

3am Interview

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

"I refused to call Deborah Harry anything but that. Everyone called her Debbie. I said, I won't have a Debbie in my film. She laughed, and we got on fine together. Now she's universally Deborah. At the time, Blondie wasn't known in the States - *Heart Of Glass* only hit number one while we were filming. I'd already spent some time here in the UK and I knew she was worth taking a chance on. She put her soul into her screen test and it was very moving. Obviously, she had an edge, and she wasn't afraid to appear ridiculous or ugly. For a beautiful woman in cinema this is absolutely essential. I wrote the screenplay in November and we were filming in March. It all happened that fast."

By **Richard Marshall**

COPYRIGHT © 2003, 3 A.M. MAGAZINE. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED



3 AM: The Crucifixion paintings are a big deal.

MR: Well, people continue to be interested in them. I painted them in 1990 and 1991, then did a few more at an exhibition in Portugal in 1992. I always wanted to paint the Crucifixion. When I was an altar boy, I served in a church that had a huge proscenium above the altar, but there was nothing there. No figure of Christ, just a big blank space. I tried to imagine the Crucifixion that I would paint in that space. I was eleven. This was in Pennsylvania. I painted all my life but never had the courage to confront this particular subject. And then finally I did.

Our friend George (Stavrinos) had AIDS. We talked about it only very obliquely. He had been an artist all his life too, but had never worked with oil paint. He was the consummate illustrator - a full-page every week for Bergdorf Goodman in *The New York Times*. We made a pact that he would go to the house in North Carolina and work in my studio - George lived in New York. The house was empty - I was still living most of the year in Northumberland, on the Scottish border. George was going to go down to North Carolina and paint in oil. And then he died, never having gone there, never having used the paint. I just felt incredibly shabby about not having had the courage to paint what I secretly wanted to paint. So I began work on *The Crucifixions*. Very hard work, but exhilarating.

They were first exhibited as a group as part of a touring exhibition of my paintings to benefit AIDS services in the American South. All very interesting. This was North Carolina, a homophobic place to say the least. The pictures have nothing to do with AIDS. With capital punishment, but not AIDS. The Jesus I painted didn't have AIDS, he had a morbid agenda. It wasn't altogether a coincidence that this ravaged body of Christ would be there in the context of the AIDS crisis. I freely admit that I was determined to shock, especially in a place where no one would ever admit to behaving despicably with regard to the suffering of others. But don't get me wrong, there were extraordinary people, like the Metrolina organisation in Charlotte, and kind souls like Eric Ennis (with Works of Heart in Raleigh).

There was a lot of interesting press, as you can imagine. I was called a blasphemer, fundamentalist Christian clerics took me to bits. The chap at the ABC Store who sold me my whisky said he was probably my last friend in town. He was a theatre actor, so we could share such inane jokes! The events in the UK were more subdued. We did Winchester Cathedral and Canterbury Cathedral. Greater serenity, you might say.



Crucifixion IX, 1991

3 AM: Were they more sympathetic?

MR: People took the paintings in their stride. Unlike in the States, people here don't feel compelled to create a division in sensibility. They can appreciate an artist's work without politicising it, without having to affirm or condemn it. It is simply the artist's view. One has a philosophical view of things and it's a private matter, even if it is manifest in one's art. I know my work is upsetting - let's face it, serious art is often deeply perplexing. But increasingly in America there has to be a political imperative: art must conform to the populist ideal. Some of us refuse. Not very radical but unacceptable behaviour for an artist in America nevertheless. At any event, my life is here in Europe.

3 AM: What about this book of photographs?

MR: 30 years work. Artmedia Press, London is publishing the book in October (2003). We did the series of full-page images for *Modern Painters* (the British fine art quarterly) and one thing led to another. Wherever I am I take photographs, so there will be pictures taken in Athens, Madrid, Savannah, New York, Rome, North Carolina, Ramsgate, London. As Mel Gooding, the critic, would have it, I take pictures as if I'm not there. But I am in search of the sublime. I like to think my photographs are abstract without being abstract. I hope everyone will find them very beautiful.

When I was about eight or nine, I went to a white elephant sale at the church - you know, all sorts of debris from attics and basements. I found a camera there - I don't think it cost more than a dollar - and eventually began taking pictures. I say *eventually* because for a while I only pretended to take pictures. It was a nifty little camera, German I think. Unfortunately all my earliest photographs were stolen from my room at art school by a kid a few of us had befriended. He used to hang around the place and we just accepted his presence. He'd come up the fire-escape at night and drink and smoke with us. I showed him my slides and he was fascinated. I came back to my room one day and they were gone, so was my camera. One of those miserable things.

I didn't take any pictures again until a few years later when a friend lent me his Nikon. A perfect specimen of a camera, manual everything. I still use a camera like that, only now I have a Pentax. I've never used anything exotic. Nothing digital or anything like that. This was about 1970, when I borrowed the Nikon. He finally got it back in the mid 1980's! Never complained. I dropped it in Paris once, damaged the insides and sent it to be repaired. I was sick with worry. It was there for about six months, returned as good as new. All the early work I did in Paris - the Grand Magic Circus, Armande Altai, the Artaud research - I did with that camera.



Armande Altai, Paris, 1977

3

AM: Where did the interest in Artaud come from?

MR: I recently wrote something for Stephen Barber about this. I was in my first year at art school - I was there to avoid murder and mayhem in the jungles of Viet Nam, *not* learn how to paint - and I knew absolutely nothing about Artaud. This now strikes me as rather odd because I'd been familiar with Rimbaud since my early teens. I had a date with a Polish girl of considerable grace and maturity. When I got to her flat she had just come in from a long walk in the rain and excused herself to go take a shower. I found a book on her bureau and had a look. It was Jack Hirschman's *Artaud Anthology*, published by City Lights. Naturally, I was fascinated. When I left that evening, she urged me to take it with me. I went on collecting books on Artaud. Then of course the film project developed.

Obviously you have to feel tremendous sympathy for someone like Artaud. I've always been drawn to that fearlessness. You know, there's a sort of spiritual lineage amongst poets that informs and nurtures an alternative view of the world. And I saw Artaud very much as the next step after Rimbaud. I respected the way he resisted absorption by the surrealists, how he felt the movement to be a politicised sham. It's a weird paradox after the antipathy between them, but Andre Breton remained Artaud's friend to the end and supported him both emotionally and financially. Artaud's years in the various asylums were particularly hard on his friends - in his mental illness he could be excessively abusive - but quite a few of them still gave him their support after his release at the end of the war.

3

AM: Who else do you admire?

MR: People ask me, you do different things but what do you *really* do? Whatever medium I might work in - whatever medium serves my needs - I am in pursuit of the poetic. Consequently, I write and paint and work in film. Quite a few artists have done the same. Jean Cocteau, a writer and a painter, was allowed to make films, whereas Antonin Artaud was not. I don't admire Cocteau any less for his success. His films are dreams worth knowing. His plays were well in advance of their time, not unlike what Tennessee Williams accomplished with greater international significance. How can you not be stunned by the simple elegance of Matisse? Amongst film-makers, there is only one Martin Scorsese, and his work embraces much of this poetical spirit. I can't say that I'm a true Artaudian in any appreciable way. I've never carried his principles relating to acting into my film work - I've made so few films - I do however approach film-making absolutely on an intuitive level of expression. I have no formal education in film whatsoever.



Theatre Atelier, Paris, 1977

3

AM: How did you get into film work?

MR: Although I had made small films and had been working on a couple of ideas for dramatic features, it wasn't until I met Monty Montgomery that it all came together. I had a great friend in Monty, who went on to become a very fine producer. He was associate producer on *Wild At Heart*. In fact, he gave David Lynch the novel the film is based on. Monty also produced *The Portrait Of A Lady*. He grew up in Atlanta, Georgia - a gentleman. His family background is Coca Cola bottling - so he came from a very substantial situation - but he never made an issue of it. He just loved painting, and film. Having seen an image of mine on the back cover of *Andy Warhol's Interview*, he came to New York and asked my dealer at the time, David Deitcher, if we could meet. And we became friends. About two years later, Monty asked me if I had ever considered making a feature film. I said yes, I'd like to make a film about the life of Antonin Artaud. He asked me if I had a proper script and I said nearly! So he had a look. Bear in mind, he was 24 or 25, and I must have been about 27. We were young but serious. We became business partners.

I went off to Paris to research locations, and then to Berlin to talk to Bowie about playing Artaud. Bowie was at the studio at Hansa Wall working on *Low*, which for me is one of his finest albums. Fripp and Eno were there. Later, Iggy. Then I ran into Peter Beard, Francis Bacon, and Mick Jagger in Paris. Peter suggested Mick should play Artaud. Mick agreed and we shot a pilot in New York - this was in March 1978 - with Dennis Lipscomb playing Artaud's would-be psychiatrist. Bowie had simply faded on the project and Mick was conveniently in New York working on the cover for *Some Girls*. He was spending quite a lot of time with Andy (Warhol). And he was just starting out with Jerry (Hall). The pilot went relatively well and Brian (Eno) allowed us to use one of his 'ambient' pieces for the soundtrack. I did the graphics, and the opening credits using my own photographs of the Theatre Atelier in Paris. I don't think anyone expected anything quite so startling. But when *Some Girls* broke big, and it was the Stones' biggest success in years, we lost Mick to their touring schedule.



Dennis Lipscomb, *Wings of Ash*, 1978

3

AM: It was a weird time for that to happen because the super groups were all being trashed at that time.

MR: It was. But Mick picks up on everything, gets his claws into everything, and there was a lot of punk in *Some Girls* - 'When The Whip Comes Down' and so on. It all fitted in nicely with what we were doing with *Wings of Ash* (the Artaud film), but then the tour was more important to Mick. So I went off to Milan to visit with Sal (MacLeod), who was modelling there at the time. Monty telephoned me at the hotel and said we had better get going on something else, and he already had an idea. He was like that. We had put together a brilliant crew, including Ed Lachman (recently Oscar-nominated DP for *Far From Heaven*), and Monty felt I should get on with writing a new script. Although initially I despaired at the idea, I knew he was right.

Monty had found a short story by Cornell Woolrich, who of course wrote *Rear Window*, etc. and was confident the rights were nearly ours. It was only 12 pages long so he faxed it to me at the hotel. The story was set in America in the 1930's. I thought, if I set it in the early 1950's and bring about a kind of revelation concerning the more dire aspects of the psychology at work in the country at the time, we may have something. I very much saw the film's story as a foreshadowing of the sick mentality that enabled racism to flourish, women to be kept subservient to a weird male-orientated moral code, and the egocentric violence of the Viet Nam war to explode in the world's face. I called Monty back and told him I was up for it. We agreed the picture could be made very inexpensively and I returned to New York to begin writing. I wrote the screenplay literally in eight days. I explained to Monty that it was a *black comedy*, but he didn't think it was very funny. So I performed it for him. He'd sit on the bed in this tiny flat I was using with this bemused look on his face. Little did we know we were hatching the first *neo-noir*.



Deborah Harry, *Union City*, 1979

I refused to call Deborah Harry anything but that. Everyone called her Debbie. I said, I won't have a Debbie in my film. She laughed, and we got on fine together. Now she's universally Deborah. At the time, Blondie wasn't known in the States - *Heart Of Glass* only hit number one while we were filming. I'd already spent some time here in the UK and I knew she was worth taking a chance on. She put her soul into her screen test and it was very moving. Obviously, she had an edge, and she wasn't afraid to appear ridiculous or ugly. For a beautiful woman in cinema this is absolutely essential. I wrote the screenplay in November and we were filming in March. It all happened that fast.

3 **AM:** It did well.

MR: Yes, it's still available both on video and DVD. However, it's not my cut. Our co-producers didn't understand how the film worked at all. They were more interested in Blondie fans than they were in serious cinema. This created a lot of tension. Graham Belin and Ron Mutz both died of AIDS in 1991. We now own the film with the Museum of Modern Art, New York and that has been very helpful. My original design for the box has been used and we can promote the film now without encumbrance. MOMA is a decent and benign partner; they are about enhancing the artist's ability to get his work out with maximum integrity.

3 **AM:** The new film has been a long time in the making.

MR: Especially when the first draft of the screenplay was written in 1981! A little over a year ago I finally came up with the perfect title - *My Scorpion Soul*. I've sworn myself to secrecy, so I don't want to say much more. But I did write one part expressly for Peter O'Toole, who I've wanted to work with for years. And we do hope to begin filming in April in Spain. We have a very good cast lined up.



Rome, 2003

3 AM: You knew Jarman?

MR: Never in London. Derek and I used to meet all over the world. We were always running after the same money! I'd be staying at a hotel in Rome and would be walking out through the lobby and there would be Derek walking in. He'd say, Not you again! Then we'd go off to the bar for a quick drink. We'd swap notes on who was who in film financing in that particular town. I'd mention a name and he'd say, I saw him yesterday, a total shit. Where are you going this afternoon? I'd ask. To see so and so, he'd say. Been there, the guy doesn't have any money, I'd say. We once ran into each other in Zagreb - at least I think it was Zagreb - where he was trying to conjure up a production deal for Carravaggio. I always liked his work. It comes from a different place than mine. And I loved his diaries. It's very sad he's gone.

3 AM: Would you say you've always had a clear picture of what you're trying to achieve as an artist?

MR: No, not always but I'm a tyrant nevertheless. Most people don't seem to mind luckily. Making *Union City* for instance, the colours of the interiors which make people feel so queasy I worked out back in my own studio. If you want to know how a colour works you paint a four foot square of it in a corner of the room, let the daylight come through the window, pull the drapes and turn on a lamp nearby, look at the colour in evening shadow - you see how you relate to it. The harmonic of the colour as it resonates within you over a period of time is what you want to pay attention to. Some of the crew were astounded that a director would go to such trouble.

3 AM: You don't perform?

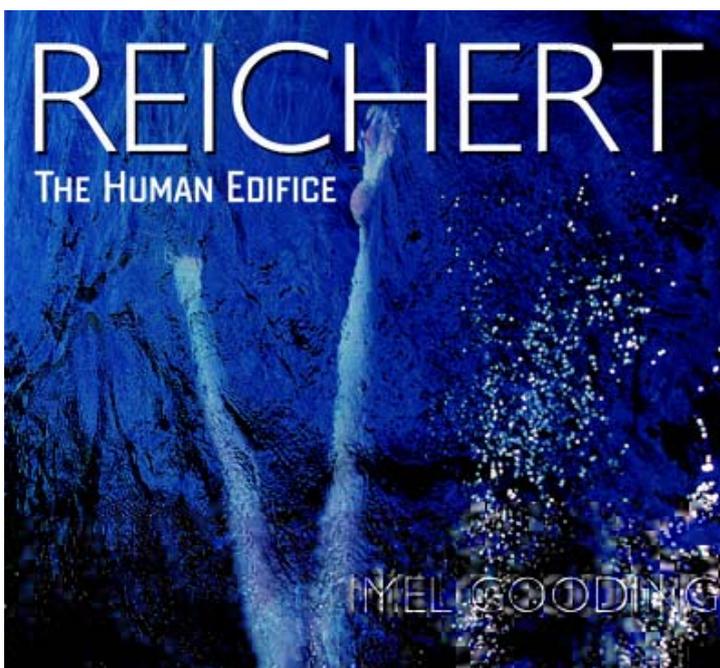
MR: No, I'm not a performance artist! Although I'm not as shy as I used to be. When I had to play the barman in *Union City* - two actors cancelled in that role, one on the day of filming - I was so nervous they practically had to nail me to the floor. I've never been one for talks, for forums and that sort of thing. I never know what to say. I find it almost impossible to explain why a thing works the way it does. Public appearances? Horrible.



3

AM: You're also a novelist. The connection between painting and film-making is probably more obvious than between painting and novel-writing.

MR: People always say how visual *Verdon Angster* is. But it's far more cinematic than it is painterly. I just saw a copy for sale on Amazon for \$190! Absurd to say the least, but there were only 3000 printed by BurnhillWolf, and there's never been a second edition. With [The Miracle of Fontana's Monkey](#), the book was first published as a kind of work in progress. The entire book is now being serialised with my own illustrations on 3AM, which is great. Andrew (Gallix) and I have discussed finding a publisher for it in French. It's set in Marseilles and Nice in the 1930's and has an enormous amount to do with the film industry of the period. It also has a lot to do with man's futile need to create and nurture a god in the image of himself. My research was replete. I found what I needed to substantiate everything I put into that book. Occasionally, when I'm taking still photographs, a scene will strike me as something out of *Verdon* or *Fontana's Monkey*. Life mimics the writing - the imagining - in a peculiar way. When I was taking pictures in New York last summer, I stumbled upon an image that would make a great cover for *Hoboken*, the book which is still in the works. In the last year or so, I've gone back to writing poetry. Two poems I wrote before the war on Iraq - *Zarife's Release* and *Dreaded City* - which were first published on the internet, have assumed a certain notoriety. And what they foretold has proven all too true.



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

MARCUS REICHERT is the author of three novels, including the cult classic *Verdon Angster*, and several screenplays. The first *neo-noir*, Reichert's film *UNION CITY* was hailed by Lawrence O'Toole, film critic for Time Magazine, as "an unqualified masterpiece." He was given his first exhibition of paintings at the age of twenty-one at the legendary Gotham Book Mart and Art Gallery, New York, home to the Surrealists during WWII. American critic Donald Kuspit has written of his Crucifixion paintings that 'both Picasso's and Bacon's pale in comparison.' Marcus Reichert's film works are held in the Archive of the Museum of Modern Art, New York and his writing and a selection of books on his work are available from [BurnhillWolf Books](#), North Carolina and [Art Books International](#), London. *The Human Edifice: The Photography of Marcus Reichert* by Mel Gooding, with 100 images in colour, will be published in October 2003 by Artmedia Press, London and is also distributed by Art Books International.

Visit www.MarcusReichert.com

GET OUR NEWSLETTER!

Your Name:

Your Email:

Enter your email address above for 3 AM MAGAZINE'S Monthly Newsletter. Each time a new issue is posted, we'll let you know. (Your email address will be kept confidential!)

[home](#) | [buzzwords](#)

[fiction and poetry](#) | [literature](#) | [arts](#) | [politica](#) | [music](#) | [nonfiction](#)
| [offers](#) | [contact](#) | [guidelines](#) | [advertise](#) | [webmasters](#)

Copyright © 2005, 3 AM Magazine. All Rights Reserved.