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Sandra Bridie, b. 1959

Painter

(a fiction)

1997

Interview with Sandra Bridie by B. S. Hope
February 1993

B. S. Hope: Sandra, what is the work you will be showing in Adjacent Space?

Sandra Bridie: Actually, I have the work here, the small photos anyway; shall I show them to you?

Yes.

These snaps were taken last week, but only six have been selected to be enlarged to be in the show – these ones. They are being printed at the moment, and I get them back from the lab on Tuesday morning.

That doesn't give you much time for error, does it? You will be hanging the show that afternoon, won't you?

Yes, that's true, I'll have to accept the enlargements however they turn out.

So how big will the prints be? Could you please give us some idea of how the work is going to look in the space?

They are being enlarged to ... what was it ... 79 by 51 centimetres; that's about 30 by 20 inches. I think I want to hang them along that wall there – the wall on your left as you walk into the gallery. I haven't thought about the order in which I will hang them yet. Most likely it will be in the order that they were taken.

What are they photos of? These are taken at your place, aren't they? What are you doing – are you painting the house?

Yes, that's what I'm doing, I'm painting my house. The exhibition of these photos is going to be called *Sandra Bridie, Painter*, and I like the bombasticity (sic) of that.

For the sake of this interview, then, could you describe the photos?

As I said, these are photos of me painting my house, the rooms in my house; the kitchen, the bathroom, the living room, my bedroom and the hallway. There's also one photo I wanted to include of me painting the walls in this gallery, Adjacent Space, but that photo could be of any wall anywhere, or even a canvas or whatever, because all you can see is my hand and a roller, and the slight gleam of the new paint. In the other photos I am dressed in my grey overalls, painting the walls a light cream, while the furniture in the living room and bedroom and hallway is covered in white sheets. The light in these shots is even and cool. Looking at the photos all together like this I see there is a consistency and quietness to them that I hadn't intended.

Yes, I was about to say that you look totally absorbed in the task of painting, but the pictures are emptied out of the signs of activity, you know – rollers, spatulas, paint tins, rags, that sort of thing; where are they? What we are left with is this subdued image of someone standing at a wall with a roller in her hand. You could just as well have been standing in the same situation, thinking.

I know what you mean, that's what I was trying to say before: that degree of quietness wasn't intended. I wanted the shots to be more lively. The paint tins and the clutter is out of frame – maybe I should have included it. The photos look more contemplative than active, don't they?

I tell you what associations they bring up for me (I am imagining them the size they will be) – which probably have nothing to do with what you wanted, but anyway – they look like you are preparing a site for some ritual to occur. So in the first instance they have a look of documentation of some kind of performance, but then the performance being documented is the preparation of a site where something is to happen. There's that sense of ... not potency, but potential action. Or else I'm just saying what comes to mind, is that all right?

Go ahead, this is interesting.

Taking it the other way around, rather than preparation, these photos also look like cleaning up after some activity, or even a life; they look like the slow and thorough cleaning up of a deceased estate. Either way there is a total absence of activity. They do not look to me like the maintaining of a living space for your habitation, a place where you live and will continue to live. I don't know why, I think it may have to do with the lack of clutter, lack of colour, and the coolness of the light. So (I'm on a roll here), rather than photos taken in your own home, they look more as if they were taken from a stage setting for a Beckett play!

Oh, come on!

So what was your intention? How did these photos come about?

Now you've given me your interpretation, who cares what I have to say! Look, I agree these photos look ponderous, but they weren't meant to be. My idea was to take snaps of an unremarkable day-to-day activity, painting a room. I wanted to juxtapose that, through the title of the show *Sandra Bridie, Painter*, with the idea of the vocation of being an artist, and the usual weight of expectations that artists continue to burden themselves with. I wanted the content of these photos to be forgettable in their 'lack of moment'; do you know what I mean?

My intention was to take throwaway snaps of an unremarkable moment, using the word 'painter' as the key to a comparison between a useful activity, such as painting a wall, and an arty one – painting a picture. But, even in the snaps, I make the painting of a wall look kind of arty, don't I?

Mmmm. Did the walls in your house actually need painting, or were they painted to serve the purpose of a work concerning the domestic, or everyday?

They did need painting. The work is based on a task that needed doing, I wanted to *not* go out of my way to make a show, and I wanted the artwork to be incidental to my day-to-day existence. So

the context of the activity being documented, painting a house, is that I am moving in a month's time, and I had to paint the house I rent (but am in the process of moving from) to get my bond back. When I moved there eight years ago, I stripped the wallpaper down from the bathroom, the bedroom and the kitchen, but, typically, I didn't get around to repainting the walls, so for eight years the walls have looked pretty crappy. It's a shame that the only time I can get around to making the place I live in enjoyable is when I am about to move out. Painting the hall and living room was more to remove scuffmarks from the walls, I guess they could have been cleaned vigorously rather than painted. The gallery here, in truth, didn't need painting at all. The last person to use this space didn't leave any marks on the walls, did they? But I needed to paint the gallery to include the photo in the show.

No, the last person to show here, Amanda Shapcott, exhibited a small floor piece and really didn't touch the walls.

And so, you turned a domestic task into an artwork, why is that? Why was it necessary to document the painting of both your home environment and the gallery, what was the link you were trying to make?

Here's a barrage of questions I will ask while I think of them: how is this work different from feminist performances of the '70s, artists getting down on their hands and knees and scrubbing the floors of a gallery? What is this exotic thing 'the everyday'? To me it's like the middle-class romanticising of 'the working class'; it's a concept that most people do not seem to need to define, but it's an unobtainable quality for people who live an abstract or rarefied existence – such as artists, writers and others.

A lot of loaded questions there!

OK, one: why perform the same task in both the domestic space and the gallery? I guess I was asking myself the question 'what is the difference?'. And it's a question I always seem to return to; what's the difference between a task you perform as a part of your day-to-day life and a task you perform as part of the creation of an 'artwork'?

I would desperately like to answer that there isn't any difference whatsoever. That's why the 'painter' of the exhibition title describes both a perfunctory act of painting a wall, and the self-nomination of the role one perceives oneself to be performing in relation to the history of art. So by including snaps of home and gallery I am asking the viewer that question too; 'what's the difference?'. I would love there to be no distinction, that the production of artworks did not necessitate a denial of function, and an isolation or annexing of the thing we create into the blank, mute space of a gallery.

Your second question, about '70s performances of domestic chores: ... I don't know, maybe this work has something of that, I guess the feminists' angry question was 'why is there this hierarchy of values given to "works"?' – especially at that time in a male-dominated institution such as the gallery and museum. Perhaps I am catching up with that decade in art history, but my work is more personal, I think.

I have said 'I would rather paint a wall than a painting'; this phrase is like my 'quotable quote'. My work for years now has been how to avoid painting a painting. So I guess this work is about my own quibble with the nomination 'painter', trying to get around that, and trying to do a work where the object isn't a painting and the task isn't objectionable. For me painting a wall isn't – well, I wouldn't describe it as pleasurable exactly, but it's matter of fact, so normally it's not painful, either.

The third question, or your tirade about the 'everyday' being an expression used only by those who live a rarefied existence: perhaps that is what my complaint is about the art world – its complaisant distance from any useful purpose, the emptied out works we see in emptied out spaces. I am as culpable as anyone for emptying out, as you were saying when you were describing the photos. Actually, 'everyday' is not a term I use myself. I prefer to have an ideal of my artwork being 'incidental' to the rest of my life, rather than annexing the work from the life and the life from the work. Looking at the photos, it's evident, though, that I haven't achieved this ideal, yet.

What is the difference between, say, doing the dishes, and creating a work to be seen in an exhibition?

The difference has to do with that idea of performance, the idea of a viewer, the fact that someone else apprehending a work as an isolated event or object weighs it down. So, for me, the art object is a site for anxiety – doing the dishes is not. You could say, in part, that this work is an investigation into what this difference is. And I found that I cannot equalise the gallery and my home by performing the same task in both places. A day-to-day task, painting my house, washing the dishes, becomes fraught as soon as the activity becomes incorporated into an artwork, being recorded for a photo to be hung in a gallery.

The level of the anxiety attached to producing artworks makes me often wonder if the pain is worth it.

You sound like you are experiencing a crisis in your art practice at the moment, about whether you will continue or not.

I am in a continual state of crisis! I will get past it, I always talk like this just before a show, it's just like stage fright, worrying that people might think the work is dumb, all those kinds of thoughts.

Why is it necessary to record your activities with photographs; would another medium have been just as apt, video for instance? Take that even further – what is the work without documentation at all, take the photographic evidence away and what have you got?

An empty space. I like it – but it's been done before.

I could have used, and I do use the video camera often in my work. Both stills and video cameras function as the viewer to a performance, but to date I haven't been brave enough to perform in front of an actual audience. For me it is necessary for the work to be witnessed by some device for me to bring it into being. Take the photographic evidence away and all you have left, I guess, is anecdotal evidence

of a work – my say so. I don't know if your question is a very useful one, really. I wouldn't make work without recording it somehow

Were you making a criticism of this work being merely documentation? I don't think it is. I think in part what I am trying to do, unsuccessfully perhaps, is to bring other things to the scrutiny of the gallery visitor as worthy of contemplation, non-events or recognisable but unremarkable tasks. I want to ask the viewer 'what value do you give this?'. I don't know if this is a reactionary stance, or not. And, going on, despite my best efforts to the contrary, the work, the photos do persist in having a monumental uselessness.

I don't think you are being fair on yourself, Sandra.

I guess what I was thinking – looking at the snaps you brought in that will be enlarged – was that they do subscribe to a familiar aesthetic, despite your wanting them to be casual and offhand. I don't think you can defy those conventions without very consciously unlearning a way of seeing that has evolved over many years of art practice. And why devalue that for the sake of it?

Talking of your art practice, these works have a history, don't they? I see them as a logical extension of concerns you have had for several years, but these works have reached almost what I would call a 'zero point', in that I cannot see where you could go from here. Can you? But before you answer that question could you backtrack a little to describe what path led you to this current work?

I think my work is always at what you call a 'zero point'. It's as if every time I embark on a new work, or a new series, I must in some way counteract all previous work; each new work is a 'killing off' of the ideas that led to it, or all work that came before, like a ridiculous and radical denunciation of the reasons why I should be pursuing an art practice. I said I was always in a state of crisis; it's true, the work is always 'zero point', a closure that offers no potential work from itself. This being in a state of crisis sounds horribly like the romantic notion of the suffering artist. It probably is. But, taking up my domestic analogy again, what I would very much like would be to produce work that is seamless with our non-performative, non-make

a product out of your experience and call it art' existence – such as painting a house, going from one room to another, or like a leisurely day at home, going from reading a book, to doing the washing up. I would like the process of creating work to be continuous, to come from itself, to not have to rent itself from nothing, from 'zero point'.

You are sounding depressed again.

Yes, I am sounding depressed, but I'm not, I'm really a very happy person!

My work ... I was speaking before about my work being an avoidance of painting. I always thought that I ruined a painting as soon as I got past 'the virgin stroke', so to speak; this was when I was painting figurative works, you know, in my first year at art school. There was always something so fresh about that first mark. And I have a clear memory of looking at my potential pictures and enjoying that moment, thinking 'why can't this be it, why do I have to do more to the picture than this?'.

Did you ever just leave a painting at that stage?

Not quite that. I tried to produce some pictures where from the outset there was only going to be one mark, but they didn't work, they were a bit contrived. I think – with the figurative work – that the sense of delight I had in the first mark was the arrested possibility for the painting, that sense of total beginning-ness (if there's such a word) that made the moment of the first stroke so pleasurable. Not the fact that a picture was completed, but that it hadn't even started.

It sounds like you very swiftly moved into abstraction.

Yes, I guess I always did want to bypass the image, and then the painting. So, like so many others, I started painting monochromes. That kept me going for a while. I still get optical pleasure from looking at formal or abstract work. But painting them myself wasn't

very sustaining or satisfying. There was still this thing in me resisting a finished object, no matter how sheer the layer of pigment was.

I've known you now for over a decade, and the sense I have is that all these phases you are talking about were very clearly delineated, each series of work seemed to be in response – or responding to – a perceived problem in the former phase.

You're right, I could never persevere on beyond a single series of work.

So the next phase in this reductiveness was that I decided I didn't like painting pictures but I didn't mind preparing canvases; stretching, sizing, priming – all that. So for a year I did work that was arrangements of different sized primed canvases. I thought this was pretty radical, but also I remember at the time I was looking at European art catalogues and saw that other people were doing this work too. But because my work came from an instinctive premise, I guess I never saw myself as copying these people, so I forgot that my work resembled, very closely, what other artists were doing.

Then the next stage was I got rid of the canvas stretcher. I did a series of exhibitions doing wall drawings, more like plotting out an exhibition, marking out the template of the intended paintings directly onto the walls of the gallery in pencil. These works were also, in a way, performances, because they were recorded on video.

Then (we are almost up to the present day), the last show I did, in Perth in December last year, I omitted the wall drawings, but meticulously prepared the gallery for my exhibition. The photos of that preparation of the space became the work, the same scale as the images you will see here.

Look, I know, I was the one who introduced this concept of 'zero point' into our conversation, but listening to you here, and remembering that I do know all this work, I am going to say that I actually think yours has been an incredibly consistent output. Rather than you sabotaging each past series in a new one, 'killing it off', as you said, I see the work persistently, almost laboriously, addressing the same point. So it's not so much to do with the style or aesthetic of

the work that you do (though that's very consistent also); it's more to do with a problem that you have with –

– Nomination, the nomination of 'painter'.

Yeah, I think so, or 'artist'.

Just out of interest – what would you do if you didn't paint, if you didn't paint a wall, or a picture, or draw templates for potential paintings on a wall?

I don't know I guess I'd stop this faffing about pretending to be a painter or not being a painter, and go home and do the dishes.

I think this interview has gone on for long enough, don't you?

Yes, I am happy to finish here.