skills, David admits he used to be frustrated at the prevalence of conceptual art, but he now takes a more mellow approach: "Conceptual art is where it's all supposed to be at: it's all tied up with celebrity culture. They are making statements, and people like me have to accept it. It hasn't much to do with the work I'm creating, so I carry on doing what I'm doing."



David Cobley, *Seated Figure of an Ineen*, 2002cm.

What he does most days is get into his Bath studio early and, typically, paints directly from life. The resulting paintings are viewed with a critical eye: "Rembrandt, Velázquez, Vermeer: they are the people I compare my work to." Such attention to detail stems in part from David's art master at school who announced, "Anybody can draw, have you got anything to say?" Through his work, David Cobley has been answering that question in the affirmative ever since.

Artist Biography

David Cobley is a painter of portraits and the human figure who works from a studio in Bath. His portrait commissions include HRH The Princess Royal, Steven Berkoff and Richard Briers, and in 2004 his portrait of Ken Dodd OBE was bought by the National Portrait Gallery for its permanent collection. He has exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition and held solo exhibitions at Beaux Arts in Bath, and Messum's in London. He was elected a member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in 1997 and the New English Art Club in 2003. Visit www.davidcobley.co.uk