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Cityscapes

Priscilla Owusu talks to painter Paul Joseph-Crank about Naples and his passion for cities.

Paul Joseph-Crank's last exhibition majored on Italy. It gave him the chance to indulge in his favourite pastime: painting cities. For the exhibition he visited Naples. "I love it and I have visited it several times. I enjoy painting streets, markets, cafés – seeing how the people behave, painting them in stillness or in frantic motion."

A figurative artist born in the village of Flixton, Manchester, he now lives in pastoral Cambridgeshire. He and his family have always had a passion for art. His parents were both artists.

"There was always artwork around the house. My mother worked in calligraphy, pen and ink and illustration; my father was a technical illustrator at British Aerospace. They used to take me to art galleries in the Lake District and those closer to home, such as the Colin Jellicoe Gallery, in Manchester."

He gained a degree in fine art at Manchester Polytechnic (now Manchester Metropolitan University). After working for various graphic design companies and publishers, establishing contacts along the way, he became a partner in Cambridge Illustrators, a directory showcasing illustrators' work. Twelve years ago he set up his own graphic design business, Catalyst Design

Partnerships, with his wife and fellow artist, Polish born Krystyna Wojcik.

Paul met Krystyna at a life drawing class. "It's great being married to an artist," he says. "Together we go away painting and drawing. We are able to share ideas. There is no conflict or artistic difference."

He prefers the vibrancy of cities to the quiet of rural Cambridgeshire. "My wife focuses on painting landscapes in watercolour. But I am attracted to the atmosphere of cities; the bright lights, noise, the vitality. My paintings explore the way that light falls in a city, how it casts shadows and reflections, how it pierces the darkness."

Sketchbook in hand he enjoys painting foreign cities, particularly those in Europe, America and Asia. "I don't really have a preference. All the cities I have visited possess unique qualities. I start by making small sketches on the spot, absorbing the atmosphere, the sounds and the smells around me as I work. Then I take photographs – 20, 30, perhaps 40 shots of the same scene."

He takes time to appreciate the environment and absorb the atmosphere. "Sitting down for two or three hours, I examine the different cultures

merging together. I prefer using acrylics as they dry quickly, giving immediacy to the paint; acrylics suit the fleeting nature of the scenes I try to capture."

When he returns to his studio he begins the process of putting his work together to create his final pieces. "I gather my photos and use Photoshop to create an overall image that I like. I then take the preparatory image and draw it straight onto canvas keeping as much life in the line as I can."

Encouraged by his parents, he sold his first piece of artwork when he was just 10 years old.

"I started with wildlife drawings and paintings and I was fortunate to be able to exhibit my work in local galleries. I was commissioned to paint pictures for my secondary school." At the time his commissions were around £50-70. Today they sell from £500 to £2,000.

He says he's influenced by painters such as Degas. "They can take a simple domestic scene and using light and daring composition they create excitement and find beauty in that which is ordinary."

Future plans? "I've never been to Tokyo. I've always wanted to paint there. My wife and I are planning a trip to her native Poland. I want to keep exploring different aspects of cities."

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